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SHORT-TAILED PIPIT BREEDING AND DISTRIBUTION RECORDS FROM THE EASTERN FREE STATE

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The Short-tailed Pipit *Anthus brachyurus* is a tricky species to get to know well. In summer their preferred breeding habitat is short grasslands regenerating after a burn the preceding winter. Despite the short grass habitat they are amazingly difficult to see on the ground. Instead they are best located and identified by the diagnostic song of displaying birds, who perform widely ranging display flights over suitable breeding habitat (and rarely into airspace over adjacent, apparently unsuitable taller grasslands). In this paper we report on records of Short-tailed Pipits from two sites in the eastern Free State – Sterkfontein Dam and Golden Gate Highlands National Park (GGHNP) – and a single nest record from the latter.

The first site consists of grasslands on the western side of Sterkfontein Dam in pentads 2825_2855 and 2830_2855. Grasslands here held displaying Short-tailed Pipits in December 2010 and December 2012, although the precise localities had changed between the seasons due to differing burning patterns. In an area of climax grassland that had not been burnt the previous winter we also recorded displaying Yellow-breasted Pipit *Anthus chloris* in December 2010.

The second site, in Golden Gate Highlands National Park, is centred on the floodplain of the Klerk River, below the prominent sandstone escarpment of the area, in pentad 2830_2840. The birds were



Fig 1 – Ankle-height, regenerating grassland on the floodplain of the Klerk River; breeding habitat for Short-tailed Pipit.

observed displaying here in January 2011, and again in December 2012. In both years the floodplain had been burnt the previous winter, creating the habitat suitable for this species (see Fig 1). In the summer of 2010/2011 the species was also recorded at nearby sites in pentads 2830_2840 and 2825_2840, where there was suitable regenerating grassland on hillsides below the main cave sandstone layer.

On the 18th December 2012 we watched several birds carrying food on the Klerk River floodplain. By watching the movements of



Fig 2 – Three fully feathered Short-tailed Pipit nestlings photographed on 18 December 2012.

provisioning birds we estimate that there were at least three active nests in a relatively small area (c. 4000 m²). We were able to find only one nest, with three fully feathered chicks (Fig 2, cf. Figure 8 of Davies and Christian, 2006.). The nest was built into a grass tuft of the predominant grass species, and was well concealed from above (Fig 3). We returned to check on the nest on 21 December 2012 and found it to be empty; given their advanced development when found, it seems likely that the chicks had fledged.



Fig 3 – The nest lies hidden in the tuft at the end of the pen.

Previously, various aspects of the breeding biology of this species have been described from Vernon Crookes Nature Reserve (VCNR) on the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) south coast (Davies and Christian, 2006). Based on the estimated incubation period of approximately 2 weeks (Davies and Christian, 2006), and a nestling period of a similar length (Tarboton, 2011), one would expect the clutch reported here to have begun in mid November. Although this is roughly a month later than the inferred laying dates of most clutches at VCNR, we expect that it is fairly close to the mean laying date for populations in the eastern Free State and KZN Drakensberg, which lie at a much higher altitude than VCNR.

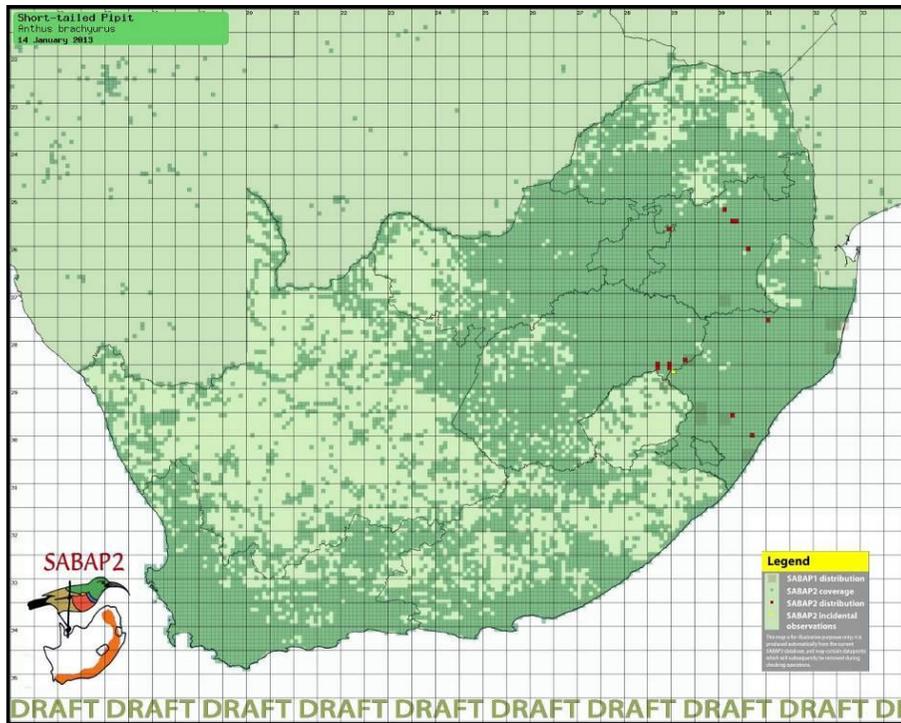


Figure 4 – Short-tailed Pipit records from the SABAP2 database, accessed on 14 January 2013.

The possibility that Short-tailed Pipit is a largely overlooked species has been mentioned before (Davies and Christian, 2006; Peacock 2012). It was probably widely overlooked during SABAP1, and it seems the same has thus far been true of SABAP2. In particular there are currently no SABAP2 records of this species from most of the KZN Drakensberg where it is certainly a breeding resident in suitable habitat in the foothills each summer (Fig 4). However there are several records from areas in which it was not recorded in SABAP1, primarily the escarpment region in Mpumalanga.

Apart from the records reported on here, there is a further SABAP2 record from the eastern Free State from pentad 2820_2915, which lies immediately west of Van Reenen’s Pass. This pentad lies in a quarter degree square in which the species was recorded in SABAP1. However it appears that these are the first records of Short-tailed Pipit from GGHNP and Sterkfontein Dam. Indeed they were not recorded from GGHNP in the 1990’s (De Swardt and Van Niekerk, 1996; A. Botha pers.comm.), despite the fact that frequent burning did occur (A. Botha pers. comm.). Nevertheless, the areas described in this article are very similar to the KZN Drakensberg, both geologically and in terms of avifauna and flora, and so it is not very surprising that Short-tailed Pipits breed here in summer.

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