

Sprague's Pipit

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SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Anthus spragueii*. From the Latin *anthus*, meaning bunting or titlark. The specific epithet honors Isaac Sprague, who accompanied John James Audubon's natural history expedition up the then-uncharted Missouri River in 1843. Sprague was the most skilled botanical illustrator of that era and his drawings of birds were equally accurate.

DESCRIPTION: About 6.5 inches total length. Slender, with sharp pointed bill. Prominent dark eye. White eye-ring and buff-brown cheeks. Both sexes buff colored overall, much more so than the grayer American pipit. New spring feathers richer than winter plumage. Newly hatched nestlings buffy gray, gradually becoming more streaked. First-winter juveniles similar to adults. Back and wing feathers distinctly streaked. Pale edges of rounded back feathers give a scaled effect. Underparts white to buffy. Streaked breast and light throat. Legs and lower mandible yellow to pinkish. Tail shorter than the American pipit's, with two pair of white outer tail feathers. White eye-ring and pale legs diagnostic.

HABITAT: Open plains and short-grass prairies away from human disturbance.

DISTRIBUTION: Breeds on the northern Great Plains of Canada, south to Montana, the Dakotas and Minnesota. Winters from southern Great Plains through Arizona and Texas to southern Mexico. Arizona—southeastern corner, from October through early March.

BIOLOGY: Sprague's pipit is a secretive little bird that tends to crouch in the grass when alarmed. It is difficult to detect unless startled, when it launches into the air with two or three explosive *squeet* notes.



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During breeding season, the male puts on a characteristic show. He spirals up in lofty stair-step flight, repeating a descending series of sweet musical notes throughout the nuptial or courtship flight. After completing the song, he silently dives back to the earth and the female rises from the nest to greet him. This species rarely sings on the ground.

The female hollows out a nest in a clump of dry grass. More grass forms an arched roof over the nest, making it very difficult to find. The four to five grayish-white eggs are covered with small purplish-brown speckles. The female cares for the eggs, and for the nestlings until the latter are old enough to leave the nest—about 10 to 12 days after hatching. The male then takes over their care until they can fly.

Sprague's pipits frequently associate with horned larks and vesper sparrows. After the breeding season, they gather into large mixed-species flocks and migrate slowly toward the wintering grounds. Pipits feed on a wide variety of insects, from grasshoppers to ants and stink bugs, but also eat weed and grass seeds.

Northern harriers and other prairie-dwelling raptors are the principal predators of adult Sprague's pipits. Eggs

and nestlings are taken by snakes, small mammals and larger carnivores.

STATUS: Included on the Department's 1988 list of Threatened Native Wildlife in Arizona as a candidate species. Not currently listed or a candidate for listing by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Concerns about the Arizona population stem primarily from habitat loss.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: The wintering ecology of Sprague's pipit is virtually unstudied from the standpoint of analyzing habitat requirements. Natural history studies are needed to identify minimum habitat requirements and determine the most important areas of recurrent occurrence. Meanwhile, the wintering grounds need protection from overgrazing and various human impacts.

Burning grasslands to improve livestock forage or the control of shrubs should be closely monitored and timed carefully, as winter or severe burns may cause Sprague's pipits to abandon the area. Pesticide use should be controlled to prevent contamination of the birds' main food supply. Specimens and egg shells should be analyzed for pesticide residue that may affect egg thinning and hatching success. ♣