PINE BUNTING ON ATTU ISLAND, ALASKA

by George F. Wagner

ON NOVEMBER 19, 1985, I OBserved and photographed a male Pine Bunting at the United States Coast Guard Station on Attu Island in the western Aleutians. This represents the first known occurrence of this species in the Aleutians as well as in Alaska and North America. It becomes the seventh species of the genus *Emberiza* that is so far represented in the A.O.U. *Check-list* area only as a vagrant by way of the Alaskan connection.

In the Aleutians, the winter snow cover does not arrive abruptly with a single weather system as it does in many parts of our continent. There, the process is more gradual; snow first accumulates on the mountain peaks and, with declining temperature, it daily progresses lower. By mid-November 1985, the snow blanket had crept down to the ocean beaches. On November 18 and 19, only a few patches of bare ground remained. Several of these patches were around the construction site at the Coast Guard Station. There, on November 18, my unaided eye glimpsed a bird whose call was suggestive of a Rustic Bunting (*E. rustica*), yet somewhat different. The bird immediately disappeared among the buildings and construction rubble. On the following day, I observed the bird with 10x40 binoculars at a distance of 10-20m (30–60 ft) as it foraged on the snow-free ground next to the foundation of a portable construction camp.

Of North American species, this bird resembled a Lapland Longspur (*Calcarius lapponicus*) in structure, but differed in being chunkier, having a longer tail, a more erect stance, a smaller bill and a fuller crown, as well as appearing slightly larger. The bird's most striking features were the markings on its rusty brown head. A prominent, broad, white crown stripe (streaked mostly on the sides with gray and fine black) extended from the upper forehead to the back of the head. A blackish line bordered the cap below. Below it a rusty brown supercilium extended rearwards well onto the sides of the neck. A prominent white patch extended below the eye, rearward and down over the cheek, which itself was bordered on the outside by dark brown. The chin and throat were also clearly rusty brown. The breast and flanks were buffy brown and streaked broadly with dark brown; the belly was white. The bird's back was brownish gray with prominent black streaking. The rump and uppertail coverts displayed a bright rusty brown color. The wings appeared as brown with some rust. The tail was fairly long, notched and dark brown (upperside) with white outer tail feathers. The legs appeared as pale. The bird's call sounded like *tsik* or *teek*. I thought it was sharper, louder, and more prolonged than that of a Rustic Bunting. The head marking's of the bird are unique to one species — the Pine Bunting and a male at that. No other identification is possible.

This Pine Bunting on Attu was subjected to rain, sleet, snow, and constant winds of 30–60 mph, and had no place to hide in this hostile; treeless habitat.

The bird was photographed under difficult lighting conditions and at considerable distance on November 19. Those images are not of publishable quality but do document the record. Copies are on deposit at the University of Alaska Museum at Fairbanks and at VIREO.

The Pine Bunting is a common or sometimes abundant bird found in the hardwood forests of the eastern Palearctic (Dement'ev and Gladkov 1970). It breeds from the Ural Mountains east to the shores of the Sea of Okhotsk, north to the Arctic Circle and south to the 48th parallel. In the Far East, it also breeds on Shantar, Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands (Dement'ev and Gladkov 1970; Flint *et al.* 1984). Johansen (1961) does not mention any reports from the Commander Islands.

It winters throughout central Asia (Flint *et al.* 1984) and northern Japan (Wild Bird Society of Japan 1985). It is a migratory species, but some birds are present during the winter in the southernmost breeding areas (Dement'ev and Gladkov 1970). As the name suggests, it is most often found in coniferous forests or mixed hardwoods. Its diet consists mostly of seeds as well as some insects during the summer (Dement'ev and Gladkov 1970).

The bird present on Attu was a male in winter plumage, but displayed a prominent white crown stripe and rusty brown throat. Such head markings do not appear to be typical of the winter plumage. Dement'ev and Gladkov (1970) indicate that the white crown cap after the fall molt is mostly obscured by fresh olive-gray feather edgings; as is the chestnut throat camouflaged by fresh light edgings. The stereotypical winter male plumage is portrayed in *A Field Guide to the Birds of Japan* (Wild Bird Society of Japan 1985). In late November, the Attu bird displayed a head pattern more suggestive of transitional spring plumage rather than of fall.

Lest anyone suggest that this plumage condition at that time of the year is somehow an obstacle to this record, I feel obliged to discuss the matter further. Pine Buntings undergo a single annual molt in late summer, some as early as July, and others as late as late August (Dement'ev and Gladkov 1970). The fresh edges on the newly molted feathers obscure the nuptial plumage beneath. With time, the edges wear away to reveal the splendid plumage of spring. Pine Buntings, like many other species, acquire their nuptial plumage as a result of wear. As feather wear is affected by many factors, including habitat, it need not progress at the same rate in all individuals under different conditions. This Pine Bunting on Attu was subjected to rain, sleet, snow, and constant winds of 50-100 kph (30-60 mph), and had no place to hide in this hostile, treeless habitat. Feather wear might have advanced at a faster rate on this bird than on the typical Pine Bunting sheltered by an Asian Pine forest and not exposed to the hardships of the Aleutians. Besides, on a bird that molted in July, four months of wear under any conditions may reveal some markings of spring.

As with all extralimital records, this bird's manner of arrival on Attu must be considered. It is a migratory species that breeds as close as Sakhalin and the Kural Islands. It is in a genus whose members are regular vagrants to the Near Islands from the same region. It is also a rare autumn visitor to western Europe, including Britain (Bruun 1979). Certainly, the potential exists for this bird to have reached Attu Island on its own.

Ship-assisted passage remains an unlikely but reasonable consideration due to the nearby heavy shipping activity between Japan, Korea, and North America. However, this consideration should not be given greater weight in this case than in the case of the hundreds of other migrant passerines so far accepted as vagrants to the Near Islands.

Even if assistance was a factor in this bird reaching Attu, it was most probably in the form of a weather system or storm, rather than of humans. Fall in this region is typified by frequent violent storms that move up the coast of Japan toward the Near Islands. They begin in August and increase in intensity and frequency through November Wind speeds of 50-70 kph (30-40 mph) were the norm on the nicest days in November 1985. Several storms produced winds in excess of 160 kph (100 mph). Weather is a major factor in diverting vagrants to the Near Islands and perhaps the most significant consideration in the arrival of this Pine Bunting on Attu

In many cases, vagrants can be directly linked to a particular weather event. In the case of the Pine Bunting that is not possible. This bird's time of arrival on Attu remains open to conjecture. It is possible that the Pine Bunting arrived on the island on November 18. However, it seems much more plausible that it arrived much earlier and was not observed until that date. At about this time, increasing snow cover forced the bird to the island's few patches of bare ground around the construction site at the Coast

Guard station. Dement'ev and Gladkov (1970) indicate that this species' fall migration commences during the last days of August and concludes in early November. By November, the vast majority are on their wintering grounds. To suggest that this bird arrived on Attu on November 18 is to suggest it was migrating well beyond the norms of the species' normal migratory timetable. It seems much more plausible to suggest that the bird instead arrived in September or October and remained until it was discovered. Small vagrant flocks of Bramblings (*Fringilla montifringilla*), for example, undertake such extended fall layovers in the Near Islands (Wagner, pers. obs.). A further consideration is that Attu lies roughly at the latitude of the southern Baikal region, where Pine Buntings winter (Dement'ev and Gladkov 1970, Wild Bird Society of Japan 1985).

On the night of November 19, continuing snow accumulation cloaked the remaining bare ground at the construction site. The Pine Bunting was not seen on November 20 or thereafter. How long the Pine Bunting might have remained on the island or survived is open to speculation. However, its return to Asia seems unlikely in view of the fierce prevailing westerly winds at that time of the year.

The Pine Bunting becomes the latest species of the genus *Emberiza* to be recorded in the A.O.U. *Check-list* area. This genus is so far represented in North America (and predominantly from the Near Islands) only by vagrants from Asia. The other members of the genus are the Rustic Bunting, Little Bunting (*E. pusilla*), Common Reed-Bunting (*E. schoeniclus*), Pallas' Reed-Bunting (*E. pallasi*), Gray Bunting (*E. variabilis*) and Yellow-breasted Bunting (*E. aureola*). No doubt, it will not be the last! ■

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