MOUNTAIN PIPIT OR THICKBILLED LARK?

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On 17 August 1985 I found a dead bird hanging by its foot from the barb of a barbed wire fence near Piketberg, western Cape. After consulting McLachlan & Liversidge (1978) I decided that it was a Longbilled Pipit *Anthus similis* since the tail pattern and wing formula corresponded exactly with that laid down in the book. A few days later I showed it to my colleague, Peter Ryan, who remarked that the bill was far too heavy for a pipit and that the tail was too short for a Longbilled Pipit. I measured the tail, found that he was quite right and concluded that I had found a Mountain Pipit *A. hoeschi* on southward migration. But how to make sure it was a pipit and not a lark?

This is a lot more difficult than many people suppose and the only helpful books are those published before the first world war. Since then writers have assumed that the basic facts about birds are well known and do not need to be repeated. As a result, ornithologists grow up unaware of the facts on the basic structure of birds. Modern books will tell you that larks alone among passerines have the rear side of the tarsus covered by discrete plates of hardened skin. My bird had a smooth rear tarsus and apparently had to be a pipit. However, Ridgway (1901) remarks in a footnote that old larks develop a smooth rear tarsus so that character did not settle the question. What other external feature might distinguish a lark from a pipit, since I did not wish to dissect out the syrinx to see if it had the lark's bony pessulus?

Shelley (1902) and Ridgway (1904, 1907) make it clear that larks have the nasal openings covered by minute feathers and that the short outermost primary, the remicle, is long enough to be easily found. In pipits, the nasal opening is largely clear of feathers and easily seen, and the remicle is so small that it can only be found with difficulty. They add that most larks have only nine functional primaries. I then realised that my specimen was a Thickbilled Lark *Galerida magnirostris* and not a pipit. I had already become uneasy about its being a Mountain Pipit, despite its short tail, since it had functional primaries 2 to 5 counting inwards (the standard method here - Hall 1961) emarginate whereas the Mountain Pipit has only primaries 2 to 4 emarginate (Maclean 1985). What no book I have looked at makes clear is that the Thickbilled Lark has the same tail pattern as the Longbilled Pipit and the same wing formula, both in respect of emargination and relative lengths of the outer primaries, as the African Richard's Pipit *A. cinnamomeus*. Identifying a bird in the hand is not always as easy as the books suggest, even when the ringer's best friend, Mackworth Praed & Grant (1962/63) is used.

The specimen is now in the avian osteology collection of the South African Museum, Cape Town. If a bird dies in a mistnet or is found dead, it is always a good idea to pass it on to a natural history museum, practicalities permitting.

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