

The Status and Occurrence of McKay's Bunting (*Plectrophenax hyperboreus*) in British Columbia.
By Rick Toochin.

Introduction and Distribution

The McKay's Bunting (*Plectrophenax hyperboreus*) is one of North America's rarest passerine species. The entire breeding population of McKay's Buntings is found on the isolated islands of St. Matthew and Hall Islands in the middle of the Bering Sea (Roberson 1980, Winker *et al.* 2002). A survey conducted in 2003 found that the world population is now known to be over 30,000 birds. (Rogers 2005). McKay's Buntings have been found in the summer months on other Bering Sea islands, such as St. Paul, St. George, King and St. Lawrence Islands, but they are, by no means, annually occurring at these locations (Rogers 2005, West 2008). When they have been found in these other locations there are often no more than a handful of McKay's Buntings in a given summer, and the birds that are located are almost always males (Rogers 2005). There have been some documented cases of McKay's Buntings found on both St. Paul and St. Lawrence Island breeding with Snow Buntings (Sealy 1969, West 2008). As a result hybrid birds have been found in some years (Sealy 1969, West 2008). This has led some authorities to question if the McKay's Bunting is in fact a subspecies of the Snow Bunting (Sealy 1969, Rogers 2005). For now the AOU still has the two species separated, but they are considered closely related to each other (Chesser 2013). Recent DNA research has helped show that McKay's Buntings, though a close relative to the Snow Bunting, is, in fact genetically different enough to Snow Bunting that McKay's Bunting should remain its own species (Maley 2004). Most McKay's Buntings winter on their breeding islands, but some birds winter on the Alaskan Mainland on the Seward Peninsula from Kotzebue to Nome, and south to Bethel with birds wintering as far south as Cold Bay which is on the end of the Alaskan Peninsula where the Aleutian Islands start (Sealy 1972, Rogers 2005, West 2008). They are also believed to winter with Snow Buntings on the Russian Chukchi Peninsula (Rogers 2005). In southern Alaska the McKay's Bunting is a rarity with records scattered from Kodiak, Seward and Valdez (Roberson 1980, Rogers 2005). There are also scattered winter records from the Aleutian Islands (West 2008). South of Alaska, the McKay's Bunting is an accidental vagrant that has turned up only a few times. In California there are no accepted records for this species by the California Bird Records Committee (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). In Oregon there are two accepted records (OFO 2012), and Washington has three accepted records (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2012). In British Columbia, the McKay's Bunting is an accidental winter visitor with only two records, but like all birds should be watched for by observers in the future (see Table 1).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of adult male McKay's Buntings is well covered in most standard field guides of North American birds. Adult females and winter-plumaged females are less shown in most

field guides. This makes identification of non-male birds much more difficult and information on females is greatly lacking in general (Roberson 1980, Roger 2005). Adult males in breeding plumage hold this plumage from the months of March to August and are very white in overall plumage (Sibley 2000). Breeding plumage is acquired through feather wear (Beadle and Rising 2002). The head, neck, back and breast are pure white (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The bill and eyes are all black as are the legs (Sibley 2000). The folded wings are white on the coverts with black limited to the primaries and tertials on the wing feathers (Beadle and Rising 2002). The rump and undertail coverts are white (Sibley 2000). The tail is mostly white on both sides with just a little black in the central area of the tail tip (Sibley 2000). Winter-plumaged adults hold this plumage from the months of August to March (Sibley 2000). The winter plumage adult male is almost the same in plumage characteristics to the breeding-plumaged birds, but the breast and back feathers can be lightly washed in a frosty brown colour (Beadle and Rising 2002). The bill becomes pale yellow in colour (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The crown has a restricted buff colour that is only found on the crown and looks like a "Mohawk" (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The auricular patch on the cheek shares this buffy colour as well, and looks like a buffy cheek patch (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The black of the tertials and primaries have slight white edges to them (Sibley 2000). On the alula area there is a black spot, and on the greater coverts a slight thin black line with the rest of the area white in colour (Beadle and Rising 2002). This can also be seen in flight on the upper surface of the wing as a black spot (Sibley 2000). In flight adult males are extremely white in colour with black restricted to the outer primaries, tertial feathers and in the central tip area of the tail (Sibley 2000). The inner primaries and secondaries are pure white (Sibley 2000). Adult females in breeding plumage hold their plumage from the months of March to August (Sibley 2000). These birds have a dark speckled forehead, dark bill and dark eyes (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The rest of the face, neck and breast are white (Dunn and Alder 2011). The back is dull and dark-streaked with white streaks amongst the dark streaks (Sibley 2000). The rump is white as are the undertail coverts (Sibley 2000). The wings have broad white greater coverts, with black primaries and black-centered tertial feathers with white edges (Beadle and Rising 2002). The tail is blacker in the central feathers, but this is restricted to inner feathers with the outer tail feathers pure white (Beadle and Rising 2002). Adult females in winter plumage hold their plumage from the months of August to March (Sibley 2000). They are very similar to adult males, but average a bit darker buff colour overall that can vary with individuals (Beadle and Rising 2002). The rump is all white, and the tail is similar to the males, but has a bit more black in the central area of the tail (Sibley 2000, Beadle and Rising 2002). The calls and songs of the McKay's Bunting are similar to that of the Snow Bunting (Beadle and Rising 2002). Hybridization between McKay's Buntings and Snow Buntings has occurred on St. Lawrence Island and possibly other Islands in the Bering Sea making the identification of some immature female birds problematic (Sibley 2000, Rogers 2005, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). There can be a

lot of variability in the amount of black in the wings which could suggest that hybridization with Snow Bunting is more frequent than is currently known, but the colour variability found in female Snow Buntings is not well understood and hasn't been studied in detail at this time (Beadle and Rising 2002). It is clear that further study is needed (Beadle and Rising 2002).

The only other species that can look similar to the McKay's Bunting is the closely related Snow Bunting. Adult males hold their breeding plumage from the months of March to August (Sibley 2000). As in the case of the McKay's Bunting, Snow Buntings wear their feathers into breeding plumage (Beadle and Rising 2002). The male Snow Bunting in breeding plumage has a white head, neck throat and breast with a black bill and black eyes (Sibley 2000). The upper back is solid black with a white rump (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The black on the upper back extends on to the tertial feathers, the primary feathers, the greater wing covert feathers, the alula area and scapulars on the wings (Beadle and Rising 2002). There are white bases to the primary feathers, and the medium and lesser coverts are white (Beadle and Rising 2002). On the upper surface of the tail the outer three rectrices are white and thinly tipped with black on the outer web of the feathers and the others have a little white on them (Beadle and Rising 2002). The legs are black (Sibley 2000). The adult breeding-plumaged females hold their plumage from March to August (Sibley 2000). The breeding-plumaged females have a dark-streaked crown, dark-streaked face, and dark streaks on the nape (Sibley 2000, Beadle and Rising 2002). The bill and eyes are black (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The throat is white (Beadle and Rising 2002). Many individuals have brownish streaks on the sides of the breast (Beadle and Rising 2002). The rest of the breast is white as is the belly and undertail coverts (Sibley 2000). The legs are black (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The upper back is streaked black with white and brownish streaks mixed in (Beadle and Rising 2002). The wings are black on the scapulars with buff fringes that extend into the tertials (Beadle and Rising 2002). The primaries are black and this extends into the greater coverts area of the wing, including the alula area. The medium and lesser coverts have reduced, but visible, white across the length of the wing (Beadle and Rising 2002). The tail pattern is similar to the adult male's pattern (Beadle and Rising 2002). The first winter birds are similar to the adults, but have darker secondaries with buffy colour on the head, and usually have browner underparts and browner colour on the rump (Beadle and Rising 2002). The song and calls are similar to the McKay's Bunting (Sibley 2000, Beadle and Rising 2002). The Snow Bunting and the McKay's Bunting are the same general size, but the McKay's Bunting is a chunkier bird that has a higher body weight (Sibley 2000).

Occurrence and Documentation

Anywhere south of Alaska, the McKay's Bunting is an accidental vagrant with almost all birds turning up amongst flocks of Snow Buntings. In British Columbia, the first record was of a male photographed on February 12, 1980 at Wickaninnish Beach in Pacific Rim National Park (see

Table 1). The second record was of a male found by Kevin Louth on December 4, 2004 at the Iona Island South Jetty in Richmond. This bird was with Snow Buntings and was joined by a female McKay's Bunting that was found by the author on December 8, 2004. Both birds were extensively photographed, but the male was taken by a raptor at the end of the month. The female stayed until it was last seen on March 7, 2005, before migrating north with the wintering flock of Snow Buntings (see Table 1). Both Provincial records follow the winter pattern of vagrancy for the species south of Alaska. Since McKay's Buntings leave their breeding islands in early October to winter along the Alaskan Mainland (which is the same time Snow Buntings start to move south of their breeding grounds), it is highly likely these birds get mixed up into flocks of Snow Buntings and travel further south on occasion (Rogers 2005). Since the males are much more obvious than the females, it is possible that a few more McKay's Buntings turn up along the West Coast than are reported. As our understanding of this species increases, so will the information on identification of female birds and potential hybrids. It is a species that could occur in British Columbia again in the future. Observers should check carefully migrating and wintering flocks of Snow Buntings for this Alaskan gem.



Figure 1 & 2: McKay's Bunting male on South Jetty tip at Iona Island, Richmond on December 24, 2004. Photos © Rick Toochin.



Figure 3, 4, 5 & 6: Probable female (note male in the background) McKay's Bunting (bird on left side) with Snow Buntings on South Jetty tip at Iona Island, Richmond on December 24, 2004. Photos © Rick Toochin.

Table 1: Records of McKay's Bunting for British Columbia:

- 1.(1) male February 12, 1980: (photo) Wickaninnish Beach, PRNP (Godfrey 1986, Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 2.(1) 2nd year male winter plumage December 4-8 &14-29, 2004: Kevin Louth, mobs (photo) Iona Island South Jetty, Richmond (Rogers 2005, Toochin 2012a)
 - (1) 2nd year female winter plumage to breeding plumage December 8 & 14, 2004-March 7, 2005: Rick Toochin, mobs (photo) Iona Island South Jetty, Richmond (Rogers 2005, Toochin 2012a)

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