

indicator of adequate food and cover for other migrants. Eventually, we made our way back through one of the grassy lanes of fescue and flushed a Sprague's Pipit. It called loudly as it took off. We quickly got on the bird and watched it climb high into the sky. We called out its position to make sure we were both on the same bird. As expected, the pipit folded its wings and dropped to the ground like a rock. Just before landing, the bird made a lateral swing before touching down. As I had done the previous fall, I continued down the grassy lane hopping for another pipit, and sure enough, a second bird flushed. We watched it fly off calling loudly, climb high into the sky, and eventually land in the same dramatic fashion.

I had the distinct pleasure of seeing and hearing a total of eight Sprague's Pipits on the prairies of southwestern Missouri on Sunday, 4 November 2007. That is my personal high count and personal latest fall date for Missouri. The prairies of southwestern Missouri are a long way from my home in the St. Louis area, so I don't check them weekly. In a normal year, I would have thought 10 November (the date of the 2007 IOS trip seeking this species), might have been a little late to seek this species at this latitude.

I have seen this species each of the last five years in Missouri. Over the last three years, I have targeted this

Key to Table:

- AB = American Bird
- AFN = Audubon Field Notes
- IAB = Illinois Audubon Bulletin
- IBB = Illinois Birds & Birding
- IBET = Illinois Birders Exchanging Thoughts (Internet listserv)
- IORC = Illinois Ornithological Records Committee
- MJIB = Meadowlark: A Journal of Illinois Birds
- NN = Nature Notes (Webster Groves Nature Study Society)

See Literature Cited for more specifics on table data.

Observing and identifying this species in the field, in most cases, requires a planned search. Select either a spring or fall date near the median of the migratory window. Select a large area of pasture or farm field with appropriate cover. Grassy lanes within these areas seem to be especially ideal. Suitable areas are likely available in most Illinois counties. Gaining access to a pasture or field may be your limiting factor. From my experience, this is not a species likely to be observed on the ground or easily photographed. Looks will be fleeting at best, and one must be satisfied with a brief encounter. Knowing well the flight calls and flight behaviors of Horned Lark, American Pipit, Savannah Sparrow,

species around Halloween and have been successful each of those years. My first encounter with Sprague's Pipit in Missouri was 17 October 2003. That is my personal earliest fall date for this species in Missouri. Conventional wisdom indicates that the fall migratory window for this species in Missouri occurs from mid-October through the first ten days of November, though there are late September records. This year, I was unable to locate one on my traditional end of October search. I believed the peak passage was slightly delayed in 2007, and the timing of the IOS fieldtrip may have been very good, and as noted above, it was!

The Sprague's Pipit is considered a rare transient in western Missouri (Robbins and Easterla 1992), and can be very difficult to find. It is rarely reported outside of western Missouri and until recently was considered hypothetical for the eastern part of the state. In general, only those who make a serious effort at the proper locations and at the right time of year will encounter this species in Missouri. I am only aware of a few individuals who have seen this species in Missouri over the past five years. Most records are from the fall. One recent spring record from eastern Missouri has been accepted by the Missouri Bird Records Committee (MBRC). The sighting occurred 5 May 2005, St.

Vesper Sparrow (*Poocetes gramineus*), Lapland Longspur (*Calcarius lapponicus*), and Smith's Longspur (*Calcarius pictus*) are essential, as these species share similar open habitats and must be considered when a bird flushes at your feet.

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Prior to the IOS fieldtrip to Pyramid State Park on 10 November 2007, Joe Eades of St. Louis, Missouri shared with us his most recent observations of Sprague's Pipit in southwestern Missouri. His details are provided below.

Charles County (MBRC 18th Annual Report, record #2005:45). There is only one other accepted record for the well-birded Missouri section within the St. Louis Area (a circle radiating 50 miles from the St. Louis City limits) – 19 October 1992, St. Charles County (MBRC 6th Annual Report). The paucity of reports from this region is largely a result of geological factors: Most of east-central Missouri is forested and the wooded Ozarks act as an "island" that separates the prairies of western Missouri from those in Illinois. Another factor is that areas of appropriate habitat on public land near St. Louis are very few. Extensive walking is a requirement. It is almost always difficult to get a good look at one.

Behavioral and visual clues

There are several behavioral and visual clues that can be helpful in identifying a Sprague's Pipit. Usually, they flush nearby and appear long and slender as they fly away from you, like a very pale Horned Lark. When the white outer tail feathers flash, the white is very extensive, almost like that of a Dark-eyed Junco (*Junco hyemalis*) and much more than a Vesper Sparrow. This, plus their very pale coloration and slender shape, is distinctive. When on the ground, they are very pale blonde but may appear