

# On the hunt for Sprague's Pipit: a composite of Sprague's Pipit observations from Southern Illinois and Southwestern Missouri, with tips on locating the bird

By Dan Kassebaum and Joe Eades

The value of Bohlen's *The Birds of Illinois* (1989) and the various state birding publications since 1974 cannot be understated when it comes to knowing where and when a species is likely to occur in Illinois. Beginning with the spring migration of 1974, comprehensive seasonal data summaries have been available to Illinois birders through the *Illinois Audubon Bulletin* (numbers 170-210), *Illinois Birds & Birding* (volumes 1-7) and *Meadowlark* (volumes 1-16). With these publications, one can assemble a migratory window and plot the best time to look for the more unusual species of Illinois. This is especially true for Sprague's Pipit (*Anthus spragueii*). Although data for this species in Illinois are sparse, patterns for the spring and fall can be found.

My first encounter with this species was on 20 April 2000. I had located an Upland Sandpiper (*Bartramia longicauda*) in an agricultural field in Clinton County. While viewing the sandpiper, I heard a persistent flight song high overhead. Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris*) was the most likely candidate, but I soon realized I was hearing the flight song of a Sprague's Pipit. I attempted to locate the bird with my binoculars. Although I could clearly hear the bird calling overhead from what seemed like a fixed position, I could not find it in the sky. When I got home, I confirmed the song with several commercial recordings. I also checked Bohlen (1989) and was relieved to see that the record fell perfectly within the window of data for spring migrants. I know of no other Illinois reports that claim to have heard the Sprague's Pipit in full flight song during migration. This record was submitted with documentation

to the Illinois Ornithological Records Committee (IORC), but the outcome is still pending.

In the summer of 2003, I traveled to North Dakota with Louise Augustine, specifically targeting Sprague's Pipit and Baird's Sparrow (*Ammodramus bairdii*). On their breeding grounds, both these species are easy to observe. During this trip, I watched several Sprague's Pipits perform their flight song. It is amazing to see the height at which this behavior occurs. The pipit can fly as high as 75 meters during its courtship ritual. These observations further strengthened my confidence that the report from 20 April 2000 in Clinton County was valid.

My next encounter was with Travis Mahan on 12 November 2006. We were at the Denmark Unit of Pyramid State Park (Perry County) looking for the previously reported Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*). Pyramid State Park is mostly composed of reclaimed strip mine, some of which is leased as cattle pasture. The area is huge and the grasses are sparse due to poor soil quality and grazing. While trying to locate hidden roosting burrows for the owl, we flushed a bird with an odd squeaky call. Because our concentration was to the ground, we were slow to react and could not locate the "squeaky" bird overhead. We quickly dismissed American Pipit (*Anthus rubescens*), Horned Lark, and any sparrow or longspur as the source of the sound and were excited at the prospect of Sprague's Pipit. We fanned out over the area but could not produce another bird. We compared our observation with the call notes recorded on the National Geographic Society - Guide to Bird Sounds (1985) and Flight Calls of Migratory Birds

- Eastern North American Landbirds (2002). The calls we heard in the field matched perfectly with those recordings. Both the Peterson (1990, 1992) and Stokes (1997, 1999) recordings include Sprague's Pipit, but only the flight song and not the call note. From my experience, knowing the call note will greatly increase your chances of identifying this bird in the field.

At this point, I pieced together the migratory windows from Bohlen (1989) and the subsequent issues of *Illinois Birds and Birding* and *Meadowlark*. I also found a few more obscure records from the *Illinois Audubon Bulletin* prior to the *Seasonal Reports* beginning in 1974 and a few recent IBET postings that have not been published. The spring migratory window, based on 18 records, extends from 16 March through 9 May, with most records concentrated around 20 April. The fall window, based on 12 records, extends from 1 October through 12 November, with a concentration of records during the last week of October. Table 1 summarizes the records and reports found for Sprague's Pipit in Illinois.

Based on the observation from 12 November 2006 and records of wintering Sprague's Pipits in southern Illinois, Travis Mahan planned a fall IOS field trip at Pyramid State Park on 10 November 2007 with Sprague's Pipit as the target species. Although the limited fall data suggested late October as the better window, we proceeded as planned. As expected, the turnout was low given that this species has no history of being found in Illinois on demand. A few local southern Illinois birders came, and only Craig Taylor and Tim Kuesel made the trip from up north.