

## Pipits Successfully Released!!!

In mid-May of this past year, a young woman from Peyton brought me three long-legged chicks she had rescued from children who were playing with them. The little birds had been with her for two weeks. She had initially fed them soaked dog kibble, and then introduced cooked egg yolk, which became their diet of choice. When their condition began to deteriorate despite her best efforts, the rescuer realized they needed to go to a wildlife rehabilitator.



Baby birds can be notoriously difficult to identify. Adding to the difficulty in this case, was the bad condition of the feathers. Encrusted with dried food, they were malformed and breaking off almost as soon as they grew in, due to the deficient diet, which made identification practically impossible. The habitat, in which they'd been found, as well as their long legs and the fact that they were walking around and self-feeding at a very young age, led me to believe they were some kind of shore-bird common to the prairie--Killdeer? Mountain Plovers? I had to wait for them to molt and grow a completely new set of feathers before I would know for sure.

Over two months, many, many, MANY mealworms, waxworms and crickets, and a miraculous molt later, they turned out to be sleek and, in their own unostentatious way, very handsome American Pipits, at home "on open ground (tundra, beaches, fields), often in flocks" ([Sibley Guide to Birds](#)).

Having cared for them so long and being the anxiety-prone type I am, I wanted to make sure they were released in optimal Pipit habitat, and--if at all possible--in the vicinity of other Pipits. I contacted every birder and bird rehabber I could

think of, but no one was able to confirm any Pipit sightings, which left me with the option of simply releasing them close to where they were found--Peyton.



But where in Peyton? A wildlife-savvy friend who lives out East started reconnoitering the area for me and, by pure chance, happened upon a place neither she nor I had ever heard of: Homestead Ranch Regional Park. It lies between Falcon and Peyton, and, my

friend reported back to me, “It has everything you can think of: short-grass prairie, marshy areas, a pond, a creek, forested hills and the proximity of fields. I think it’s perfect!”

I checked the weather forecast for the next few days--no major storms predicted. And so on a Friday morning, my patient, supportive husband and I headed east with my three Pipits safely stowed away in a screened basket. (My sleepless night worrying about whether I’d be able to transfer them from the pre-release cage in my urban yard without anyone escaping into totally unsuitable habitat is a whole other story!)

We reached the Park--having gotten lost only once!--and it was absolutely breathtaking:

A glorious, sunny morning, big blue prairie sky with a few wispy clouds, lots of tree swallows wheeling around a stand of cottonwoods, prairie, some cattails where the creek fed into the pond, and--for humans--only some grandparents with their grandkids happily exploring for grasshoppers and fish, and one lone bicyclist.

We picked the “perfect spot” from which any kind of habitat the birds might want would be readily accessible. I set down the basket and, taking a deep breath, removed the screened top. To our utter amazement, relief and joy, the three birds SHOT out and upward into the sky almost vertically until we could barely see them! No sign of weakness or flight problems, and you could just sense their EXHILARATION!! I couldn't have been more thrilled if these had been BALD EAGLES we were releasing!!!

We stayed a little while, breathing in the sweet, late-July prairie air.

As dusk fell that evening, I worried, of course, whether these three little birds would be OK, spending their first night out in that big place. Kind of like a parent coming back from having gotten their kid settled into a big, anonymous college dorm. But then, that's life. I was left with an enormous sense of relief, professional satisfaction--and a very full and grateful heart.