

A Confusion of Birdwatchers

The pipit and the skylark look alike but are quite different birds.

Out in the open country a small fawn bird takes flight. Roused from the shelter of the rough grasslands where it feeds and nests, the bird rises to hang, fluttering in the sky. But what is it?

Poets have made a common symbol of the skylark; the native pipit, however, lacks such a literature.

It is very easy to confuse the two — they look so similar that it can be difficult to realise there are actually two different species of birds in the same habitat.

Not only do these birds favour the same environment, they behave in a similar manner. Yet they are not even related — in evolutionary terms, skylark and pipit are so different that they belong in totally separate categories, birds without any scientific similarity.

The skylark is an introduced European bird, the familiar subject of poetry and music, literary allusion and sentiment. The pipit or pihoihoi is a native bird, though it occurs in other parts of the world where it is known as Richard's pipit.

Skylarks were introduced to New Zealand by sentimental settlers. This is the songbird of the two, singing as 'the lark ascending' and continuing its song for many minutes as it flutters high above.

The native pipit has a more restricted songbook: it is more likely to be heard calling 'pipit' from a fence post (though the skylark sings from there too). Unlike the skylark, the pipit tends to swoop in the sky, rather than maintain a particular position, and sings only as it returns to earth.

It is easier to tell the difference between the two birds on the ground. The pipit is slightly longer and heavier than the skylark, with a longish tail, though the distinction is hard to grasp when a direct comparison is not possible. The pipit has a dark eye stripe.



The simplest way to identify a native pipit on the ground is to look at its tail. The bird flicks it frequently as it walks about.



The native pipit builds a more substantial nest than the skylark, making a structure of dried grass as a foundation for its deep nest cup, 'in rough vegetation, nearly always on a bank or slope,' according to naturalist Geoff Moon who took these pictures. The pipit breeds two to three times from August through February.