

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Why write a book about pipits? Perhaps the single most challenging group of African passerines from an identification perspective, pipits have long been shunned by all but the most dedicated birders and researchers. As a consequence, little is known about their distribution, biology and relationships and less even of their identification. Nevertheless, they are highly diverse, ecologically adaptable and challenging to ornithologists and birders alike. In addition, many species serve as excellent bio-indicators of land management practices and conservation efforts. Several species are endemic or near-endemic to southern Africa. The variety of life history strategies that pipits employ are astounding: Some species are inter-continental migrants, others migrate within continents while yet other undergo altitudinal migrations or extensive nomadic wanderings. Some species have distributions spanning several continents, while others are restricted to small oceanic islands.

My personal relationship with pipits dates back to my childhood days when I spent some years on a farm in South Africa's Waterberg Mountains. It was there that I developed a budding interest in ornithology and started keeping field notes. Everything was progressing smoothly until I came across an energetic, but extremely nondescript passerine running around on a burnt piece of grassland. And thus I first became acquainted with pipits. Predictably, the more colourful or spectacular birds were initially a higher priority. However, repeatedly seeing the same species, but not being able to assign it an identity gradually led me to spend more time studying pipits (and other LBJ's). After some years, and a long learning curve, these casual observations led to the 'publication' of a 14 page identification guide in 1998 (Peacock 1998). This booklet was reproduced on my father's photocopier, staple-bound and sold for R14,25. It is thus especially gratifying to produce an in-depth reference work on pipits, nearly a decade after that first enthusiastic, but boyish effort!

In the last decade or so, my obsession with LBJ's (and in particular warblers and pipits) resulted in the accumulation of hundreds of pages of field notes, ranging from halfhearted doodles and scribbled annotations to detailed behavioural studies and many night late nights' worth of paintings and research. The value of amateur birders' field notes and experience is generally underestimated, and rather than having these notes and illustrations gather dust while stuffed away on a shelf, I started toying with the idea of using them as the basis for a book. Initially, my idea was to produce a simple field identification manual, but as I progressed the project evolved into a much more extensive product. With the advent of desktop publishing software a home PC now gives potential authors the ability to publish books without once setting foot inside a publisher's office. The choice to follow this route proved to require a great deal of time and sacrifice (and much appreciated help from those in the know!), but overall the process has been enlightening and very gratifying. More birders should be encouraged to publish their findings and ideas, whether it be in the form of a book, a newsletter article or even online.

The main objective of this book is to present an up-to-date identification manual to distinguish between the 16 different species of pipits that occur in southern Africa. Essentially this