

HYPERMELANISTIC AMERICAN PIPIT RETURNS TO WINTER IN CENTRAL CALIFORNIA

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On 1 December 2013, I observed a hypermelanistic American Pipit (*Anthus rubescens*) at Bedwell Bayfront Park in San Mateo County, California (Schneider 2014). This rather striking individual remained there through at least 4 January 2014. Almost a year later, on 5 November 2014, I found a similar pipit at the same location, where it remained through at least 28 January 2015. The bird was judged by photos to be in its first year when observed in 2013. Photographs of the bird in 2014–2015 again show a rather uniform medium-brown plumage with pale edging on the wing coverts and tertials and a blackish bill and legs, and the shape of the primary coverts, as well as other features of the plumage, made it possible to age the bird then as an adult. As the bird was not captured and banded in winter 2013–2014, it is difficult to prove that the pipit the following winter was in fact the same bird, but the rarity of this plumage abnormality in pipits, the similar overall appearance from one winter to the next, and the same location argue strongly that this was indeed the same bird. The progression in the apparent age of the bird from first year to adult also lends support to this conclusion.

One possible alternative to the earlier conclusion (Schneider 2014) was that I had not been able to exclude entirely the possibility of adventitious discoloration (as by soot or mud), but I think that the overall appearance of the bird, including the residual patterning with pale edges to many of the flight feathers, made this unlikely. That the dark plumage remained one year later and, presumably, after both a partial prealternate and complete prebasic molt provides further evidence that the coloration was an intrinsic abnormality (such as increased melanin pigment) and not a result of soiling or other external factors.

It is not clear whether or not this coloration would make the bird unusually conspicuous and vulnerable to predation, but it is of interest that such a bird apparently survived into its second year. Of perhaps greater interest, little has been learned about fidelity to wintering sites in this species (Hendricks and Verbeek 2012). Hudson (1928) reported the recurrence of a “partial albino” American Pipit wintering in South Carolina. My current observations add to the anecdotal evidence that flocks of American Pipits we observe in winter at any one locality may be composed of many of the same individual birds seen there in prior years. Studies with banded or otherwise marked or tracked birds could provide helpful insight into this question.

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LITERATURE CITED

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