

# Winter Water Pipits

## Title

Winter Water Pipits 1966/67-1967/68

## Description and Summary of Results

(Note: at the time of this survey the Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta* was considered to be a race of a species which included what is now considered to be the Rock Pipit *A. petrosus*. The 'Scandinavian Pipit' is still considered as a race of *A. spinoletta* (*A.s. littoralis*), but this form was not included in the survey. The survey was careful to ensure that only records of *A.s. spinoletta* (ie true Water Pipits) were considered.)

Each winter since 1962/63 small numbers of Water Pipits *Anthus* (*s.*) *spinoletta* had been recorded in several similar habitats in an area of SW Hertfordshire, and in parts of the adjacent counties of Buckinghamshire and Middlesex, and similar records had been received from other parts of Britain over a longer period. With publicity through the BTO publications and from other places, an enquiry was conducted into the winter status of this bird in the British Isles during the winters of 1966/67 and 1967/68.

It was noted from the start that Rock Pipits *Anthus* (*s.*) *petrosus* occasionally occurred at inland sites and sometimes at the same or at least similar habitats as Water Pipits and that therefore care was needed in identification. Some records from the survey were considered suspect because the observer relied upon call alone, and especially as these two forms were at the time considered to be the same species.

The response in 1966/67 was good, but was not maintained into 1967/68. Thus for the second winter the enquiry relied much more on regional bird reports, in turn creating some difficulties in interpretation and lack of detail. Specifically: a) regional report editors had different standards for the publication of records – each record was checked and only confirmed ones were included; b) some areas had no tradition of recording the 'species'; c) some areas and locations were poorly covered; d) observers lost interest after an initial finding or failure to find; and e) counting was very difficult especially on large sites. Some locations were very well recorded, with accurate counts at near daily intervals, others much less so.

The results showed that Water Pipits favoured the southern counties of England, and areas well inland. There was no indication of changes through the winter or between the two winters. The most obvious behavioural characteristic observed in the British Isles was their extreme wariness towards man, and some of the gaps in past records and much of the difficulty in field identification were thought to be due to this wariness.

There was a strong preference for lowland fresh-water habitats, with a specific preference for watercress beds fed with pure spring water at a fairly constant temperature throughout the year. The water in these is usually, if not invariably, calcareous and supports a rich fauna. During hard weather, watercress beds are often the only relatively frost-free areas.

### **Methods of Data Capture**

A questionnaire form which contained notes on identification features was used to obtain detailed records. Visits to suitable habitats were organised. In addition to these forms available references were consulted and county recorders were asked to confirm records made before and during the period of the survey.

In some areas numbers and locations were not accurately recorded, for example 'present in small numbers from late October until April, never more than four'. Attempts were made in such cases to obtain more specific information but not always successfully. Thus one 'location/bird/winter' record at one extreme may have meant that a single bird was recorded once at a single site, and at the other one or several birds continuously recorded throughout the winter months at several sites located very close together.

### **Purpose of Data Capture**

To determine how many and where were Water Pipits in winter throughout Britain and Ireland following increasing casual reports of the 'species'.

### **Geographic Coverage**

All of Britain and Ireland, although in practice none were recorded in Ireland or Scotland.

### **Temporal Coverage**

The two winters 1966/67 and 1967/68 primarily October to March.

### **Other Interested parties**

The survey was organised and run by Ian Johnson as a volunteer with the help and support of the BTO.

### **Organiser(s)**

Ian G Johnson

### **Current Staff Contact**

archives@bto.org

### **Publications**

The main report of the survey is:

Johnson, I.G. 1970. The Water Pipit as a winter visitor to the British Isles. *Bird Study* 17: 297-319.

The survey was noticed in *BTO News* numbers 20, 21, 23, 25, 27, 28 and 35.

**Available from NBN?**

No.

**Computer data -- location**

None.

**Computer data -- outline contents**

N/A.

**Computer data -- description of contents**

N/A.

**Information held in BTO Archives**

One folder of letters mostly organiser to and from Ken Williamson, and a few notes re setting up the survey. The data are presumed to have been retained by the organiser and no doubt later destroyed.

**Notes on Access and Use**

**Other information**

**Notes on Survey Design**

**Specific Issues for Analysis**