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First report of American Pipit (*Anthus rubescens*) on Cuba

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Photo: Michael J. Good

First report of American Pipit (*Anthus rubescens*) on Cuba

Michael J. Good^{1,2} and Giraldo Alayon³

Abstract This is the first report of American Pipit (*Anthus rubescens*) on Cuba, discovered 3 December 2014 at El Verraco (21°55'51.1"N, 84°30'39.3"W) on Cabo San Antonio, Guanahacabibes National Park, in the Pinar del Río province, known as a significant migrant trap for many fall transients. The Guanahacabibes region of Cuba is an under-studied Important Bird Area for fall migrants.

Keywords American Pipit, *Anthus rubescens*, Cuba, first record, Guanahacabibes National Park

Resumen Primer registro de *Anthus rubescens* en Cuba—Este es el primer registro de *Anthus rubescens* en Cuba, descubierto el 3 de diciembre de 2014, en el Verraco (21°55'51.1"N, 84°30'39.3"W) en el Cabo de San Antonio, Parque Nacional Guanahacabibes en la provincia de Pinar del Río. Este parque es conocido como un colector migratorio importante para muchos transeúntes otoñales. La región de Guanahacabibes en Cuba es un Área de Importancia para las Aves poco estudiada para los migrantes otoñales.

Palabras clave *Anthus rubescens*, Cuba, Parque Nacional Guanahacabibes, primer registro

Résumé Premier rapport du Pipit d'Amérique (*Anthus rubescens*) en Cuba—Nous fournissons le premier rapport du Pipit d'Amérique (*Anthus rubescens*) en Cuba, découvert le 3 décembre 2014 à El Verraco (21°55'51.1"N, 84°30'39.3"W) en Cabo San Antonio, Parc National Guanahacabibes dans la province Pinar del Río, connu comme un piège important pour les oiseaux migratoires qui passent dans l'automne. La région de Guanahacabibes en Cuba est un zone d'importance pour les oiseaux (IBA) insuffisamment étudié pour les migrateurs de l'automne.

Mots clés *Anthus rubescens*, Cuba, Parc National Guanahacabibes, Pipit d'Amérique, premier rapport

An American Pipit (*Anthus rubescens*; family Motacillidae) was discovered 3 December 2014 at El Verraco, 17 km southwest of La Bajada Ranger Station on Cabo San Antonio, Guanahacabibes National Park, Cuba (21°55'51.1"N, 84°30'39.3"W). The individual was feeding on flies and other insects in a drying lagoon at 0900; the weather was sunny, the temperature was approximately 24°C, and there was no wind (Fig. 1). This observation was made during the Caribbean Conservation Trust's annual Cuba Bird Survey; this survey is authorized by the United States government, and in 2014 was conducted by Halifax River Audubon of Florida. Cabo San Antonio is the westernmost peninsula in Cuba, and is known as a significant migrant trap for many fall migratory species traveling southward from Florida and the Atlantic Flyway (Chaves-Ramirez 2012).

Cuba represents over 50% of the entire landmass of the West Indies and is a significant stopover site and migratory route for

North American breeding birds (Craves and Hall 2003, MJG pers. obs.) There are 28 Important Bird Areas in Cuba, and 315 bird species occur in the country. Of these, 27 species are endemic and 18 are globally threatened (BirdLife International 2018). Due to its large land area and geographical position within the Caribbean, Cuba is one of the most important countries for Nearctic-Neotropical migratory birds—both birds passing through on their way south (75 species) and those overwintering on the island (86 species) (Garrido and Kirkconnell 2000). This report is the first for American Pipit in Cuba and has been verified as a Cuban National Record by O. Garrido and A. Kirkconnell (pers. comm.), co-authors of the *Birds of Cuba* (2000) field guide.

American Pipit was previously considered a form of Water Pipit (Bond 1960, Knox 1988) of the Old World lineage. American Pipit is approximately 15–18 cm in length, the size of a large sparrow. It is a slender brown bird of open country with uniformly brown crown and upperparts, buff white underparts with black streaks, white outer tail feathers, and dark or black legs. American Pipit has a propensity for bobbing its tail and usually walks rather than hops. Sprague's Pipit (*Anthus spragueii*) is similar in appearance to American Pipit, but has a streaked back and yellow legs, and seldom bobs its tail. Sprague's Pipit has been recorded from Grand Bahama, Eleuthera, and Exuma (Latta *et*

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Fig. 1. American Pipit showing dark legs and buffy belly with streaking up through to the malar region. A buffy supercilium, thin black eye line, and thin white eye ring are also evident. White outer tail feathers were visible in flight. Photographs by Michael J. Good.

al. 2006) in the Bahamas archipelago. Neither species has been reported from Cuba before, although Raffaele *et al.* (1998) considered that American Pipit was possible in Cuba.

American Pipit breeds in northern Alaska, British Columbia, the Arctic Archipelago, Newfoundland, and in the mountains of California and New Mexico (Dunne 2006), as well as in northern New Hampshire on Mount Washington and on Mount Katahdin in Maine (MJG pers. obs.). The New England populations occur in post-glacial relic spruce-fir Krummholz and subalpine meadow breeding habitat (Gawler and Cutko 2010). American Pipit is known to winter across the southern United States and north to British Columbia and southern New England; in Guatemala and southern Mexico, including the Yucatan Peninsula; and on the Gulf Coast and in southern Florida. On rare occasions, American Pipit has also been recorded wintering on islands in the Caribbean: Jamaica, Providencia, San Andrés, San Salvador, and the Swan Islands (Bond 1960, Raffaele *et al.* 1998), as well as Hispaniola (Latta *et al.* 2006). This report confirms the conjecture of Raffaele *et al.* (1998): American Pipit utilizes Cuba during the winter to an unknown extent.

During the breeding season American Pipit prefers such habitats as the tundra and rocky arctic, windswept alpine slopes, and alpine meadows. As a migratory species, it utilizes sea-beaches, mudflats, wet meadows, sandy areas, pastures, and during the non-breeding season, cultivated fields, agricultural land, golf courses, and mountaintops (Bond 1960, Garrido and Kirkconnell 2000, Dunne 2006, MJG pers. obs.). During the winter, large flocks of American Pipit gather in open fields; when disturbed, they typically rise in unison and then circle back to resume feeding (MJG pers. obs.). In North America, the American Pipit feeds on insects congregating at edges of tundra puddles,

and also visits unmelted snowbanks in alpine meadows to prey on insects possibly transported there by wind (MJG pers. obs.). We observed similar disturbance flights and feeding behavior at El Verraco and have photographs of this bird feeding intently on flies and other insects (Fig. 1).

Weather patterns on Cuba around the time of the the American Pipit observation included a 96-hr period of east-northeasterly wind from 30 November to 4 December 2014 (pers. obs.; see also Weather Underground 2019). This was likely an ideal weather pattern for southward movement of fall migrant birds of the Atlantic Flyway, as evidenced by numerous other sightings of Nearctic-Neotropical migratory species by our group during this time period.

It is likely that other previously undetected northern migrants occur yearly on the Guanahacabibes Peninsula. However, the number of qualified ornithologists birding in the region is low; most are participants in programs like those offered by the Caribbean Conservation Trust, or are involved in the occasional Guanahacabibes National Park surveys. Eco-tours have become an important and popular form of travel (Craves and Hall 2003), with many companies focused on birdwatching and thus attracting clientele with strong bird identification skills—ultimately enabling better documentation of rare migratory species. The conservation value of these ecology-based tours is important for documenting the temporal records of birds including American Pipit.

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