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First record of Blyth's Pipit *Anthus godlewskii* for Micronesia

by Alexander C. Lees & Eric A. VanderWerf

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The systematic recording of vagrants from remote oceanic islands can offer unique insights into rates of dispersal, colonisation (and subsequent endemism) and shed light on competing hypotheses used to explain vagrancy events. Pipits (*Anthus*) appear to be amongst those avian genera most prone to long-distance vagrancy, being frequently recorded as inter-continental or oceanic island vagrants. Well-documented records of 'extreme vagrancy' in this genus include Olive-backed Pipits *A. hodgsoni* in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (Pyle 1984) and Mexico (Hamilton *et al.* 2000), and Red-throated Pipits *A. cervinus* in Ecuador (Brinkhuizen *et al.* 2010) and Australia (Carter 1997). Here we present a description and photographic documentation for the first record of Blyth's Pipit *A. godlewskii* for Micronesia and the Pacific, and discuss its significance in understanding avian vagrancy.

Blyth's Pipit on Palau

The Palau Islands are the westernmost Micronesian archipelago and consist of more than 350 volcanic and coralline islands. The first detailed treatment of their avifauna was prepared by Baker (1951), while a handful of other reports, e.g., Pratt *et al.* (1980), Engbring (1983, 1988, 1992), and Pratt & Etpison (2008) have provided additional information on resident breeding species, and others have contributed new records of migrants and vagrants. In the most recent checklist of Micronesian birds, Wiles (2005) reported 148 species in Palau, including 50 resident breeders, 67 migrants and 31 vagrants. More recently, VanderWerf *et al.* (2006) and Buden & Retogral (2010) each added a presumed vagrant to the list, and Pratt *et al.* (2010) added at least ten new vagrants or rare migrants, and reassigned a previously recognised vagrant—Asian House Martin *Delichon dasypus*—to hypothetical status. In April–May 2005, surveys focusing on Palau's resident birdlife were organised by the Palau Conservation Society and conducted by EAV, G. J. Wiles, A. P. Marshall and M. Knecht (VanderWerf *et al.* 2007). Incidental observations of migrant and vagrant taxa observed were published in VanderWerf *et al.* (2006). The most important concerned a Richard's Pipit *Anthus richardii* present at Malakal sewage treatment ponds (07°19'41.88"N, 134°27'03.91"E) on 23 and 28 April 2005. Two photographs and a brief description were presented in VanderWerf *et al.* (2006). These authors solicited opinions on the identity of the bird and these favoured Richard's Pipit (a single vote for Blyth's Pipit *A. godlewskii* from P. Alström came too late for publication as such). This represented the first record of any 'large pipit' of the Richard's complex from Micronesia. The record went unquestioned until ACL independently came across VanderWerf *et al.* (2006), in 2011, while undertaking a literature survey of records of Siberian vagrants in the Pacific. Reasonably familiar with the species from the Indian Subcontinent and as an autumn vagrant to the UK, he immediately suspected that the bird was a Blyth's Pipit based on structural features evident in the two published low-resolution images. After soliciting the original images from EAV and correspondence with colleagues also familiar with the species, a consensus was reached that the bird was identifiable as the first Blyth's Pipit for Micronesia and the easternmost record to date.

Field identification

It would be near-heretical to say that the identification of Blyth's Pipit is 'straightforward', but increased experience of the species amongst Holarctic ornithologists has permitted refinement of identification criteria that has led to field identification of autumn vagrants in Europe—once thought impossible (e.g. Baker 1926)—to become relatively routine.

The bird initially attracted ACL's attention by its distinctive compact jizz—short tail, short cone-shaped (deep-based) bill, small head, short legs, and apparently short hind-toe, which combine to give the bird a structure closer to Tree Pipit *A. trivialis* than Richard's Pipit. However, many of these structural features are also shown by smaller races of Richard's Pipits such as southern Chinese *A. r. sinensis* (Alström & Mild 2003). The higher resolution photographs made it possible to confirm these and other 'pro-Blyth's' features. The bird exhibits the classic 'capped appearance' typical of Blyth's, the result of the densely streaked crown and nape. The streaks are evenly spaced and lack the 'dark coagulation' (*sensu* Dupriez & Millington 2010) of Richard's Pipit. The supercilium is rather short, and is clean above and immediately behind the eye, whereas elsewhere it is sullied buff. The breast is quite heavily streaked but the lower breast and flanks are unmarked, unlike Richard's Pipit, which is often streaked over the flanks. Nor is there any evidence of significant contrast between the coloration of the breast and flanks, as is often the case in Richard's Pipit. Furthermore, spring Richard's Pipits do not exhibit such a strongly streaked mantle and crown, nor are they so sandy overall (P. Adriaens *in litt.* 2011). On the mantle, the broad dark feather centres that afford the bird its streaked appearance are also typical of Blyth's. The precise pattern of the adult median coverts is a diagnostic feature separating the two species, and this individual clearly shows the distinctive 'apricot buff' median covert with a dark 'curly bracket' outline (Dupriez & Millington 2010). The median covert tips form broad creamy wingbars typical of spring Blyth's. The hindclaw is visibly short, approximately the same length as the hind-toe and quite strongly curved; although there is some overlap between Blyth's and Richard's, this individual's relative claw length and curvature suggests Blyth's. Unfortunately, the bird's vocalisations—another diagnostic feature separating the two species—were not sound-recorded, although the call transcription as a soft *chirt* probably better fits Blyth's and could be analogous to the 'type 2' call of Blyth's transcribed by Alström & Mild (2003) as *chep*. Separation from Tawny *A. campestris* and Paddyfield Pipits *A. rufulus* is relatively easy using a combination of structural and plumage features, most obviously the dark lores of both species. Taken together, the structural and plumage features eliminate all confusion species and establish the identification as an adult or first-summer Blyth's Pipit.

Vagrancy in Blyth's Pipits

Blyth's Pipit breeds from southern Transbaikalia and eastern Manchuria south to Tibet and winters mainly in the Indian subcontinent and adjacent Myanmar (Alström & Mild 2003). As knowledge of salient field identification criteria has solidified (Williamson 1977, Bradshaw 1994), Blyth's Pipit has become an annual vagrant to Western Europe, with records from all Atlantic / North Sea-facing countries from Norway to Portugal, as well as Switzerland and Finland (Williamson 1977, Fremont 1999, Alström & Mild 2003, Dies *et al.* 2007, Matias *et al.* 2007). Further east, Blyth's Pipits have reached Cyprus, Turkey, Israel, Kuwait and Bahrain (Alström & Mild 2003, Richardson 2008, Slack 2009, Prünke *et al.* 2010), and are sufficiently regular in the United Arab Emirates to be considered a scarce winter visitor (Alström & Mild 2003). East of their regular breeding / wintering range, Blyth's Pipits are vagrants to Japan (Brazil 2009), South Korea (Moores 2007), Taiwan (P. Morris *in litt.* 2011), Thailand (Perlman 2001), Hong Kong (Anon. 2004) and the Andaman Islands (Grimmett *et al.* 1998). Fig. 4 depicts the distribution of these records on a global pseudo-cylindrical projection, together with the species' normal migration route (headings between 170° and 250° from the centroid of the breeding range). This in comparison with birds reaching the Middle East, which must have departed on headings between 270° and 290° (assuming a rhumb line) and those arriving in Europe between 290° and 320°. To the east, departing vagrants must head between 110° (Japan) and 160° (Thailand). This scatter of records in a 'great semi-circle' between 110° and 320° (Fig. 4) mimics the 'normal distribution' of headings frequently found in analysis of

ringing recoveries or in Emlen Funnel experiments (e.g. Wernham *et al.* 2002) and is not suggestive of a ‘reverse great circle route’ as has often been hypothesised to account for Siberian vagrancy (e.g. Rabøl 1976). Hypothetically, this great ‘semi-circle’ of vagrant records could be ‘filled in’ if observer coverage increased at high latitudes, showing a scatter of records of vagrants in all compass directions (*cf.* Alerstam 1990, Gilroy & Lees 2003). However, the absence of records of Blyth’s and Richard’s Pipits from the Alaskan islands (St. Lawrence, Aleutians and the Pribilofs) in this case may be noteworthy. These areas do not lack observer coverage, with teams of experienced observers regularly searching for Siberian vagrants at appropriate seasons. Thus, occurrence patterns of Richard’s and Blyth’s Pipits show no support for the ‘migration shadow’ paradigm (*sensu* Cottridge & Vinicombe 1996): a reverse projection of both species’ regular migratory trajectories (south and south-west) would take vagrants over northern and eastern Siberia and the Aleutians.

It is also noteworthy that Blyth’s and Richard’s Pipits (the latter the second commonest Siberian ‘vagrant’ to Europe after Yellow-browed Warbler *Phylloscopus inornatus*) appear reticent to embark (or poor survivorship) on long over-water crossings. There are no records of either species from any of the oceanic Atlantic Islands (Azores, Madeira, Canary Islands, Faeroes, Jan Mayen) or Iceland, despite records of Yellow-browed Warblers and other scarcer Siberian species on all these. There are, however, many records from continental islands between Sandøy Ona (Norway) and the Berlengas archipelago (Portugal), which individuals must have made short to moderate oceanic crossings. For instance, birds arriving on the Shetland Isles, UK, must make an over-water flight of >300 km from Norway, i.e. considerably less than the 870 km required to make landfall on Palau, but nonetheless demonstrating that long over-water crossings are not beyond the species’ physiological capacity. Short of direct experimental manipulation (*cf.* Moore *et al.* 2008) it is difficult to speculate on the physiological capacities for flight in vagrants when it may be a behavioural reticence to embark on over-water flights rather than physiological incapacity (*cf.* Lees & Gilroy 2009).

Timing-wise, the mid-late April occurrence of the species in Palau (which presumably overwintered locally, rather than being freshly arrived) is not exceptionally late for a wintering bird, as the bulk of the population departs India in late April / early May, and spring (vagrant?) Korean records fall between 30 April and 19 May (Moore 2007). The lack of previous records of Blyth’s or Richard’s Pipits from Micronesia is probably best attributed to rarity and lack of observer coverage. However, the paucity or lack of records of Blyth’s from the broader South-East Asia / Australasian region might also reflect observers’ unfamiliarity with the species, which easily could go undetected amidst the commoner Paddyfield and Australian Pipits *A. novaeseelandiae*. The future extralimital occurrence of Blyth’s and Richard’s Pipits as far south as Australasian ‘vagrant traps’ such as Ashmore Reef and Christmas Island should thus be considered a possibility.

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Figures 1–3. Adult or first-summer Blyth's Pipit *Anthus godlewskii*, Palau, 23 April 2005
(Eric VanderWerf)

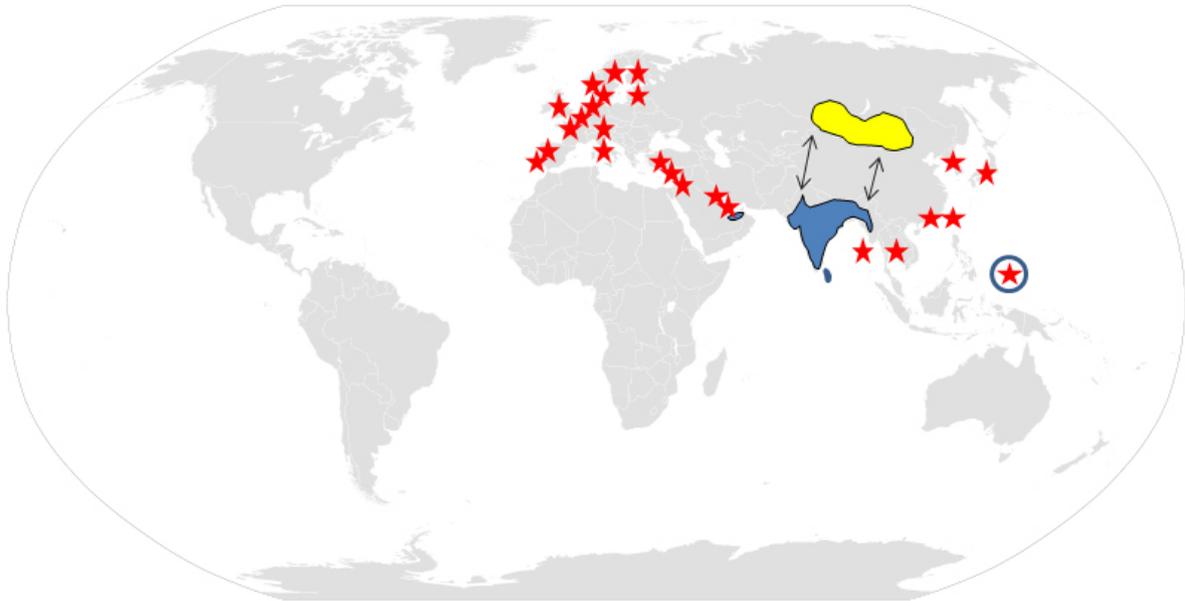


Figure 4. Global distribution map of Blyth's Pipit *Anthus godlewskii* with breeding area marked in yellow, wintering area in blue, and countries with extralimital records depicted as red stars. The Palau record is circled.