Richard's Pipits *Anthus richardi* at Dakhla, Western Sahara, with a brief review of regional status and trans-Saharan migration

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Pipits de Richard *Anthus richardi* à Dakhla, Sahara occidental, avec un aperçu du statut régional et de la migration trans-saharienne de l'espèce. Il y a peu de données documentées récentes du Pipit de Richard *Anthus richardi* au sud du Maroc et son statut au nord-ouest et à l'ouest de l'Afrique est mal connu. L'observation d'un groupe de quatre Pipits de Richard à Dakhla, Sahara occidental, en mars 2017 est documentée et le statut de l'espèce dans la région est examiné. Les données sont concentrées pendant les périodes de passage au Sahara occidental et en Mauritanie, suggérant une distribution hivernale trans-saharienne. En dépit des mentions historiques, son statut comme migrateur trans-saharien demeure peu connu à cause de la rareté des données et de la documentation inadéquate des mentions potentielles. Jusqu'à présent, il n'y a pas de données sûres au sud du Sahara. L'article examine les données publiées et l'origine hypothétique des migrateurs trans-sahariens dans les zones à habitat approprié.

Summary. Few documented recent records of Richard's Pipit *Anthus richardi* exist south of Morocco and its status in north-west and West Africa is poorly known. We document a flock of four Richard's Pipits observed in Dakhla, Western Sahara, in March 2017 and discuss the species' status in the region. Records appear clustered during passage periods in both Western Sahara and Mauritania, suggesting a trans-Saharan wintering distribution. However, despite historical records, its status as a sub-Saharan migrant remains little known owing to the paucity of records and inadequate documentation of potential records. To date, no unambiguous records exist south of the Sahara. We review published accounts and offer hypothetical origins of trans-Saharan migrants in areas of suitable habitat.

Richard's Pipit *Anthus richardi* breeds across a large part of eastern Asia including southern Siberia, ranging as far west as Kazakhstan and east to south-east Russia and China (Cramp 1988, Tyler 2004). It is a long-distance migrant, wintering in South and South-East Asia, but frequently occurs as a vagrant elsewhere (see Cramp 1988, Alström *et al.* 2003, Tyler 2004). Here, we report a flock of at least four Richard's Pipits at Dakhla—the first documented record in Western Sahara for nearly two decades. We then comment on the status of Richard's Pipit in Western Sahara and its possible sub-Saharan wintering distribution based on existing information, highlighting the paucity of, and necessity for, well-documented records.

Observations

On 23 March 2017, we observed at least four Richard's Pipits in low sandy coastal vegetation at Pointe de la Sarga, Dakhla, Western Sahara (23°38'08.2"N 15°59'41.9"W). Initially two birds were seen foraging on the ground and gleaning invertebrates from small bushes. They were close (*c.*10 m) and we noted their large size and 'leggy' appearance, long stout bill, dark malar, pale lores and well-streaked mantle, as well as their long hallux, which was especially evident in photographs (see below). After watching them for *c.*10 minutes, they flew a short distance, giving the distinctive hoarse *shreep* flight call several times. Together, these features eliminate potential confusion species such as Tawny *A. campestris* and Blyth's Pipits *A. godlewskii* that do (*A. campestris*) or could (*A. godlewskii*) occur in the region. The birds alighted briefly and flew again, this time joined by at least two others that also called, thereby indicating that a minimum of four individuals was present.

We obtained multiple photographs of the first two birds (see Fig. 1) and, on review, noted both possessed clearly different generations of feathers in the greater and median coverts. Post-juvenile moult in Richard's Pipit is partial (Cramp 1988, Svensson 1992) indicating that these individuals were in their second-calendar year (first-winter). The two birds also showed a dark 'smudge' at the base of the bill that did not form a loral stripe (*cf. A. campestris*). Pale lores are a key field mark of

Figure 1. A Richard's Pipit *Anthus richardi* from the small flock observed at Dhakla, Western Sahara, in March 2017, showing diagnostic features, such as large and 'leggy' appearance, well-streaked mantle, long hallux, stout bill and pale lores; different generations of median and greater coverts with the retained juvenile coverts showing well-defined buff-white / white edges, typical of a first-winter, are also obvious in the bottom-right image (Sam Jones)

Un des Pipits de Richard *Anthus richardi* du petit groupe observé à Dhakla, Sahara occidental, en mars 2017, montrant les caractères diagnostiques, tels que la grande taille et les longues pattes, le manteau bien strié, le long hallux, le bec fort et les lores pâles ; des générations différentes de couvertures alaires moyennes et grandes sont visibles dans la photo en bas à droite, avec les couvertures juvéniles retenues montrant des liserés blanc-chamois / blancs bien définis, typiques d'un oiseau de premier hiver (Sam Jones)

adult Richard's Pipit, and a dark mark at the base of the bill is typical of first-winters (Svensson *et al*. 2010). A series of images are archived in the Macaulay Library, Cornell Lab of Ornithology (ML54668401, 54668411, 54668421, 54668431, 54668441 and 54668461).

Regional status of Richard's Pipit and trans-Saharan migration

In the Western Palearctic Richard's Pipit is now widely considered to be a scarce but regular migrant (Cramp 1988, Alström *et al*. 2003, Svensson *et al*. 2010, Mitchell 2017). The

increasing regularity with which the species is documented in small groups during winter in southern Europe and south-west Asia (e.g. Atahan *et al*. 2015, Touzé & Mérot 2017) has prompted suggestions that they are colonising new wintering areas, perhaps facilitated originally by wandering individuals (Gilroy & Lees 2003). This contrasts with traditional views that such records pertain to vagrancy via 'reverse migration' (*cf*. Rabøl 1969, Gilroy & Lees 2003). Indeed, true 'reverse migration' for Richard's Pipits into Western Europe is, *sensu stricto*, impossible (Ullman 2007). Further, birds aged as adults are often present during winter or passage periods (e.g. Touzé & Mérot 2017), indicating they are not necessarily inexperienced immatures, as is often typical of vagrants.

Records of Richard's Pipit in north-west Africa have followed the same trend as in southern Europe, and it is now considered to be a rare but probably regular winter visitor to Morocco (Bergier *et al*. 2017a), where previously treated as accidental (Thévenot *et al*. 2003). Records from this region are almost exclusively coastal and appear commoner in the north (P. Bergier *in litt*. 2017), where small aggregations occur (e.g. 15 at the Massa estuary; Bergier *et al*. 1997). Further south in Morocco, accepted records are fewer. Bergier *et al*. (2017b) report just four records from Western Sahara (Atlantic Sahara): five in the wetlands at Saquiat Al Hamra near Laayoune (January 1995) and singles at Khnifiss Lagoon (March 1991), between Tarfaya and Khnifiss (December 1995) and at the Draa bridge, north of Tan-Tan (October 1998). Like records in northern Morocco, these are all from coastal areas of wetlands and headlands. Even further south, records are also few. Mahé (1985) reports a single record from Cap Blanc, on the Mauritania / Western Sahara border, and while citing few records, Isenmann *et al*. (2010) conclude that Richard's Pipits are recorded with increasing regularity in Mauritania, with the first in 1971 and each observation typically pertaining to 1–2 individuals. A distinct north–south passage appears to occur in both Western Sahara (Bergier *et al*. 2017b) and neighbouring Mauritania (Meininger *et al*. 1990, Isenmann *et al*. 2010) indicating birds may cross the Sahara to wintering grounds further south.

Our observation documents the southernmost record of Richard's Pipit in Western Sahara / Morocco, and one of the few to concern more than 1–2 individuals. Considering the site's location and the species' preferred wintering habitat elsewhere in southern Europe and Morocco, it is plausible that these birds had wintered at Dahkla. Alternatively, because the site is a coastal headland and an obvious refuelling location for migrants, the record could have involved a small group on northbound migration (typically, wintering birds leave northern Morocco in March; Thévenot *et al*. 2003). The most recent similar record, of 'up to 5' near Tintane / Hodh El Gharbi, Mauritania, in March 2007, is mentioned in Isenmann *et al*. (2010). Through conversations with other birdwatchers, we were informed anecdotally of undocumented records at the Laayoune Delta, further north in Western Sahara (27°09'51.2"N 13°11'37.6"W), apparently also involving multiple individuals. The provenance and accuracy of these records is unclear. Although records in Western Sahara are very few, Bergier *et al*. (2017b) surmised that spring and autumn passage may occur through the region, by birds crossing the Sahara, and that some winter in suitable wetlands in Western Sahara.

The suggestion of trans-Saharan movements by Richard's Pipits is not recent (e.g. Vielliard 1967), although the validity of many records is unclear. In Mauritania, it has been recorded on passage in late September–November and April–March (Meininger *et al*. 1990, Isenmann *et al*. 2010), although some of these records (e.g. Lamarche 1987), including apparent wintering birds, are deemed unreliable and not included in the regional atlas (Browne 2018). Via literature searches and dialogue with ornithologists in North Africa, we were unable to find any fully documented, unambiguous records of Richard's Pipits south of the Sahara. Therefore, given observations of an apparent north–south passage in north-west Africa, where indeed *do* they go?

Historically, Richard's Pipits have been reported as far south as the area around Lake Chad in Nigeria, where three specimens were identified as *richardi* (White 1957). A fourth *Anthus* sp. collected there was originally identified as Blyth's Pipit (B. P. Hall *in* White 1957). All four are now thought possibly to represent a resident population of African Pipit *A. cinnamomeus* (D. J. Pearson *in* Keith *et al*. 1992); a thorough examination of these specimens would clarify their

identity and the status of African and Richard's Pipits in Nigeria (Dowsett 2015). Lamarche (1981) reported Richard's Pipits to be rare but widespread in wetter regions of the Sahel in Mali between September / October and April, but many of these records are considered unreliable, as opined by Cramp (1988), who treated them as requiring confirmation. Applying the concerns of Dowsett (2015), the poorly known status of the formerly considered conspecific African Pipit *A. cinnamomeus* in West Africa inhibits our knowledge of what may be resident populations of the latter, wintering populations of migrant *A. richardi*, or possibly both. This opinion is further reflected in Borrow & Demey (2014) who report Richard's Pipit as a 'rare to scarce and local Palearctic visitor' in West Africa, with potential records from as far south as Ghana and Nigeria, and possible wintering areas in Cameroon and Chad, although the validity and identity of all of these records are unclear. Despite the ambiguity surrounding many historical records, they have sometimes been uncritically included in references to wintering by Richard's Pipits in West Africa (Elgood *et al*. 1994, Tyler 2004). Indeed, two of the birds collected in the area around Lake Chad (White 1957) showed signs of breeding condition and were collected in May / June respectively, making them even less likely to have been Palearctic migrants (see D. J. Pearson *in* Keith *et al*. 1992).

The physiological capability for long-distance overland migration by Richard's Pipit is clear, but without further surveys and well-documented records the destination and frequency of trans-Saharan migrants is largely conjecture. However, coastal regions of western Africa and river basins throughout the Sahel, such as the Inner Niger delta in Mali, offer plausible wintering habitat.

Our record, together with recent trends in northern Morocco and southern Europe support the suggestion of Bergier *et al*. (2017b) that Richard's Pipits in Western Sahara are probably regular, but rare, wintering birds and / or passage migrants rather than vagrants. Evidence is also increasingly supportive of the 'new-colonists' theory (Gilroy & Lees 2003) but the extent, both geographically and numerically, of this phenomenon and the potential presence of wintering populations in more remote and poorly covered areas of north-west Africa is little known. It is our hope that documenting notable records such as this will stimulate more thorough future documentation of *Anthus* species. Unambiguously documented records will shed light on the wintering ranges of Richard's Pipits and other rare Siberian migrants that may have extralimital wintering grounds (e.g., see van Bemmelen *et al*. 2017) while illuminating the status of poorly known populations of African Pipit. This offers professional and amateur ornithologists alike the exciting potential to document the apparently relatively recent colonisation of wintering ranges via long-range vagrancy.

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