



## Yellowbreasted Pipit

**Geelborskoester**

*Hemimacronyx chloris*

The Yellowbreasted Pipit is a southern African endemic with its breeding range on the Drakensberg range, between 1400–2400 m, from the Stormberg (3026D) in the south to the southern Transvaal escarpment in the north. It is virtually restricted to South Africa, only marginally penetrating Lesotho in the Sehlabathebe National Park (2929CC) (Osborne & Tigar 1990). In favourable terrain several pairs may be found breeding in close association (Vernon 1983a), but it is generally highly local and best classified as scarce within its range.

It is congeneric with Sharpe's Longclaw *H. sharpei* of the Kenyan highlands; the two form a superspecies. The East African form resembles the southern one closely and should bear the revised vernacular name of Kenyan Yellowbreasted Pipit (see Cooper, M.R. 1985; Clancey 1985c, Clancey *et al.* 1987).

Most early students described it as shy and elusive, though subsequent fieldworkers have not found it so difficult to locate and study (see Vernon 1983a). It is closely comparable to the Grassveld Pipit *Anthus cinnamomeus* in size, and they occur sympatrically and in comparable habitat. The diagnostic bright lemon yellow underside, streaked breast, tawny flanks and conspicuous yellow supercilium are not readily discernible in the field, unless the underparts are observed clearly. The warm olive-brown back is moderately dark streaked or scaled, and the outer tail-feathers – as in the Grassveld Pipit – are sharply marked with white laterally. The legs are yellowish flesh-coloured or buffy. The diagnostic yellow colours are present only in breeding plumage (Keith *et al.* 1992).

**Habitat:** The breeding grounds are restricted to submontane undulating grasslands in the massif of the Drakensberg, generally at high altitude (Clancey 1985c). It favours lush, almost meadow-like conditions. After breeding it is found at lower elevations, at this time often in pasture and fallow lands, but seemingly not attracted to recently burnt grassland as is the case with many *Anthus* pipits.

**Movements:** At least some birds move to lower altitudes after breeding, from about April, when they occur towards the coast in the eastern Cape Province and Transkei (Clancey 1990b). The highest reporting rates occurred during the sum-

mer breeding season, the opposite of the pattern typical of an altitudinal migrant, but this may result from greater conspicuity when in breeding plumage.

**Breeding:** Breeding records were from summer, November–February, in agreement with the few published records (Dean 1971; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

**Interspecific relationships:** It is generally found in small parties and is not inclined to consort with other pipits or terrestrial passerines.

**Historical distribution and conservation:** It was collected well out of the present range near Swellendam (3420AB) in the 19th century, but that specimen is considered to have been a vagrant (Hockey *et al.* 1989), and no evidence of a subsequent range contraction. It was probably more widely distributed in Lesotho in the past and the fragmentation of its range is probably largely the result of human overpopulation and agricultural practices. Fewer migrants are seen at lower altitude than before, suggesting a decline in numbers (Keith *et al.* 1992). Brooke (1984b) included several records south of 32°S, where it was not recorded during the atlas.

The Yellowbreasted Pipit is considered globally threatened (Collar *et al.* 1994). It is threatened by the rapid afforestation of montane grasslands in South Africa and by overgrazing and burning, particularly in Lesotho and Transkei. A substantial population occurs in the Drakensberg conservation areas.

P.A. Clancey

Recorded in 44 grid cells, 1.0%  
Total number of records: 158  
Mean reporting rate for range: 4.2%

### Reporting rates for vegetation types



