

# BRAMBLING: A EURASIAN VISITOR TO SASKATCHEWAN

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October's inclement weather had a bonus for Saskatoon birders. On 31 October, at 1:30 p.m., I was sitting in my family room watching the birds at my various feeders, when a brightly coloured bird caught my attention. The small finch-like bird ate birch seeds on the snow, then flew to the table feeder to eat small sunflower seeds. I did not recognize the bird, so I consulted various field guides. Finally, on the last page of the National Geographic's *Birds of North America* I spotted a male Brambling (*Fringilla montifringilla*) in fall plumage. The field markings were all the same. The fact that the sketch was not accompanied by a range map shook my confidence somewhat. The Brambling was patterned in shades of orange, grey, black, buff and white. It had a bright burnt orange breast and shoulders, with black and white wing bars, and a white belly with faint black spotting on the flank. The white rump was evident while the bird flew or fed. It also had two slightly broken black bars extending from the crown to the neck, remnants of the black summer plumage pattern. The bill was pale yellow with a dark tip. Its size was approximately 15 cm, similar to the chunkier Dark-eyed Junco feeding nearby.

This small finch is a native northern Eurasian species, and is an uncommon spring and fall migrant to

Alaska, but exceedingly rare elsewhere. It occasionally summers in the Aleutians, but regularly reaches Siberia, and winters in Britain, Europe, Asia and Japan.

My telephone calls to several birding friends were met with some scepticism, because it seems there have been no previous records of Bramblings in Saskatchewan. The Brambling would feed for five to six minutes at a time; however, it chose to stay away about three-quarters of an hour when the first birders arrived to verify my identification. Michael Williams, Ramona Harms, and Burke Korol were the first of more than 70 birders to see and enjoy this very cooperative Halloween visitor. The Brambling's pattern of feeding was consistent during the six-day stay; it was active in the mornings and came less frequently in the afternoons. It became aggressive when sparrows or juncos came too close.

This little bird became a national celebrity when our local television station, CFQC-TV, and Carol Blenkin brought a crew to film the bird. They interviewed Mary Gilliland, President of the Canadian Nature Federation, and some of the many birds watchers who had come to enjoy the Brambling. The local news carried the story several times; and on 1 November national television coverage was a delightful surprise



*Male Brambling.*

*Helen Fast*

for Canadian bird watchers across the country.

It was ironic, indeed, that, last March, on a visit to my son in Japan,

I missed the Brambling in its natural habitat; yet, six months later, this Eurasian visitor, obviously off course by half a planet, should appear in my back yard in Saskatoon.

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At the present moment Ina is, as usual, resting – though I don't know from what – in a little cup which her body exactly fits. Her body long ago assumed perfectly the shape of a toad, which is a shape not without dignity and charm if one is broad-minded enough to accept it. She measures well over an inch from the tip of her nose to the place where her tail would be had she cared to keep it. And since the tadpole from which she developed was only one-fifth of an inch, exclusively of tail, I calculate that she has increased her weight one hundred and twenty-five fold; which is as though a human body were to reach eight hundred pounds in a similar period. *J.W. Krutch, 1952. The Desert Year. William Sloane.*