

pale grayish in flight. The bill can be very pale and appears thicker than that of an American Pipit. Because of this, if the bird is flying away from you (which it will be!), the bill can appear too big and conical to be this species. You may be tempted to write it off as a sparrow. Keep watching it! The flight is very undulating, with a very long, loping pattern of undulation. Shortly after take-off, you will likely hear a "jeet" or a "jeet, jeet, jeet", usually in sequence, which is strident and monotonal and very different from the up-and-down goldfinch-like flight call of the American Pipit. They continue to utter this call, but it becomes faint as the bird builds distance from you. They then begin to climb "giant steps" into the sky with this long undulating flight, gaining altitude rapidly in an exponentially accelerating curve. Once they reach a considerable height of 250-300 feet, they begin making broad circles. This may go on for a few minutes, and they sometimes appear to be looking back at where they were flushed. If you are still standing there, they usually turn away and fly off some distance further and then suddenly fold their wings to their side, point their head down, and drop at a very steep angle like a stone, practically all the way to the ground. They break their fall so close to the ground that it may actually be unusual to see it happen, especially if the grass is waist high. They appear to crash into the ground. It is an amazing sight.

If the bird in question breaks its fall 20-30 feet from the ground or higher, it is probably not this species. Smith's Longspurs sometimes drop from a considerable height, but they break their fall earlier with a couple of "stutter steps" from a height of about 30 feet. Keep in mind that this habit is shared by other birds of the open field, though none drop so dramatically and perpendicular to the ground in my experience. Even Horned Larks can drop suddenly and very steeply from a considerable height.

Directly overhead and at close range, the buffy underparts and neck-lace of streaks limited to the upper breast, as well as the relatively thin "pipit bill" and plain face, may be

seen. It will probably be calling, a squeaky "jeet, jeet, jeet", which may help you with the identification. Chris Hobbs, an expert Kansas and Missouri birder, has described the flight call as "sounding like a robin on helium."

### Improving your chances

If the entire group of birders drops to the ground quickly after flushing a good suspect, the bird may come back and land very close to where it flushed. Alternatively, if you leave that area and come back in 30 minutes, it is very likely that the bird will have returned to the same spot. This happened with three of the four Sprague's Pipits that I flushed at Prairie State Park in southwestern Missouri on 4 November 2007. The tendency for the bird to come back to the same area can make it difficult to determine how many birds are present. You may well flush the same bird more than once.

They will drop into tall grass, but definitely prefer short grass, about the height of that of a golf course fairway. I look for them in close-cropped native prairie grasses, such as on Greater Prairie-Chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido*) leks or hayed native grass fields. I usually walk about 10-15 feet from

an edge of taller grass and concentrate on hilltops and the slopes leading up to and down from these.

Sometimes, you will get lucky and a Sprague's Pipit will fly low for only about 50 feet. If this happens, mark the spot immediately and get to it quickly. Stop about 25 feet from the spot and watch for the bird to stick its head up. This may get you once-in-a-lifetime looks. They allow fairly close approach, but you must be restrained because they generally flush at about 15-20 feet. I watched one from a distance of 25 feet in perfect light for 15 minutes on the ground on November 4, 2007. That opportunity doesn't come every day. If you have a group, you should try encircling the area where the bird landed in a manner similar to that used for good looks at Le Conte's Sparrow (*Ammodramus leconteii*). The bird will attempt to mouse away and may well be successful if you do not act quickly and stealthily.

Good luck pipit hunters!

— Joe Eades  
S517 Willow Lane  
St. Louis, MO  
63122

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