

The First Record of Pine Bunting (*Emberiza leucocephalos*) in British Columbia and Canada.

By Rick Toochin. Submitted: April 15, 2019.

Introduction and Distribution

The Pine Bunting (*Emberiza leucocephalos*) is a small passerine found breeding mainly in the open woodland and forest edge of Siberia (Brazil 2009). The widespread nominate subspecies (*Emberiza leucocephalos leucocephalos*) is found breeding from the eastern Ural Mountains (55° E), eastward to Magadan and Amur Estuary, Sakhalin and Kuril Islands, and northeastern China. It ranges north to the Arctic Circle (66° N) and south to northern Mongolia (50°N)(Occhiato 2003, Brazil 2009). This is a migratory species that winters mostly in Afghanistan, Pakistan, north-western India, Nepal and northern China; less important wintering areas include northern Iran, the former Soviet states of Central Asia, Mongolia, and to a lesser extent Japan in Honshu and Hokkaido (Occhiato 2003, Brazil 2009).

A second and more geographically isolated and apparently sedentary subspecies (*Emberiza leucocephalos fronto*), breeds in northern Qinghai and Gansu provinces, in China (Cramp and Perrins 1994, Byers *et al.* 1995).

Though the range of the Pine Bunting is limited, this species does turn up as a rare, but regular vagrant in Europe. This species is often found amongst flocks of Yellowhammer (*Emberiza citrinella*) during the late fall and winter (Lewington *et al.* 1992). In North America, the Pine Bunting is an accidental vagrant that has occurred in Alaska in the western Aleutian Islands, and the Pribilof Islands. There are four records; including a bird found on Attu Island that was collected as a specimen November 18-19, 1985 (Wagner 1990); an immature male also found on Attu Island on October 6, 1993 (Gibson and Byrd 2007); a single bird found on St. Paul Island October 2-4, 2012 (Tobish 2013c), and a recently photographed bird from Gambel November 22 – December 2, 2016 (e-Bird 2019). The Pine Bunting is a recent addition to the avifauna of British Columbia with a photographed bird found in Victoria in the fall of 2018 (Toochin *et al.* 2018). There are no other North American records for this species (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

Identification and Similar Species

The field identification of the Pine Bunting is not covered in all standard North American field guides. It is covered in standard field guides for Europe and Asia (Brazil 2009, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). This is a fairly large species of bunting measuring 16-18 cm in length, and weighing 24-35 grams (Brazil 2009). The following descriptions of age and plumage are taken from Brazil (2009) unless otherwise stated.

The adult males hold their breeding plumage from February to August (Beadle and Rising 2002). In breeding plumage, adult males have a distinct head pattern of a white crown and ear-coverts (both bordered in black), with a broad chestnut supercilium. This chestnut also extends onto the chin, throat, and sides of the head. The bill is blue-gray and sharp and pointed with a dark culmen. The eyes are black. The nape is grey with a rufous-brown mantle that is streaked black. The lower back, rump and undertail are plain rufous-brown. The tail is blackish-brown with white outer tail feathers. The underparts are rufous-brown, with a narrow grey-white collar and neck patch separating the chestnut throat from the rufous breast. The belly and vent are white. The legs are pinkish-brown. The wings are blackish-brown with rufous-brown fringes found on most feathers. Adult males are found in winter plumage from September to January (Beadle and Rising 2002). Adult males in winter plumage are duller, greyer-brown above and below, with only a hint of the breeding plumage head pattern, though the cheek patch is still prominent.

Adult females hold their breeding plumage from May to September (Beadle and Rising 2002). Adult females are generally greyish-brown, with pale supercilium, an off-white malar that is bordered above by a black moustache and below by a dark lateral throat-stripe which extends as heavy dark grey streaking on the breast and sides (Lewington 1990). Females in winter plumage are like adult males, but duller in plumage (Beadle and Rising 2002). First winter birds resemble adults of respective sex, but are paler overall.

The call notes of the Pine Bunting include a hard “*tsick*” and downslurred “*chueh*”.

In Siberia, the Pine Bunting freely hybridizes with Yellowhammer (Beadle and Rising 2002, Brazil 2009). Hybrid birds can be difficult to separate, but Pine Bunting lacks the bright yellow tones that are found on the Yellowhammer (Mullarney *et al.* 2009). Birds in the autumn, especially first year females, are especially hard to separate from young female Yellowhammer (Mullarney *et al.* 2009). For more information on separating hybrids it is recommended reading Lewington *et al.* 1992, Bradshaw and Gray (1993), Shirihai *et al.* (1995), Bowman 1996, Occhiato (2003).

This species is very different from any commonly occurring sparrow or bunting species found in British Columbia.

Occurrence and Documentation

The Pine Bunting is an accidental or vagrant to British Columbia. The first record for the province was a female photographed by Maury Swoveland at Uplands Park in Victoria on October 15, 2018 (L. Haviland Pers. Comm.). Photographs of the bird can be viewed on the BC Bird Alert Blog <http://bcbirdalert.blogspot.com/2018/10/rba-pine-bunting-in-victoria->

october.html. The bird was originally thought to be a Lapland Longspur before photographs circulated and it was identified as a Pine Bunting (L. Haviland Pers. Comm.). The time delay in getting the word out to the local birding community unfortunately meant the bird was not relocated despite great effort by many observers to find it (L. Haviland Pers. Comm.). There are only 2 photographs of the bird which is partially hidden by vegetation. In both photographs there appears to be a yellow hint to the throat, but this appears to be from the lighting off the surrounding vegetation and not yellow feathers which would indicate hybridization with Yellowhammer (J. Curson Pers. Comm.). The second photo is in better focus and shows finer streaking on the crown which is correct for a female Pine Bunting (J. Curson Pers. Comm.). Unfortunately there are no photographs of the entire bird, but from what is visible in the photographs, the bird looks right for a female Pine Bunting (J. Curson Pers. Comm.).

The timing of the Pine Bunting found in Victoria, British Columbia, fits perfectly with the overall pattern of vagrancy for this species in Europe and in Alaska (Lewington *et al.* 1992, Gibson and Withrow 2015). Most records for Europe occur in October and into the winter months with birds often found amongst flocks of Yellowhammers (Lewington *et al.* 1992). North American records have involved single birds found on their own.

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