Scandinavian Rock Pipits (*Anthus petrosus littoralis*) on the Isle of Man

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Very little attenton has been paid to the winter populations of the Rock Pipits to be found around the IoM's shoreline.
However advances in field identification and quite a few ringing recoveries from the 'adjacent island' now make it possible for a good percentage of these birds to be assigned to the Scandinavian race *littoralis*.

Where to look:

From late October through to late March several sites on the island see a noticeable increase in rock pipit numbers – we have noted 3 sites as being particularly popular with immigrant birds (although there will doubtless be more).
These are 'The Wigeon Pool' by the Manx Flyers Aero Club in Derbyhaven, Niarbyl on the west coast and Port Mooar below Maughold Head. However, passage birds can be seen almost anywhere around our coast and often in significantly sized flocks (up to a dozen birds).

Identification of autumn plumage *littoralis*:

It should be stressed at the outset that the species as a whole is very variable in plumage and overlaps in features will mean that some *littoralis* will remain impossible to separate from the resident *petrosus* birds and that, as winter progresses, these features become even less distinct. So that by December/January when the birds have completed their post-breeding moult, they are mostly indistinguishable from the resident birds.
However, when the birds first arrive – field observations show that late October is the peak – many birds are still showing some of the characteristics that make them 'stand out from the crowd'.

General impression or 'jizz':

Although they are almost identical in size and shape, some birds tend to give a more 'thrush-like' appearance with a heads-up, tails-down posture – this is especially noticeable when the birds are 'alert' or generally 'scanning' their surroundings.

Voice:

No discernible difference in tone has been noted although they do appear to be more vocal. This is presumably as a result of them 'squabbling' as they find themselves in a flock situation for the first time since the previous winter.

Certainly many chases take place as individual birds vie for dominance in a feeding area.

Bare parts:

No consistant difference in leg colour between the races has been noted – on the whole both show dark red legs.
A strong pointer to a bird being of the race *littoralis* can be seen in bill colour. Invariably, a bird showing a bright yellow base to the lower mandible (almost 'redwing-like') in autumn will be a *littoralis*. These birds will show a hint of yellow or buff on the bill throughout the winter, but observers should beware of very bright *petrosus* birds in early spring as they can show some pale colour at the base of the bill.
However, not all *littoralis* show such strong colouration!!

Upperparts colouration and head pattern:

This is where it starts to get confusing!
It would be very easy to state that *littoralis* birds tend to be paler than *petrosus*, but because of the chosen habitat of Rock Pipits, determining the colour of their upperparts is 'fraught with danger'.
Birds seen feeding on storm wrack will look olive-green to grey – the more brown the wrack, the greener the bird and the darker the wrack the greyer the bird!
Birds seen walking between patches of wrack via the sand of the beach can look remarkably dark and very *petrosus*-like!
Conversely, when seen on really dark rocks the apparent pallour of some *petrosus* birds is really very pronounced.
Occasionally *littoralis* birds will show contrastingly pale rumps, which hasn't been noted to such an extent on *petrosus*. But again this can vary in intensity with the light conditions.
One feature remains relatively constant though. This is the head pattern of *littoralis* birds.
A very high percentage of *littoralis* birds show supercilliums ranging from 'very strong' in autumn to vestigial in mid-winter, becoming stronger again as they approach spring. But it is always visible (and often most pronounced) when the birds are viewed head-on. The same cannot be said for *petrosus* birds.
As a guide, a bird showing a distinct supercillium is most likely a *littoralis*.

Underparts:

As with the other features discussed so far, there is a high degree of overlap here and it is only really at the extreme edges of variation that any degree of certainty can be confidently claimed.
Birds displaying more fine, less "smudgy" streaking against a paler background colour are thought to be *littoralis* whereas the much darker and heavily smudged underparts of a 'classic' winter *petrosus* lend them an almost 'dirty' quality. Unfortunately there are an awful lot of variations between the two extremes.

Wings and tail:

There doesn't appear to be much to separate the two races by looking at wing feathers but a small number of *littoralis* can show much cleaner, paler tips to the median and greater coverts than *petrosus* birds. These covert tips can often give a very obvious double wing-bar that can be seen over quite some distance – very reminiscent of Water Pipit.
Much has been made of the apparent whiteness of the outer tail feathers of *littoralis* birds and whilst some do indeed seem to have "white outers" many also show a more classic petrosus-like dirty grey-brown with contrasting pale tips.
Again viewing conditions are extremely important when assessing the apparent 'whiteness' of a bird's outer tail feathers.
In bright sunlight, and against a dark background, most, if not all, outer tail feathers can look very white indeed and it is only really in 'flat light' with a neutral background and with prolongued observation that a determination can be made.

So to summarise, if all the ideal viewing conditions exist and a bird clearly shows:

- white outer tail-feathers,
- a strong supercillium,
- is paler with clearer breast-streaking
- has a yellow base to the bill,

then you can fairly confidently say that the bird is "probably a *littoralis*".

Identification of spring plumage *littoralis*:

Fortunately this is where it gets a bit easier and *littoralis* birds start to look much more like summer-plumaged Water Pipits.

They start to develop a distinct, peachy-pink flush about the breast and throat and the breast streaking is much reduced – occasionally disappearing altogether.
The head becomes slightly greyer (although not as contrastingly grey as on Water Pipit), often with a hint of rusty-brown below the ear-coverts and the supercilliums become very pronounced.

Based on our observations over the last few years, I believe that the vast majority of Rock Pipits seen on the island in winter originated in colder climes and are indeed Scandinavian Rock Pipits.

Below is a very good example of a recently arrived *littoralis*. Note the hint of a supercillium even when seen in profile, the strong orange-yellow colour of the

base of the bill, the very white tips to the median coverts and the general pallor of the bird.

Left:
Another newly-arrived bird this time showing the slightly more thrush-like appearance and again a very bright bill, a slightly more obvious supercillium, and again with the much 'cleaner' breast streaking. On this more neutral background the pallor of the bird can be seen clearly.

Below is a 'classic' early

spring *littoralis* (taken in late March). Below the ear coverts the rusty patch is clearly visible as is the strong pink-peach flush on the throat and the increasing strength of the supercillium at this time of year.

Below is another spring bird this time in April showing the much-reduced breast-streaking. The head pattern is starting to look more “Water Pipit-like”.