

The Status and Occurrence of Lark Bunting (*Calamospiza melanocorys*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin.

Introduction and Distribution

The Lark Bunting (*Calamospiza melanocorys*) is a grassland species of the Great Plains of North America (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). It breeds from southeastern Alberta, across southern Saskatchewan, south through Montana, North and South Dakota, eastern Wyoming, eastern Colorado, western Nebraska, western Kansas, western Oklahoma, northeastern New Mexico and northwestern Texas (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). It winters from southern Oklahoma, south through Texas, west through southern New Mexico and southern Arizona with many birds wintering in southern California near the Salton Sea area as well as in Mexico from the Baja Peninsula across the central northern regions of Mexico to the Gulf Coast (Sibley 2000, Howell and Webb 2010). In migration, the Lark Bunting has turned up throughout the eastern United States and the Eastern Canadian Provinces (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Along the west coast, the Lark Bunting is a regular species in California with both migrant birds and wintering birds turning up every year (Roberson 1980). The Lark Bunting has been recorded breeding California after eruption years when the species is exceptionally common in the state (Roberson 1980). The Lark Bunting is a rare but regular vagrant further north along the west coast. There are 23 accepted records by the Oregon Bird Records Committee and 11 accepted records for Washington State by the Washington Bird Records Committee (OFO 2012, Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2012). In British Columbia, the Lark Bunting is a casual, to rare, regular vagrant with over 30 Provincial records (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). There are no records for Alaska (West 2008, Gibson *et al.* 2013).

Identification and Similar Species

The Lark Bunting is a beautiful bird that is found in all standard North American field guides. The adult male, in alternate plumage, is uniformly black with a highly contrasting white wing-patch that is formed by white on the greater and median wing-coverts (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The tail is short and is white across the tail tip (Sibley 2000). The bill is large and blue-gray (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The legs are a pale fleshy colour (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). In basic plumage, the male resembles female, but the chin is black, with black extending down onto the belly feathers that have whitish feather edgings (Sibley 2000). The female, in alternate plumage, is grayish brown above, darkly streaked below; has an obvious white wing-patch like the male, but the wing patch is smaller, interrupted, and tinged with a buff colour (Shane 2000). The underparts are white, darkly streaked on the breast and sides with dusky streaks and colour on the flanks (Sibley 2000). The female, in basic plumage, is less grayish-brown in colour, with paler markings, and is more strongly tinged with buff overall (Shane 2000). The juveniles resemble female birds, but in general are buffier overall with buffy edges on the neck

and back feathers that give the bird a scaly look; and the juvenile birds have more extensive streaking on the underparts (Shane 2000). The song of the Lark Bunting is a repeated low, liquid, whistled “*pwid pwid pwid pwid too too too kree kree kree pwido pwido*” that is interspersed with high rattles of “*tt tt tt*” throughout the entire song (Sibley 2000). The call note is a low, soft whistled “*heew*” or also interpreted as a “*howik*” (Sibley 2000). The alternate-plumaged male Bobolink (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*) is similar in plumage color to the male Lark Bunting and is an aerial singer, but with a different color pattern; white patches on the back, buffy nape, and whitish rump (Shane 2000). The female and basic-plumaged male Lark Buntings may also resemble female Chestnut-collared Longspur (*Calcarius ornatus*) and McCown’s Longspur (*Rhynchophanes mccownii*), but female longspurs have underparts that are largely or completely unstreaked (Sibley 2000). This is different on the Lark Bunting which is darkly streaked (Sibley 2000). The tail patterns on the longspurs also different in that they have extensive white at the tail base (Sibley 2000). The Lark Bunting has white feathering on tail tip (Shane 2000).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Lark Bunting is a casual to very rare, almost annual, vagrant in British Columbia with 35 Provincial records (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). The bulk of records are from interior parts of British Columbia with 18 records, including 1 in the Peace River (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). There are 9 records from the Lower Mainland area (which includes Chilliwack and Hope) (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). On Vancouver Island, there have been 6 records of Lark Bunting (Toochin *et al.* 2014b). It is unrecorded on the Queen Charlotte Islands (Toochin *et al.* 2014a). The vast majority of Provincial records have occurred in the spring and early summer with 9 records for the month of May and 15 records for the month of June (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1 and Table 2). These records are likely referring to spring overshoots in May and birds that looked around in the month of June for a potential breeding mate. Though no nesting pairs have ever been found in the Province, there is suitable habitat in the Cariboo region of British Columbia. Given the size of the region and the lack of coverage by observers, it is entirely possible that this species could be found in the future in this area as both a vagrant or as a potential breeding species, particularly since Sprague’s Pipit (*Anthus spragueii*) has been confirmed as a breeder in this region (McConnell *et al.* 1993). Late summer records are few with only 2 July records and 3 for mostly the latter half of August (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). Fall migration records are extremely scarce in the Province, with one record from September, three from October and one from November (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). There are no winter records for British Columbia (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1).

Conditions on the Prairies could also account for many spring overshoot records. Lark Buntings are known to wander in years of both drought and extreme flooding conditions on the Prairies,

which likely explains why most records occur in the month of June (Shane 2000, Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). Such was the case in late May and June 2013 when there was severe flooding on the Prairies (M. Meredith pers. comm.) There are 5 records of Lark Bunting for British Columbia (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1).

In both migration periods and in the breeding season, Lark Buntings are preferentially found in grassland and shrub-steppe habitat, including agricultural areas and, therefore, could turn up anywhere in the Province (Shane 2000, Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). In British Columbia, Lark Buntings have occurred as single individuals and have stayed, on average, for only one day (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). There are only two records of single birds staying for 2 days (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). This species should be watched for in the future in known vagrant traps and areas that continually produce species that prefer grassland habitat. Given the almost yearly frequency that the Lark Bunting is being found in British Columbia, more records will likely be found by keen observers in the future.



Figure 1 & 2: Record #24: Lark Bunting adult female at Botanical Beach Provincial Park, Pt. Renfrew on June 20, 2009. Photos © Rick Toochin.



Figure 3 & 4: Record #28: Lark Bunting adult female at Jordan River on October 16, 2011.
Photos © Louis Haviland.



Figure 5: Record #29: Lark Bunting at Canoe Reach, Kinbasket Lake on June 13, 2012.
Photo © James Bradley.

Table 1: Records of Lark Bunting for British Columbia

- 1.(1) adult male August 1, 1906: (specimen: NMC 3384) Thurston Ranch, Chilliwack River
(Macoun and Macoun 1909)
- 2.(1) male June 8, 1914: (specimen: RBCM 3901) shore of Okanagan Lake (Munro 1915)

- 3.(1) male May 28, 1939: (specimen) Wistaria (Cowan 1940, Campbell *et al.* 2001)[listed incorrectly as Ootsa Lake in Munro and Cowan 1947]
- 4.(1) male May 26, 1953: side of hwy nr Dolly Varden Crk in the Kootenay Rr Flats (Banfield 1954, Godfrey 1955, Poll *et al.* 1984)
- 5.(1) adult male August 30, 1969: R. E. Luscher: in shrubby area along dyke, Pitt Meadows (Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 6.(1) immature October 5, 1975: Brian M. Kautesk, CRA, Ian MacDonald (photo) Ambleside Park, W. Vancouver (Crowell and Nehls 1976a, Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 7.(1) adult male July 11, 1978: Williams: Vaseux Lake, Okanagan (Williams 1978, Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 8.(1) near adult male June 7-8, 1980: Verna Guernsey, mobs (BC Photo 635) Oak Bay, Victoria (Guernsey 1980, Harrington-Tweit *et al.* 1980, Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 9.(1) adult male June 12, 1982: Ken Hall, Peter Ward: (being chased by Bobolinks) along Road 22, Okanagan (Cannings *et al.* 1987)
- 10.(1) winter plumaged male November 4, 1983: Glen Thomson: Harbor View Park, North Vancouver (Hunn and Mattocks 1984, Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 11.(1) adult male May 25, 1986: H.L. Moen: perched in willow bush along road to Duck Lake, Creston (Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 12.(1) juvenile September 28-30, 1986: Bruce A. MacDonald, mobs (BC Photo 1120) Jericho Park, Vancouver (Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 13.(1) adult male May 28, 1988: Chris Siddle: Ft. St. John Sewage Ponds, Peace River (Siddle 1988, Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 14.(1) adult male June 10, 1990: 150 Mile House (Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 15.(1) adult male June 27, 1992: Allen Poynter: Grantham's Landing, near Gibsons (Greenfield 1997)
- 16.(1) adult male June 24, 1993: G. P. Wilkinson: Kilpoola Lake (Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 17.(1) adult male May 27, 1995: D. Cooper, Paul van Wijk: 1km north of Nelway (Davidson 1995, Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 18.(1) adult female August 28, 2000: Chris Siddle, mobs (photo) Wickaninnish Sewage Ponds, PRNP (Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 19(1) adult male June 4, 2004: Ted Hillary: Scott Creek, near Salmon Arm (Cecile 2004d, Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 20.(1) adult female June 14, 2004: Arti Ahier: Tofino (Cecile 2004d, Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 21.(1) adult male July 18, 2004: Ian Cooke: Pleasant View Motel, Summerland, Okanagan (Cecile 2004d, Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 22.(1) adult male June 2, 2006: Tom Black, mobs: Sea View Road, Miracle Beach, north of Comox (Cecile 2006d, Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 23.(1) adult male May 31, 2009: Juanite Freeman: Wolf Road and Scheyey road, Chilliwack (Toochin 2012c)
- 24.(1) adult female June 20, 2009: Mike & Barb McGrenere, Rick Toochin (photo) Botanical Beach Provincial Park, Pt. Renfrew (Toochin 2012b)
- 25.(1) adult female October 11-12, 2009: Peter Candido, mobs (photo) Cecil Green Park, UBC, Vancouver (Toochin 2012a)
- 26.(1) adult male May 4, 2010: Dorothy Beetstra: Trail (Charlesworth 2010b)

- 27.(1) adult female June 8, 2010: Rick Toochin: Ross Lake, Skagit Valley (Charlesworth 2010c, Toochin 2012c)
- 28.(1) adult female October 16, 2011: Louis Haviland (photo) Jordan River (Toochin 2012b)
- 29.(1) adult female June 13, 2012: James Bradley (photo) Canoe Reach, Kinbasket Lake (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 30.(1) adult male May 21, 2013: Jeremy Gatten (photo) Edgewood (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 31.(1) adult male May 26, 2013: Jennifer Greenwood (photo: banded) Revelstoke Dam (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 32.(1) adult male June 5, 2013: Rick Toochin: Hope Airport (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 33.(1) adult male June 6, 2013: Cam Gillies (photo) Brisco (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 34.(1) adult male June 21, 2013: Mike Bentley: Elkview Road, Fernie (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 35.(1) female/immature August 30, 2014: Russell Cannings: Port Hardy Airport (R. Cannings pers. comm.)

Table 2: Seasonal distribution of Lark Bunting records in British Columbia:

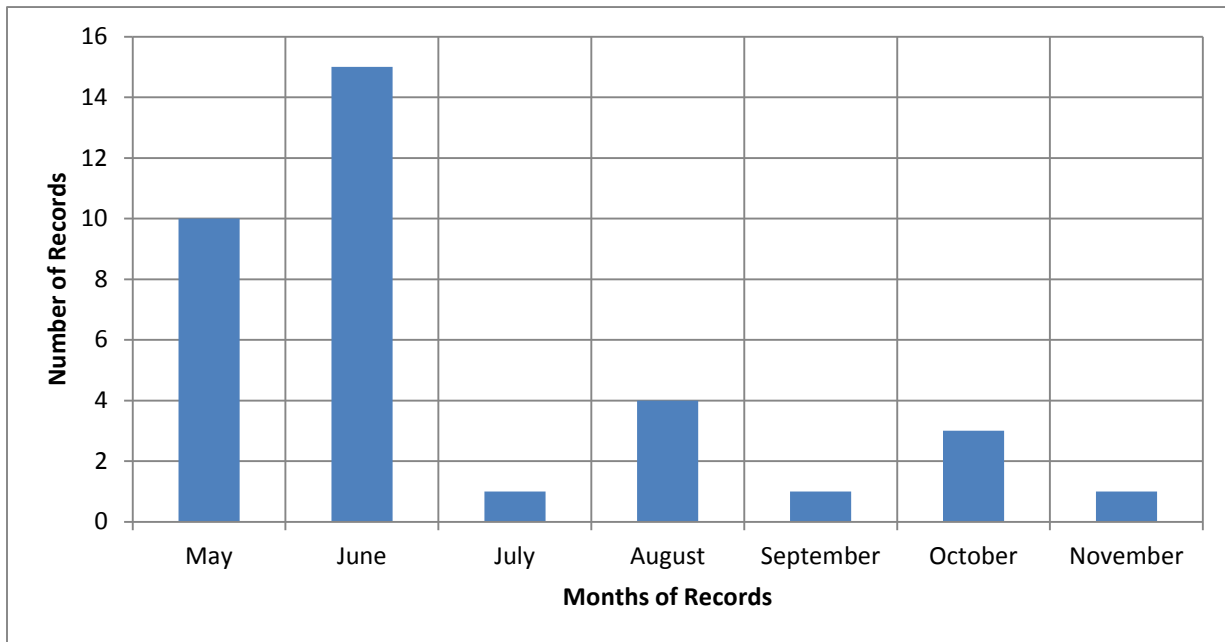


Table 2: Note the sharply defined occurrence in the spring and summer of this species with May and June having the highest number of records.

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