

## **The Status and Occurrence of Chestnut-collared Longspur (*Calcarius ornatus*) in British Columbia.**

**By Rick Tootchin.**

### **Introduction and Distribution**

The Chestnut-collared Longspur (*Calcarius ornatus*) is a passerine species that breeds on the open Prairies from southeastern Alberta, southern Saskatchewan to southern Manitoba, parts of north western Minnesota, North and South Dakota, and Wyoming and Montana (Sibley 2000, Hamilton *et al.* 2007). The species is a short distance migrant with the bulk of the population migrating south through the Prairie states to winter from southern Arizona, New Mexico, eastern Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas to south into northern central Mexico (Sibley 2000, Hamilton *et al.* 2007). Birds have shown up as vagrants throughout the eastern Provinces and States (Sibley 2000, Hamilton *et al.* 2007). The Chestnut-collared Longspur was only on the California Bird Records Committee review list of species for the state between the years 1972-73, but is no longer a review species of the committee because the species is reported annually in the state in numbers each year (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). In Oregon the Chestnut-collared Longspur is no longer a review species for the Oregon Bird Records Committee with over twenty accepted records (OFO 2012). The Chestnut-collared Longspur is still a rare bird in Washington with seven accepted state records to 2012 (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2012). The Chestnut-collared Longspur is accidental in Alaska with only one good sight record for the State (West 2008). In British Columbia the Chestnut-collared Longspur is a casual species with twenty records which seem to have increased in frequency since 2007 (Campbell *et al.* 2001, Tootchin *et al.* 2013c).

### **Identification and Similar Species**

The identification of adult male breeding plumaged Chestnut-collared Longspurs is straightforward and should not give an observer any difficulty. The juvenile plumage is an entirely different story and can be the cause of great confusion amongst observers with little or no experience with this species. It is important to note that the Chestnut-collared Longspur is the smallest of the four North American Longspur species. This species is characterized by having a short tail, short wings and primary projection and a round head shape with a small bill (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). Adult males hold their breeding plumage from March till August (Sibley 2000). The breeding-plumaged males have a large rufous nape with a black crown that starts from the top of the bill base to the back of the upper neck (Dunn and Beadle 1998). The white on the fore crown goes over the eye to well behind the eye (Sibley 2000). This is followed by a black line that goes from the dark eyes behind the eye and slightly around the upper outer auricular area (Sibley 2000). The bill is small and pale with yellow starting from the area between the bill and eye and going down the throat and encompasses the entire inner auricular area of the face (Sibley 2000). The upper side of the neck is pale then is followed by a black

breast, sides and lower belly with white under tail coverts (Dunn and Beadle 1998). The wings are dark with black-centered feathers with brown edges on the upper back, brown wings with two light white wing bars, dark black centered tertial feathers that have brown edges (Sibley 2000). The upper shoulder area is all black with a white bar that can be hidden (Dunn and Beadle 1998). The folded primaries are brown with dark-centered feathers with a short primary projection (Dunn and Beadle 1998). In flight the underside of the wing is entirely white in colour (Sibley 2000). The Chestnut-collared Longspur has the shortest tail of all the North American Longspurs (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). The pattern is most easily seen in flight as an obvious black triangle with extra white on the outer tail feathers that cuts into the center of the tail (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). Adult female birds hold their breeding plumage from March till August (Sibley 2000). In breeding plumage the females are less spectacularly plumaged than the males (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The black on the belly is reduced in overall colouration (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The nape is rufous, but not as bright or as large in size (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). The facial area is plainer with the auricular area buffy in pattern with a large black spot on the lower area of the auricular area (Sibley 2000). The eye stripe from the eye to the nape is thinner and not as dramatic looking (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). There is a thin light white eye ring around the eye and the throat is white not yellow in colour (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). Adult male and female, in winter plumage, are very buffy brown coloured; overall the males have a more subdued black breast (Dunn and Beadle 1998). Adult males and females have the same tail patterns and this pattern doesn't change at any season (Dunn and Beadle 1998). Juveniles are a buffy pale sandy-brown in overall colouration (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). The crown is buffy brown with dark streaks (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The eye stripe over the eye is buff colour with a dark rear auricular area on the face (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). The eyes are dark and the small triangular bill is pale in colour (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). There is a bit of white that goes from the bill base down the lower auricular area and a dark malar stripe with a white throat (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). The breast is buffy with dark blurry streaks that go down on to the flanks (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). The undertail coverts are white and the tail pattern is the same as the adult (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). The legs are pale (Sibley 2000). The back and wings are buffy brown-coloured with dark-centered feathers, giving the bird almost a dark streaked look on the back (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). The rump is not streaked and is pale buffy-brown; this is especially noticeable in flight (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). The underside of the open wing in flight is white (Sibley 2000).

The song of the Chestnut-coloured Longspur is a sweet warbled "*seet-sidee-tidee- zeek-zeerdi*" that starts high in pitch and ends in a lower pitch which can be reminiscent of the falling trends

of the song of a Western Meadowlark (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). The flight call is a soft, husky two to three part “*kidedel*” or “*kiddle*” (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000).

The McCown’s Longspur (*Rhynchophanes mccownii*) is a species that also lives on the Prairies but is very different in adult plumages to Chestnut-collared Longspur. The juvenile McCown’s Longspur is a pale bird that is grayish-buff in overall colouration and has a large pinkish bill and an unstreaked breast (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). The McCown’s Longspur is a small bird that is only a little bit bigger to the Chestnut-collared Longspur (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The McCown’s Longspur has a short tail, but has a long primary projection on the folded wing (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). The tail pattern of the McCown’s Longspur is the most obvious and different of the longspurs (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). The black tail band across the tip of the tail and the black that is found only on the innermost tail feathers, give the tail a perfect inverted T pattern (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). The rest of the tail has extensive white feathers (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). The call notes of the McCown’s Longspur include a soft “*poik*” and a short soft rattle (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000).

The Lapland Longspur (*Calcarius lapponicus*) in breeding plumage can look superficially similar to a breeding-plumaged Chestnut-collared Longspur (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). There are some important structural differences between the two species (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The Lapland Longspur is a much larger, longer-bodied bird that has a long tail and a long primary projection (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The rufous nape of the male Lapland Longspur is a bit darker in colour to the Chestnut-collared Longspur (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). That is where the similarities end as Lapland Longspurs in breeding plumage has an entire black face and throat with a large yellow bill (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Dunn Alderfer 2011). The adult breeding-plumaged female Lapland Longspurs have a reduced rufous nape, but an extensive dark auricular patch, buff face, black breast band and rufous in the wings (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). The outermost tail feather of the Lapland Longspur is white and the entire inner part of the tail is dark (Dunn and Beadle 1998). This makes the tail pattern completely different from a Chestnut-coloured Longspur (Sibley 2000). The juvenile Lapland Longspurs are like the adult females, but have buffier faces and have more reduced black on the breast (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). They also have extensive rufous in the wings (Sibley 2000). The calls of the Lapland Longspur are a dry mechanical rattle with a husky whistled “*tleew*” more similar in sound to a Snow Bunting (Sibley 2000).

The Smith Longspur (*Calcarius pictus*) is another species that, as an immature bird, can look similar to an immature Chestnut-collared Longspur and creates identification challenges (Dunn

and Beadle 1998). Important structural differences are that Smith's Longspur is a much larger, longer bodied bird that has a long tail and a long primary projection (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). In overall colouration, the immature Smith's Longspur is an orangey-buff colour (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The head is flatter and larger in shape with the facial pattern buffy-coloured (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). The crown is buff with dark streaks and the dark auricular area has a light spot in the central area (Sibley 2000). The malar stripe is buffy and thick with a dark thin line separating the pale throat (Dunn and Beadle 1998). The breast is all buffy-coloured with a few fine dark chest streaks that extend down onto the flanks (Dunn and Beadle 1998). The back and wings are buffy and have dark-centered feathers (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). On the open and folded wing are 2 white wing bars (Sibley 2000). The underwing is dark gray (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). The tail has two outer tail feathers that are white, and the entire inner part of the tail is dark (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). The flight call is similar to the Lapland Longspur, but is higher in pitch (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

With any out of season or possible rare Longspur the best thing observers can do is get pictures and document the bird properly.

### **Occurrence and Documentation**

In Canada the Chestnut-collared Longspur is, according to the latest COSEWIC report, classified as a threatened species (COSEWIC 2009). This species lives in native prairie grasslands which are threatened by habitat loss from both industrial agriculture practices and fragmentation from the energy sector (COSEWIC 2009). Nearly one quarter of the population of Chestnut-collared Longspurs are found in Canada, and the long term analysis of both Breeding Bird Surveys and Christmas Bird Count Data shows a 90 – 93% percent decline. In native grassland habitat, this species has shown growth in population sizes, but the overall trend is not good (COSEWIC 2009). In British Columbia the Chestnut-collared Longspur is a casually occurring species that has shown a noticeable increase in frequency of records since 2007. In the past few years this species has been recorded almost annually in the Province with most records coming from the south west coastal region. Of the twenty Provincial records for Chestnut-collared Longspur, seventeen of them come from the May-July period (Please see Table 1 & 2). In the few years better coverage of the Hope area has produced the most of the recent records. This area is a bottle neck point for migrants and the habitat around the Hope Airport is perfect for attracting migratory grassland passerines such as the Chestnut-collared Longspur, especially during the spring migration period of May to early June. It is entirely possible the birds seen in the Hope area are travelling up the Fraser River to the Cariboo region to prospect, given the good available habitat found in the region. Given the vast areas of British Columbia that do not receive regular observer coverage, it is entirely possible that the Chestnut-collared Longspur,

like the Sprague's Pipit (*Anthus spragueii*), could be found breeding somewhere in the interior of the Province in the future. In the future, summer reports of longspurs should be scrutinized extra carefully for this species. There are the odd summer records in southern British Columbia for Lapland Longspur, but any first summer or female plumaged birds should be photo documented as it is just as likely that the bird in question could be a Chestnut-collared Longspur. Fall records are extremely rare for the Province, but this could change as observers are more careful in checking longspurs encountered during the months of September through November. With the frequency the Chestnut-collared Longspur occurs in both California and Oregon it very likely that British Columbia will see more reports of this beautiful grassland gem in the future. As observer understanding of identification and migration timing increases so will the number of records. This is a species to be watched for in British Columbia again in the future.



Figure 1 & 2: Chestnut-collared Longspur at Hope Airport on June 6, 2010.

Photos © Rick Toochin.



Figures 3 & 4: Chestnut-collared Longspur at Hope Airport on June 7, 2010.

Photos © Peter Candido.



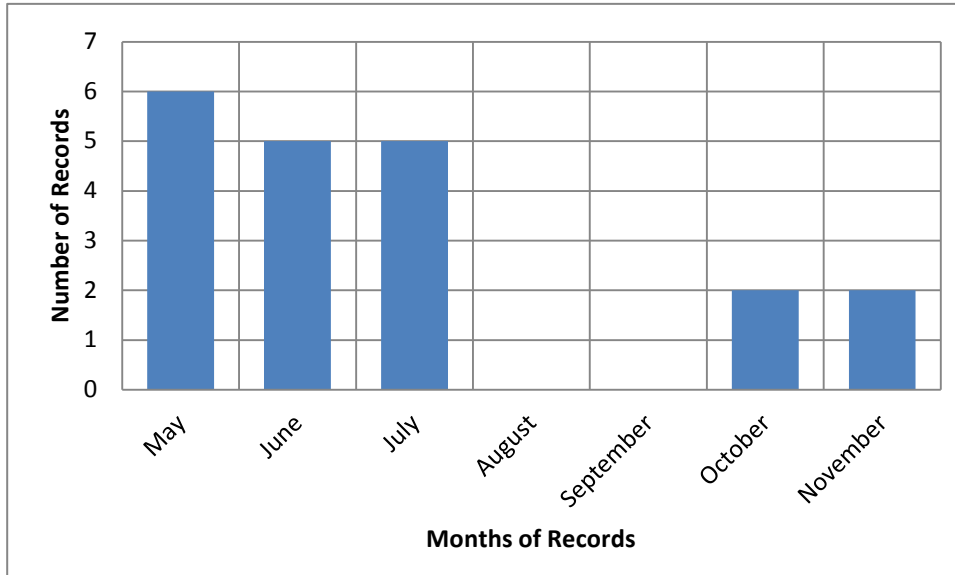
Figures 5 & 6: Chestnut-collared Longspur at Cattle Point in Victoria on October 24, 2013. Photos © Mike Ashbee.

**Table 1: British Columbia Records of Chestnut-collared Longspur:**

- 1.(1) adult female July 8, 1921: (specimen) Kispiox River Valley north of Hazelton (Swarth 1924)
- 2.(1) adult female May 28, 1930: (specimen: NMC 24629) Tobacco Plains across the Kootenay River near Newgate (Anderson 1932)
- 3.(1) adult male June 18, 1972: David F. Halter (BC photo 224) Faber Islets, Barclay Sound (Hatler 1973, Crowell and Nehls 1975, Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 4.(1) adult male June 2, 1973: John Toochin, mobs: Rannie Road, Pitt Meadows (Toochin 2013a)
- 5.(1) adult mid-May 1976: Mitlenach Island (Sirk *et al.* 1993, Toochin *et al.* 2013c)
- 6.(1) adult male May 1-3, 1977: Vic Goodwill, Ron Saterfield, mobs: Victoria Golf Course, Oak Bay (Davidson 1977, Crowell and Nehls 1977, Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 7.(1) adult male July 8-10, 1981: Mark Daly, Brain M. Kautesk, WCW, mobs: Maplewood Flats, North Vancouver (Weber *et al.* 1982, Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 8.(1 & 2) adult males May 29-30, 1984: shoreline along the Arrow Lakes at Nakusp (Rogers 1984, Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 9.(1) fall plumage October 13, 1985: Ron Satterfield: Victoria (Anonymous 1986, Campbell 1986, Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 10.(1) adult male July 1-4, 2002: Clara Ritcey, mobs (photo) Clearwater Valley Road, near Clearwater (Cecile 2002, Toochin *et al.* 2013c)
- 11.(1) near adult male June 17, 2007: Marlene Johnston, Gail Spitler (photo) Lardeau (Toochin *et al.* 2013c)
- 12.(1) adult male breeding plumage June 7, 2009: Louis Haviland, Rick Toochin: Sheringham Lighthouse, Shirley (Toochin 2012)
- 13.(1) adult male breeding plumage June 7, 2009: Jeremy Gatten, Jamie Fenneman (photo) Burton Creek, Burton (Toochin *et al.* 2013c)
- 14.(1) immature November 20, 2009: Rick Toochin: Gibsons Road, Chilliwack (Toochin 2012c)
- 15.(1) adult female June 5-8, 2010: Neil Hughes, Rick Toochin, mobs (photo) Hope Airport (Toochin 2012c)
- 16.(1) adult female June 16-18, 2011: GG, mobs: near Hope Airport [same bird as above returning?] (Toochin 2012c)
- 17.(1) adult male May 7, 2012: Tak Shabata, mobs (photo) South Jetty (Toochin 2013a)

- 18.(1) adult male May 30, 2013: Rick Toochin: Hope Airport (Toochin 2013b)  
 19.(2-1) juveniles October 24-25, 2013: Mike Ashbee, mobs (photo) Cattle Point, Victoria (M. Ashbee Pers. Comm.).  
 20.(1) immature November 21, 2013: Rick Toochin, Maz Gotz: Dixon Road, Abbotsford (R. Toochin Pers. Comm.).

**Table 2: Seasonal distribution of Chestnut-collared Longspur records in British Columbia:**



**Table 2:** Note the sharply defined occurrence in the spring and summer of this species with May, June and July having the highest number of records.

**Acknowledgements**

I wish to thank Barbara McKee for editing the article. I wish to thank Mike Ashbee and Peter Candido for the use of their photographs. All photos are used with permission of the photographer and are fully protected by copyright law.

**References**

Anderson, R. M. 1932. Annual report of the National Museum of Canada 1930. National Museum of Canada Division of Biology, Ottawa, Ontario. Pages 13-22.

Anonymous. 1986. Bird Observations. October 1985. Victoria Naturalist 43(4): 24.

Campbell, R. W. 1986. Wildlife atlases progress report – winter 1985-86. B.C. Naturalist 24(1): 6-7.

Campbell, R. W., N. K. Dawe, I. McTaggart-Cowan, J. M. Cooper, G. W. Kaiser, A. C. Stewart, and M. C. E. McNall. 2001. The Birds of British Columbia – Volume 4 (Passerines [Wood-Warblers through Old World Sparrows]). Vancouver: UBC Press.

- Cecile, D. 2002. Summer season – British Columbia – Yukon. *North American Birds* 56: 474-475.
- COSEWIC. 2009. COSEWIC assessment and status report on the Chestnut-collared Longspur *Calcarius ornatus* in Canada. Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada. Ottawa. vi + 36pp. ([www. Sararegistry.gc.ca/status/status\\_e.cfm](http://www.Sararegistry.gc.ca/status/status_e.cfm)). [Accessed: December 14, 2013].
- Crowell, J. B. and H. B. Nehls. 1975. The nesting season –northern Pacific coast region. *American Birds* 29: 1020-1025.
- Crowell, J. B. and H. B. Nehls. 1977. The spring migration – northern Pacific coast region. *American Birds* 31: 1037-1041.
- Davidson, A. R. 1977. Bird notes. *Victoria Naturalist* 34(2): 20.
- Dunn, J. and D. Beadle. 1998. Longspurs: Identification and distribution in basic plumage. *Birders Journal* 7: 68-93.
- Hamilton, R. A., M. A. Patten, and R. A. Erickson. 2007. *Rare Birds of California: A work of the California rare bird record committee*. Western Field Ornithologists, Camarillo, California. 605pp.
- Hatler, D. F. 1973. Chestnut-collared Longspur in British Columbia. *Canadian Field-Naturalist* 87: 66.
- OFO. 2012. Oregon Field Ornithologists - Records Committee. [Online resource] <http://www.oregonbirds.org/index.html>. [Accessed: December 14, 2013].
- Rogers, T. H. 1984. The spring migration - northern Rocky Mountain-intermountain region. *American Birds* 38: 936-939.
- Sirk, G. P., Ch. W. Gronau and F. C. Zwickel. 1993. *Birds of Cortes and Mitlenach Islands British Columbia: A checklist with seasonal graphs*. Published by the authors, Whaletown.
- Swarth, H. S. 1924. Birds and mammals of the Skeena River region of the northern British Columbia. *University of California Publications in Zoology* 24: 315-394.



- Toochin, R. 2012. Rare birds of the Juan de Fuca Strait checklist area (British Columbia). Revised edition.  
<http://www.geog.ubc.ca/biodiversity/efauna/documents/BirdsRareJuandeFucaXZA.pdf>  
[Accessed: December 14, 2013].
- Toochin, R. 2013a. Checklist of the Rare Birds of the Vancouver Area: Casual and Accidental Records. July 1, 2013: Revised Edition. [Online resource] Retrieved from  
<http://www.geog.ubc.ca/biodiversity/efauna/documents/BirdsRareVancouver%20X.pdf>  
[Accessed: December 16, 2013].
- Toochin, R. 2013b. Rare birds of the upper Fraser Valley: Revised edition. [Online resource] Retrieved from  
<http://www.geog.ubc.ca/biodiversity/efauna/documents/BirdsRareFraserValleyXZA.pdf>  
[Accessed: December 14, 2013].
- Toochin, R., J. Fenneman and P. Levesque. 2013c. British Columbia rare bird records: July 1, 2013: 2nd Edition. [Online resource] Retrieved from  
<http://www.geog.ubc.ca/biodiversity/efauna/documents/BCRareBirdListJuly2013XZB.pdf>  
[Accessed: December 14, 2013].
- Wahl, T. R, B. Tweit, and S. Mlodinow. 2005. Birds of Washington: Status and Distribution. Oregon State University Press, Corvallis, Oregon. 436pp.
- Weber, W. C., M. K. Daly, and B. M. Kautesk. 1982. First Vancouver record of the Chestnut-collared Longspur. Vancouver Natural History Society Discovery 10: 94-95.
- West, G.C. 2008. A Birder's Guide to Alaska. American Birding Association, Colorado Springs, CO. 586 pp.
- WBRC. 2012. Washington Bird Records Committee – Summary of Decisions. Washington Ornithological Society, Seattle, WA. [Online resource]  
<http://www.wos.org/wbrsummaries.html>. [Accessed: December 16, 2013].