

Snow Buntings observed foraging in wild-rice bed

Donald A. Sutherland, William J. Crins and Warren I. Dunlop

The diet of the Snow Bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) is reported to include mainly forb and grass seeds, as well as invertebrates when available (Montgomerie and Lyons 2011). In fall and winter, the diet may comprise as much as 97% seeds of herbaceous forbs, including knotweed (*Polygonum* spp.), ragweed (*Ambrosia* spp.), amaranth (*Amaranthus* spp.), goosefoot (*Chenopodium* spp.), aster (*Aster* spp., *Symphiotrichum* spp.) and goldenrod (*Solidago* spp.), as well as grasses, particularly bluegrass (*Poa* spp.) and foxtail (*Setaria* spp.), and grains such as wheat (*Triticum* spp.), oats (*Avena sativa*) and barley (*Hordeum vulgare*) (Gabrielson 1924, Montgomerie and Lyons 2011).

Foraging by Snow Buntings has been reported to be always on the ground with a preference shown for open, treeless habitats such as cultivated fields, pastures, ruderal (disturbed) grasslands and beaches (Montgomerie and Lyons 2011). Seeds typically are gleaned from the ground or picked from low vegetation; however, on

taller stems, seeds are occasionally taken by leaping up, jumping against the stems to scatter them, or by ascending or alighting on the stems to bend the stems over (Montgomerie and Lyons 2011). This note reports an instance of apparent foraging by Snow Buntings on wild-rice (*Zizania palustris*) over open water.

On 25 October 2014, while observing waterbirds on Pigeon Lake from the west end of Cork Line, Selwyn Twp., Peterborough County (44.456381 N, -78.476384 W), the authors observed a flock of approximately 30 Snow Buntings circling and landing in a dense bed of wild-rice approximately 500 m offshore (Figure 1). The wild-rice bed is just over a kilometer in length and averages about 200 m in width. Water depth is 1-2 m on the near-shore side of the bed and 2-3 m on the offshore side (Figure 2).

The buntings were observed alighting on the tops of the wild-rice plants, bending them down under their weight to within a few centimeters of the water surface before taking flight. Several times the



Figure 1. Pigeon Lake, looking west from the west end of Cork Line, Peterborough Co., with the extensive straw-colored wild-rice beds in the middle background. *Photo: D.A. Sutherland*



Figure 2. Location of sighting (red arrow) showing the relative position and extent of the wild-rice bed in Pigeon Lake west of Cork Line, Peterborough Co., Ontario. *Image adapted from Fish On-Line (OMNRF 2012).*

although unfortunately, this could not be determined with certainty with 60X spotting scopes over the stated distance.

In a survey of the literature, we can find no reported instances of Snow Bunting either feeding on

flock would arise, shift position and repeat this process. The buntings appeared to be gleaning either rice grains or possibly invertebrates from the panicles,

wild-rice or foraging in offshore beds of wild-rice (Gabrielson 1924, Dore 1969, Aiken *et al.* 1988, Cramp and Perrins 1994, Montgomerie and Lyons 2011).

Literature Cited

Aiken, S.G., Lee, P.F., Punter, D. and J.M. Stewart. 1988. Wild Rice in Canada. NRC Press Ltd., Toronto.

Cramp, S. and C. M. Perrins (Eds.). 1994. Handbook of the Birds of Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa: The Birds of the Western Palearctic. Vol. IX: Buntings and New World Warblers. Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, U.K. 488 pp.

Dore, W.G. 1969. Wild-rice. Canada Department of Agriculture Research Publication 1393:1-84.

Gabrielson, I. N. 1924. Food habits of some winter bird visitants. U.S. Dept. Agric. Bull. 1249:1-32.

Montgomerie, R. and B. Lyon. 2011. Snow Bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*), The Birds of North America Online (A. Poole, Ed.). Ithaca: Cornell Lab of Ornithology; Retrieved from the Birds of North America

Online: <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/198> doi:10.2173/bna.198.

Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (OMNRF). 2012. Fish On-Line. Available: http://www.web2.mnr.gov.on.ca/fish_online/fishing/fishingExplorer_en.html

Donald A. Sutherland

Natural Heritage Information Centre
Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources
and Forestry
300 Water St.,
Peterborough, Ontario K9J 8M5
E-mail: donald.sutherland@ontario.ca

William J. Crins

170 Middlefield Rd.
Peterborough, Ontario K9J 8G1

Warren I. Dunlop

502 Hunter St. W.
Peterborough, Ontario K9H 2N1

Great optics for less than you'd expect!

EAGLE OPTICS CANADA

GOLDEN EAGLE 8x42 \$999 CAN MSRP*

RANGER ED 8x42 \$579 CAN MSRP*

SHRIKE 8x42 \$219 CAN MSRP*

To view Eagle Optics products visit your local Wild Birds Unlimited

*Dealer may sell for less.
Photo by Brandon Holden | peregrineprints.com

eagleoptics.ca