

## **First Record of Little Bunting (*Emberiza pusilla*) for British Columbia and Canada.**

**By Rick Toochin, Peter Hamel, Margo Hearne, and Martin Williams.**

### **Introduction and Distribution**

The Little Bunting (*Emberiza pusilla*) is a passerine species that is found breeding from Finland east across the taiga of the far north to Anadyr Bay on the Bering Sea side of Far Eastern Russia (Jonsson 1992, Brazil 2009, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). This species is highly migratory with all birds wintering from the Himalayas in Bhutan through northern Burma, into northern Thailand, across northern Laos, through the northern half of Vietnam and across southern China to Taiwan (Byers *et al.* 1995, Brazil 2009). During migration, Little Buntings are regularly found in Europe where they are a rare but annual species, especially in the fall, in countries such as Great Britain (Jonsson 1992, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). In North America, Little Bunting has been found as a regular fall vagrant in Alaska, with about twenty records, mostly from the western Aleutian Islands as well as St. Paul Island and at Gambell on St. Lawrence Island (West 2008). South of Alaska, the Little Bunting has only been found a few times. There is only one record for Oregon, where a single bird was photographed in the town of Joseph and stayed from January 28- April 11, 2013 (Contreras and Tumer 2013). In California there have been only two records, the first being photographed at Point Loma in San Diego from October 21-24, 1991, and another that was photographed on the Southeast Farallon Islands off San Francisco on September 27-28, 2002 (McCaskie 1993, Cole and McCaskie 2004, Hamilton *et al.* 2007). There is also a recent photographed record of an immature bird found on October 8, 2008, at Rancho San José de Castro, Vizcaíno Peninsula, Baja California Sur, in Mexico (Rademaker and Powell 2010). The Little Bunting is an accidental species to British Columbia.

### **Identification and Similar Species**

The identification of Little Bunting is covered in most North American field guides. However, most standard North American guides only show adults in breeding plumage, leaving it up to observers to go to European field guides to learn more about immature plumages. Little Buntings in all plumages have a distinct chestnut auricular patch that has a white spot at the outer edge (Jonsson 1992, Brazil 2009, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). In overall size, the Little Bunting is a very small bird that is similar in size to a Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella passerina*) (McCaskie 1993). Breeding plumaged adults have a white throat with a chestnut coloured chin with this colour extending on the face and over the eye and up the forehead as a medium crown stripe (Jonsson 1992, Brazil 2009, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). Adults in breeding plumaged also have a bold white eye ring, dark eyes and the chestnut coloured auricular patch surrounded by a black line with a white line below (Jonsson 1992, Brazil 2009). Little Buntings have a gray coloured side to the neck (Jonsson 1992). The black malar stripe extends down onto the dark streaks that go across the chest and down the sides towards the flanks (Jonsson 1992, Brazil 2009,

Mullarney *et al.* 2009). The lower breast, belly and under tail coverts are white (Dunn and Alderfer 2009). The legs are light fleshy pink in colour (Dunn and Alderfer 2009). Little Bunting also has a straight, small, dark bill (Jonsson 1992, Brazil 2009, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). The back is pale brownish colour with dark streaks that extend onto the wings which have two wing bars (Jonsson 1992, Brazil 2009, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). The rump and inner tail feathers are also brownish coloured with the outer tail feathers being white (Jonsson 1992, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). Adult females are similar to adult males, but show less chestnut on the chin, and the chestnut is more restricted to the medium crown stripe and ear coverts (Brazil 2009, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). In winter plumage, adult birds have the chestnut colouration restricted to the ear coverts and from the eye to the bill base (Jonsson 1992, Brazil 2009, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). They also show a more obvious gray collar on the nape (Jonsson 1992, Brazil 2009, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). Immatures are similar to winter plumaged adult birds, but have more yellowish-buff in colouration with the stripes on the head being more indistinct, and the streaking on the ventral area being extensive (Dunn and Alderfer 2009, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). The call notes of the Little Bunting are a sharp clicking “zick” notes that can be very piercing in tone (Jonsson 1992, Mullarney *et al.* 2009)

The only Eurasian species that looks similar to Little Bunting that has occurred on the west coast and British Columbia is the Rustic Bunting. In all plumages Rustic Buntings have a distinctive crest and rusty body colouration (Roberson 1980). Adult males in breeding plumage have black on the head that goes from the base of the bill up the top of the crown, and then to the back of the nape (Mullarney *et al.* 2009, Beadle and Rising 2003, Brazil 2009). There is a median crown stripe that is usually white and a white nape spot (Beadle and Rising 2003). There is a distinct white line that goes from the top of the eye back towards the nape (Mullarney *et al.* 2009, Beadle and Rising 2003, Brazil 2009). The face has a black line that starts at the base of the bill and extends back into the auricular patch (Sibley 2003, Brazil 2009). At the far edge of the auricular patch is a distinct white spot that is found in all plumages of Rustic Bunting (Roberson 1980, Jonsson 1992, Brazil 2009). The small straight bill has a pale lower mandible with a dark edge to the top of the upper mandible with all birds having dark eyes (Sibley 2003, Dunn and Alderfer 2009). Rustic Bunting adult males have a white throat with a dark rusty coloured malar strip that extends up from the rusty breast feathers (Mullarney *et al.* 2009, Brazil 2009). These rusty feathers extend across the breast and up on to the nape and also extend down as streaks down the sides of the breast onto the flanks (Dunn and Alderfer 2009). The rest of the belly is white, as are the under tail coverts (Brazil 2009). The legs are a pale pinkish in colour (Mullarney *et al.* 2009). The feathers on the back of adult male breeding plumaged Rustic Buntings are rusty coloured with dark streaks (Jonsson 1992, Beadle and Rising 2003). This colouration extends on to the wings, but there are in all plumages two distinct white wing bars on the wings (Dunn and Alderfer 2009). The tertials are dark centered with light rusty

edges (Brazil 2009). The rump is rusty coloured and unstreaked when seen in flight (Sibley 2003). This rusty colouration extends down into the central part of the tail with dark feathers bordering the central area of the tail and white outer tail feathers noticeable in flight that are similar to a Dark-eyed Junco (*Junco hyemalis*), but do not flash as extensively white (Roberson 1980, Sibley 2003). Adult females are overall similar to adult-breeding-plumaged male birds, but differ in that their head markings lack black colouration and have a more brownish-buffy head pattern (Jonsson 1992, Mullarney *et al.* 2009, Brazil 2009). The rest of the body plumage of adult females is the same as adult males (Mullarney *et al.* 2009, Brazil 2009). They also have a distinct white spot on the outer edge of the auricular patch and have a buffy coloured medium crown stripe and nape patch (Roberson 1980, Beadle and Rising 2003, Brazil 2009). Aging winter plumaged birds is problematic as males and females look very similar to each other, but adult males tend to be brighter than adult females (Roberson 1980, Brazil 2009, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). Immature birds are very similar to adult females, but are buffier in overall colouration, and have a buffy medium crown stripe and nape patch (Mullarney *et al.* 2009, Brazil 2009). Call notes are a hard sounding “*jit*” or “*sip*” and sound very similar to the call note of a Dark-eyed Junco (Roberson 1980, Sibley 2003, Dunn and Alderfer 2009).

In the context of British Columbia, a regularly occurring migrant and wintering species that can look superficially similar to Little Bunting is a fall or winter plumaged Lapland Longspur (*Calcarius lapponicus*). Lapland Longspurs are larger and chunkier than Little Buntings (Sibley 2003, Dunn and Alderfer 2009). Adult birds in fall plumage have a rusty nape, back and wings with dark centered feathers, but have dark streaks on the side of the belly with adult male birds having a blackish chest band (Sibley 2003, Dunn and Alderfer 2009). These birds lack the nape spot and auricular spot found on all plumages of Little Bunting (Jonsson 1992, Dunn and Alderfer 2009). Immature birds also have rusty tones on the back and wing feathers, but have dark side streaks on the side of the breast (Brazil 2009, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). In flight Lapland Longspur makes a dry rattle call that is distinctive as well as “*tew*” notes that are both loud and obvious to an observer (Sibley 2003, Dunn and Alderfer 2009).

### **Occurrence and Documentation**

There is a single record for Little Bunting in British Columbia. It was found by Martin Williams on a Masset Christmas Bird Count on December 25, 2008 (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.). The bird was observed by Peter Hamel, Margo Hearne and Martin Williams for over thirty minutes in a yard with twenty Dark-eyed Juncos that were coming to a bird feeder (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.). It was photographed by Margo Hearne late on the afternoon of the first day of the observation and was briefly seen the next morning by Martin Williams before vanishing (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.). There are also two fall coastal records for California and a recent wintering bird from the interior of Oregon, so observers should be on the look-out for this species in British

Columbia (Hamilton et al. 2007, Puschock 2013). In Eurasia, the Little Bunting migrates in mid-August through September to the east and winters in south-east Asia; and, therefore, is a species that is possibly prone to weather displacement from large storms moving out of Siberia towards Alaska (Roberson 1980, Byers et al. 1995, Brazil 2009). Since the weather patterns naturally follow this path of moving from Siberia into North America, a species like Little Bunting should be watched for by observers along the west coast in the future. The number of records could increase with more coverage given to coastal communities along the west coast of the Mainland and Vancouver Island in the future. However, given the scarcity of records along the west coast south of Alaska, it is not a species that is regularly encountered, and should be properly documented if found again in the future.



Figure 1, 2 & 3: Little Bunting in Masset, Queen Charlotte Islands on December 25, 2008. [3 views of the same bird taken in poor lighting conditions].  
Photos © Margo Hearne.

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