

## **Status and Occurrence of Rustic Bunting (*Emberiza rustica*) in British Columbia.**

**By Rick Toochin.**

### **Introduction and Distribution**

The Rustic Bunting (*Emberiza rustica*) is a Eurasian species that breeds from Scandinavia across northern Russia to the Sea of Okhotsk, Yakutia, the Chukotka Peninsula and the Kamchatka Peninsula including the northern part of Sakhalin Island (Jonsson 1992, Brazil 2009, Hamilton *et al.* 2007). Rustic Buntings are rare but regular in Western Europe in migration and occur as a rare vagrant in Great Britain mostly in the months of August through September with smaller numbers occurring in May (Jonsson 1992). Birds from northern Europe right through to Siberia migrate to spend the winter in East Asia (Jonsson 1992, Brazil 2009). The Rustic Buntings winter range includes most of China, both North and South Korea and most of Southern Japan including the odd bird on the Commander Islands on the Russian side of the Aleutian Islands (Beadle and Rising 2002, Brazil 2009). In North America Rustic Bunting is a rare regular migrant in the Aleutian Islands in spring and is rare in the fall with birds turning up regularly in the Bering Sea and the far western coast of Alaska (Beadle and Rising 2002). Birds have turned up in southern and south eastern Alaska as well (Beadle and Rising 2006). Outside of Alaska Rustic Buntings are considered very rare to casual vagrants with 7 records for British Columbia (Please see Table 1), 3 records in Washington State (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WRBC 2011), 3 records in Oregon (OFO 2012) and 4 records in California (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). In the rest of Canada there is only one other record of Rustic Bunting which was a bird that wintered in Creighton, Saskatchewan from December 3, 2009 – February 22, 2010 (Yahoo messages #18043 & 18359 Saskbirds). Since this species is a regular migrant to Alaska it is likely to occur in British Columbia again in the future and should be watched for with migrating flocks of Dark-eyed Juncos (*Junco hyemalis*).

### **Identification and Similar Species**

The identification of Rustic Bunting is covered in almost all modern field guides. This species is small, slim bodied with an elongated tail and is close to the size of a Dark-eyed Junco (Roberson 1980, Dunn and Alderfer 2009). Rustic Buntings in all plumages have a distinctive crest and rusty body coloration (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 colored 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 onto 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 color (Mullarney *et al.* 2009). The feathers on the back of adult male breeding plumaged Rustic Buntings are rusty colored with dark streaks (Jonsson 1992, Beadle and Rising 2003). This coloration 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 colored and unstreaked when seen in flight (Sibley 2003). This rusty coloration 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 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 coloration 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 and they also have a distinct white spot on the outer edge of the auricular patch plus have a buffy colored 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 coloration and have a buffy medium crown stripe and nape patch (Mullarney *et al.* 2009, Brazil 2009). Call notes are a hard sound “ *jit*” or “ *sip*” sound very similar to the call note of a Dark-eyed Junco (Roberson 1980, Sibley 2003, Dunn and Alderfer 2009).

Another similar species that should be ruled out, particularly for fall plumaged birds, is the Little Bunting (*Emberiza pusilla*). This species is very small and is a little smaller than a Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella passerina*) in overall size (Dunn and Alderfer 2009). 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). Breeding plumaged adults have a white throat with a chestnut colored chin with this color 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 colored auricular patch surrounded by a black line with a white line below (Jonsson 1992, Brazil 2009). Little Buntings also have a gray colored 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 color (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 color 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 colored 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 coloration 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 coloration 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). There is a single record for Little Bunting in British Columbia that was found by Martin Williams on a Masset Christmas Bird Count on December 25, 2008 (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.). The bird was briefly seen and photographed the next day before vanishing (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.). There are 2 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 the context of British Columbia a regularly occurring migrant and wintering species that can look superficially similar to Rustic Bunting is a fall or winter plumaged Lapland Longspur (*Calcarius lapponicus*). Lapland Longspurs are slightly larger and chunkier than Rustic Buntings (Sibley 2003, Dunn and Alderfer 2009). Adults bird 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 Rustic 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 are only few records of Rustic Bunting along the west coast of North America south of Alaska. In British Columbia there are 7 confirmed records of Rustic Bunting (Please See Table 1). Almost all the records for British Columbia reflect the overall pattern for the West Coast of North America of birds turning up in the later part of the fall and in a couple of cases overwintering. Rustic Buntings are often found amongst flocks of Dark-eyed Juncos or by

themselves. Recent records include a bird found by the author on October 22, 2007 at Whiffin Spit in Sooke on Vancouver Island. It was on its own hanging out in open field habitat with a forested edge. Another recent record of Rustic Bunting in British Columbia was of an adult winter plumaged bird found between October 19-20, 2012 at the Masset Golf Course on the Queen Charlotte Islands (also known as Haida Gwaii) was in the company of Dark-eyed Juncos and was photographed (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.). Since Rustic Buntings are long distance migrants they are more prone to vagrancy due to weather displacement than short distance migratory species found in East Asia (Roberson 1980). It is likely that Rustic Buntings found along the coast in the fall are birds that are storm blown out of East Asia and either fly along the Aleutian Islands or possibly fly into North America from the Bering Sea region (Roberson 1980). South east coastal records from Alaska suggest birds follow the coastline south with almost all records of Rustic Bunting outside Alaska being found not far from coastal areas (e-bird database). Observers along the West Coast should be aware that there is an early fall record of a fall plumaged adult bird seen on August 30, 1994 near Masset in the Queen Charlotte Islands (Please see Table 1). This bird may well have been a bird that entered North America in the late Spring or early summer period and slowly made its way south as this is an exceptionally early fall record that is outside of the October through December window shown by this species. The other exceptional record for Rustic Bunting in British Columbia was of an adult female found at the far eastern part of the Hope Airport on May 5, 2002 (Please see Table 1). This bird was also in the company of a many Dark-eyed Juncos that were migrating north through the area.

Given the frequency of records in Alaska as both a spring and fall migrant it is highly likely that more birds will be found in British Columbia as more observers search particularly along the west coast. Given there are individual inland records from Washington, British Columbia and Saskatchewan this species should be considered as possible anywhere in the Province. Obviously there is a higher probability of occurrence along the west coast where the bulk of the records have been located to date. Given recent records of Asian strays found in the interior of British Columbia observers should pay close attention to migrating and wintering flocks of Dark-eyed Juncos and watch carefully at feeding stations.



Figure 1 & 2: Record# 2: Rustic Bunting at Jordan River on December 3, 1983.

Photos © Tim Zurowski



Figure 3 & 4: Record #7: Rustic Bunting at Masset Golf Course, Masset, QCI on October 20, 2012.

Photos © Ray Woods and Brian Elder.

**Table 1: British Columbia Records of Rustic Bunting:**

- 1.(2) fall plumage October 26, 1971: Adrian Dorst: near Queen Charlotte City, QCI (Crowell and Nehls 1972, Godfrey 1986, Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 2.(1) winter plumage male November 25, 1983- February 20, 1984: Vic & Peggy Goodwill, mobs (BC Photo 883) Jordan River (Hunn and Mattocks 1984, Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin 2012b)
- 3.(1) immature male December 8, 1990- April 12, 1991: Aurora Patterson, mobs (photo) Tofino (Siddle 1991, Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 4.(1) fall plumage August 30, 1994: Peter Hamel: near Masset, QCI (Bowling 1995, Toochin *et al.* 2013)
- 5.(1) adult female May 5, 2002: Thor Manson: near Hope Airport (Toochin 2012c)
- 6.(1) immature October 22, 2007: Rick Toochin (photo) Whiffin Spit, Sooke (Toochin 2012b)
- 7.(1) adult winter plumage October 19-20, 2012: Peter Hamel, mobs (photo) Masset Golf Course, Masset, QCI (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.)
- 8.(1) immature male December 22, 2013: Rick Toochin: Masset, QCI (R. Toochin Pers. Comm.)

Hypothetical Records:

- 1.(1) winter plumage December 12, 1988: Coquitlam (Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin 2012a)
- 2.(1) winter plumage January 4, 1991: near Port Hardy (Campbell *et al.* 2001,  
Toochin *et al.* 2013)

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