



Thorndon Birdlife

February 2023

Most of the bird species that migrate to the UK in autumn and winter come to the UK to avoid the harsh winters of the Arctic circle and Scandinavia. Having spent the summer raising chicks, as temperatures drop and the days shorten, these winter migrants head to the UK where the weather is milder and the food easier to find. Most of these birds arrive from the north and the east. One exception is the Water Pipit (*Anthus spinoletta*) which travels north to winter in the UK.

Flying from the Alps and Pyrenees as they become harsh, snowy landscapes, the Water Pipit spends the winter in southern and eastern England and this is often the best time for tracking down one of Britain's scarcer avian visitors. This 'little brown job' winters south of a line between Fort William and Loch Ness, though by far the majority are in England and Wales. Clusters around the inner Severn Estuary, the Dorset and Hampshire coastline, the outer Thames estuary complex and East Anglian coast mean most are to be found in southern England. It seemingly numbers no more than about 200 individuals, according to the British Trust for Ornithology's Bird Atlas 2007-11.

The Water Pipit is a large and stocky pipit. It is greyish-brown above and pale below with streaks on its breast. It has a pale stripe over its eye, a slender bill and dark legs.

In Britain, the species favours freshwater habitats over the shorelines of its closest congener, foraging on flooded meadows and inland marshes, though it can tolerate brackish conditions such as those found on the outer Thames and outer Severn, where it mixes quite freely with Rock and Meadow pipits.

The Water Pipit is largely monogamous, with pair bonds often extending into winter when the male and female can loosely associate on seasonal territories, using contact calls and following each other in flight, though it is not known how long such bonds last. Conversely, when second broods occur in summer, a different partner is often chosen as parent. Display can involve singing from a bush or in flight, with the birds ascending up to 30m into the air on shallow wingbeats, then circling or gliding over the territory, and finally descending with spread wings and tail somewhat in the manner of a Tree Pipit, display may also occur from tree to tree. Singing may continue after landing, mostly from vegetation but rarely beneath.

The major predators of Water Pipit in the UK are Kestrel and Sparrowhawk and the pipit has been seen to freeze in their presence, or even hide behind rocks. Parent birds have also been witnessed giving a 'disablement-type distraction-lure display' – that is, feigning a broken wing and luring potential predators away from the nest.

In Britain, the good thing about Water Pipit's loyalty to certain habitats at certain sites means that you can be fairly sure of seeing one in winter if you go to the right place. Despite this, the species can be elusive and cryptic, keeping to ground level and feeding among seaweed and grass. It is usually flighty and aware of even its distant surroundings – so good luck with getting close to one!

There were 5 Water Pipits at North Warren on a single day in November.



Water Pipit (*Anthus spinoletta*)



Waxwing (*Bombycilla garrulus*)

Pictures by Jon Evans ©

A few Waxwings (*Bombycilla garrulus*) have been seen in Suffolk, 23 were seen in North Lowestoft in December. Waxwings are incredibly long-lived, and can live upwards of thirteen years. When Waxwings do appear over winter, they often migrate in what is known as an "irruption", better described as a sudden and fast invasion over October, November and December. The primary reason for this is because a population of Waxwings in a given year in northern Europe may be too large for the available food, which can be affected further by a failed harvest; hence, a sudden migration south to the UK. Although Waxwings are observed mainly in eastern parts of the UK, they have been known to search further inland for food. It's therefore possible to view them over winter in inland parts of the country too. A few years ago, I saw them eating the berries on the trees at Tesco's, Stowmarket.

Garden sightings: Lots of Blackbirds, Mistle Thrush, Song Thrush, Fieldfares, Redwings, Lesser Redpolls, Siskin x 4, Nuthatch. Raven and Ringtail Harrier seen at Westhorpe. And lots of Tits on the feeders.

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