

# McKAY'S BUNTING AT REGINA

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To my knowledge there never has been a report for Canada of McKay's Bunting. The species breeds on only two small islands in the Bering Sea, Hall Is. and St. Matthew Is., about 230 miles west of the Alaskan coast, and it winters in western Alaska south to Bristol Bay.<sup>7</sup> There is a record of one on St. Paul Island,<sup>2</sup> and I found a mention of one in winter at Adak in the Aleutian Islands in "American Birds" which had the editorial comment that this extended the known winter range by 600 miles. Thus the species has a remarkably circumscribed range and I would no more expect to see one in Regina than I would expect to see a Puffin on Wascana Lake!

On 2 October, 1978, at 14:45 I drove eastwards along 19th Avenue in Regina, turned north on Robinson Street, and scattered a few small birds off the pavement, House Sparrows, Dark-eyed Juncos and a single Snow Bunting (I believed then). The latter flew across the nose of the car and settled on a branch of a small leafless tree growing on the west side of the sidewalk. As it is unusual to find Snow Buntings so far inside the city, and as it was early for them, I stopped to take a look. At the most, I estimate the bird was 12 feet from me, much too close for binoculars, even if I had a pair with me.

The visibility was very good at that time. There had been a recent shower, the sun was obscured by a high overcast but it was still a bright day. I could clearly see the bird which was perched crosswise so I noted that it was a chunky one, pure white,

with a black eye, light coloured, heavy, finch-like bill, and black primaries — exactly what one would expect a Snow Bunting to show at that angle of viewing. It then switched around on its perch, paused, and flew back towards the asphalt pavement in front of me but instead of landing it flew northwards for about 100 feet where it joined some House Sparrows foraging in low, weedy growth.

As it flew away from me low over the pavement I was struck by the effect — it was a pure white bird and its wings and body formed a spectacular "flying white cross" — an unforgettable and beautiful sight! As it mingled with the House Sparrows I moved forward until I was parked a few feet from the group where I could clearly see that my bunting was larger than the Sparrows, at least as much as one inch longer. Being on my way to the bank, which closed at 15:00, I reluctantly continued on my way. As I moved off the birds all took wing, and I never saw my bunting again although I kept an eye open for it for several days.

Still musing on the odd pure white plumage of my Snow Bunting (as I still supposed) when I returned home I consulted Bent's treatise on the Snow Buntings, particularly the "Plumage and Molt" section of *Plectrophenax nivalis nivalis*, the nominate race.<sup>1</sup> There is no comparable heading under *Plectrophenax nivalis townsendi*, Pribilof Snow Bunting, the other subspecies, but the account opens with the sentence: "This subspecies is identical in color to the nominate race and differs only in

size . . ." Nowhere could I find any plumage that is pure white on all the upper parts, all plumages having dark backs. This agreed with the description and pictures in Peterson;<sup>4</sup> Udvardy;<sup>10</sup> Pough;<sup>6</sup> Reed;<sup>8</sup> Robbins *et al.*;<sup>9</sup> Heinzl *et al.*;<sup>3</sup> Peterson *et al.*;<sup>5</sup> so I concluded that my bird was not a Snow Bunting at all.

Pough and the five titles above all have pictures of McKay's Bunting with brief descriptions of plumage.<sup>7</sup> These convinced me that the bird I saw was an adult male of that species.

I was unable to reach anyone else to alert until the next day when I described the bird to Mr. Fred Lahrman of the staff of Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History who suggested it could have been an albino sparrow of some kind. I also sent the description to Dr. Robert W. Nero in Winnipeg who concurred with Mr. Lahrman. The difficulty here is my inability to transfer in words the precise image of the bird I saw to the minds of Dr. Nero and Mr. Lahrman. I am sure that had they been present neither would have entertained the possibility of albino sparrow. It was a large, chunky bunting, the wrong shape and size for any of the larger sparrows. Nor can I see any albino sparrow developing the black primaries which I clearly saw as it was perched and as it flew from the tree.

Acting on the suggestion of Dr. Nero I wrote to Mr. H. W. R. Copland, Assistant Curator of The Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature in Winnipeg, where there is a good series of skins of McKay's Bunting. Mr. Copland very considerably took the time and trouble to describe the 18 skins there and, while he concluded: "It is difficult to say for certain the bird you observed was a McKay's Bunting. There are plumage variations in the small number of

specimens we have here. Therefore there could be still other individuals in the wild which would agree more with your description. However, all our specimens show rust on the head." Nevertheless, one of the two adult male skins described accurately reflects the bird I saw. True, that skin has ". . . a tinge of rust on each side of the upper breast", which I did not notice which is understandable under the circumstances. In this connection it is interesting to find that Gabrielson, Burroughs, Keeler and Brandt (all cited by Bent) each described McKay's Bunting as a pure white bird when visiting the breeding islands.

In view of the fact that the bird I saw on 2 October 1978 was possibly a first for Canada — indeed, for North America beyond Alaska — I was naturally diffident in offering my unsubstantiated sighting for publication until I had Dr. Dennis Paulson's record for two birds, then one, from 17 December 1978 to 5 March, 1979 near Seattle. If McKay's Bunting can turn up at Ocean Shores, it can also turn up in Regina. I believe that important sightings, even though unconfirmed, should be made known to the birding fraternity so that possible corroborations by others, at different times and at different places, may be forthcoming.

<sup>1</sup>BENT, A. C. 1965. Life Histories of North American cardinals, grosbeaks, buntings, towhees, finches, sparrows, and allies. US Nat. Mus. Bull. 237, Part III.

<sup>2</sup>GABRIELSON, I. N., and F. C. LINCOLN. 1959. Birds of Alaska. Stackpole, Harrisburg, Pa.

<sup>3</sup>HEINZEL, H., R. FITTER and J. PARSLOW. 1972. The birds of Britain and Europe with North Africa and the Middle East. Collins, London.

- <sup>4</sup>PETERSON, R. T. 1961. A field guide to western birds. (2nd Ed.), Houghton Mifflin, Boston.
- <sup>5</sup>PETERSON, R. T., G. MOUNTFORT and P. A. D. HOLLIM. 1974. A field guide to the birds of Britain and Europe, 3rd Ed. Collins, London.
- <sup>6</sup>POUGH, R. H. 1949. Audubon land bird guide. Doubleday, New York.
- <sup>7</sup>POUGH, R. H. 1957. Audubon western bird guide. Doubleday, New York.
- <sup>8</sup>REED, C. A. 1965. North American birds eggs (Rev. Ed.). Dover, New York.
- <sup>9</sup>ROBBINS, C. S., B. BRUUN and H. S. ZIM. 1966. Birds of North America. Golden Press, New York.
- <sup>10</sup>UDVARDY, M. D. F. 1977. The Audubon Society field guide to North American birds — western region. Alfred A. Knopf, New York.

## NINETEENTH ANNUAL NESTBOX REPORT FROM BRANDON, MANITOBA

MRS. JOHN LANE, 1701 Lorne Avenue, Brandon, Manitoba, R7A 0W2, and MAMIE McCOWAN, BARBARA ROBINSON, HAZEL PATMORE and LINDA MUZYKA.

In 1979 the nestbox project started by the late Dr. John Lane was again carried on by the "Friends of the Bluebirds". This group held two meetings at the home of the co-ordinator, Mrs. John Lane.

At the spring meeting, plans were made for the 1979 season. Mrs. Lane welcomed the new members who had responded to an article "Bluebirds in South Western Manitoba", published in the March issue of "This Is Westman", and to slide presentations. Among these new Friends were young families, senior citizens and the Forrest 4-H Girls' Conservation Group. Some new members have made nest boxes using the Junior Birders' pattern. At this meeting Mrs. Lane also gave a report on the first Annual Meeting of the North American Bluebird Society held in Maryland, U.S.A., 11-12

November 1978. During the fall meeting, reports were presented and experiences discussed.

In 1979, 170 nest boxes were set out, bringing the total since the start of the project in 1959 to 5,010. It will be understood that a goodly number of this total are not now in place due to the effects of time, weather and interference. A supply of boxes for replacements and new nestlines was maintained by John Plum and Walter Forsyth, who merit much thanks.

Mr. and Mrs. Perry Hopkins, Hartney area, filled out the North American Bluebird Society's "23 nest record data". The Hopkins also reported two adjacent boxes infested by black flies (*Simulium venustum*). In these boxes a total of 11 young Mountain Bluebirds were found dead.