

SHORT NOTES

DECLINE OF PIPIT IN WAIRARAPA

A drastic decline in the numbers of the Pipit (*Anthus novaeseelandiae*) or Ground Lark, as it is often called, has occurred in the Wairarapa district in the last twenty years. After being one of the commonest native birds in the Wairarapa countryside the Pipit now is one of the scarcest. It is difficult to account for this decline, though several contributing factors are probably responsible.

In the decade 1920-1929 the Pipit was widespread on farm lands in the Wairarapa Valley and also in the hilly East Coast country, in the swampy pastures around Wairarapa Lake and on the ocean beaches, not to mention a sprinkling along the summits of the Tararua Mountains. In that period it could be seen on occasions in the suburban areas of Masterton borough as, for instance, Makora Road, 11 April and 20 December 1921; 26 April 1924; 2 April 1926. Near Fish Hatcheries, Pownall Street, 15 June 1924; Lansdowne, several, 18 March 1928. Likewise it was of frequent occurrence on the roadsides radiating from Masterton and it was most unusual at that period not to see the Pipit on a journey through the Wairarapa.

The Pipit continued to be widespread in the following two decades, being recorded as plentiful in many areas. It was during the 1950-1959 decade that a decline in the numbers of the Pipit became apparent. The decrease continued in the period 1960-1969, when only single birds were seen in localities which formerly held several.

The disappearance of the Pipit from some of its former haunts is best indicated by giving records of a specific area, such as the Mount Holdsworth Road, which to this day remains unsealed, has had the minimum amount of roadside spraying and has remained little changed for the past fifty years. There has been, however, a considerable increase in motor traffic in recent years and the area has been invaded by the Australian Magpie (*Gymnorhina tibicen hypoleuca*), first recorded there on 3 June 1945. From 1921, when my records began, the Pipit could always be seen on this road. In 1934 there were at least three pairs but by 1961 the numbers had been reduced to a pair. Since 1966 not a single bird has been recorded, though the habitat remains suitable.

Another favoured locality in earlier years was the Kiriwhakapapa Road, also leading to the Tararuas. On 13 January 1946 as many as twenty were seen. Except for a single bird seen on 16 December 1966, none has been recorded since 1953.

Another indication of the decrease of the Pipit in the Wairarapa Valley is provided by records of roadside nests discovered when the sitting bird flew out on the approach of traffic. Eighteen nests were found in this way from 1935 to 1952, eleven of these being up to 1939, four in the 1940-1949 decade and three in the fifties to 1952, since when not a single roadside nest has been recorded nor has the bird itself been seen on these roads. The roads in question are: Weraiti Hill, Ngaumu, Gladstone, Cavelands, Te Whiti, Maungaraki, Rangitumau, Te Wharau (Hikorangi).

At present a few Pipits inhabit the Ruamahanga and other riverbeds but here, too, there has been a decrease in numbers. At Te Whiti, for instance, where formerly, 1937 to 1951, several were usually seen on or near the riverbed, now most visits fail to record the bird at all. The Pipit is sparingly distributed on the hilltops of the East Coast pastoral lands and along the sea beaches, perhaps most numerous in the latter areas. It has remained in small numbers on the Rimutaka Hill Highway.

Since the sealing of main roads, with an ever-increasing volume of motor traffic and faster speeds, it is likely that the habit of the Pipit in flying from its nest across the road in front of approaching vehicles has proved a fatal one. This, combined with the almost universal practice of Government and local bodies of spraying road verges for weed control, with consequent contamination of water tables; the greater destruction of roadside vegetation to improve visibility; more efficient farming methods and the increase of the Magpie which unfortunately is prone to snap up young birds found in its foraging in the Pipit's habitat have all contributed, it seems likely, to the decrease in the number of this ecologically valuable bird.

It should be stated that bird life generally in the Wairarapa has decreased considerably in the period under review to about only a quarter of its former numbers. The decrease has been particularly noticeable since the Second World War. Has a similar decrease in the numbers of the Pipit been recorded in other parts of New Zealand?

R. H. D. STIDOLPH

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A FIJI BLACK-FACED SHRIKEBILL ANTING WITH A MILLIPEDE

On 11 November 1972, in rainforest about 300 metres above sea-level in southern Viti Levu, Fiji Islands, I saw a female Black-faced Shrikebill (*Clytorhynchus nigrogularis*) apparently "anting" with a millipede.