

Brambling (*Fringilla montifringilla*)

Ed Pierce

Imagine that small bird feeder in your yard as a subject of national importance. It does seem impossible doesn't it. One day the events of your life are proceeding normally. You enjoy your quiet residential neighborhood, the independence and privacy your home provides and the evenness of your daily routines. The next day you begin to understand how the Kennedy's must live. Up to fifty people have gathered in the street in front of your house. They all have binoculars and telescopes trained on your house. (Actually a small feeder in your front yard.) It's 8:00 A.M. and your neighbors slowly drive past this crowd thinking perhaps that some celebrity is visiting you. Strangers from Columbus, Cincinnati and Dayton call you and want directions to your house. The crowd remains several days, returning each day larger and earlier. You can't leave by your front door but must exit through the garage and sneak away in your car down the driveway. You only go into your yard after dark to fill your feeders fighting the thought not to do so. What has happened? You guessed it. You've been victimized by your curiosity. You noticed a small bird at your feeder that you couldn't identify and called the local park naturalist starting a irreversible chain of events that culminated in your house location on the National Rare Bird Alert phone line.

This scenario of events happened this April to Helen and Horace Harger of Bath, Ohio. (A western suburb of Akron.) Their front yard bird feeder (see photo in this issue) was the host to a brambling. This wandering eurasian finch was a first record for Ohio and the forty-fourth record for North America in the last ten years outside it's migratory path in the Aleutians. The Harger's birding is restricted to their feeders but they know the birds they feed. When they first saw the brambling around March 31, 1987 they didn't recognize this colorful black and orange bird about the size of a junco. They checked bird books with a neighbor and settled on a bay-breasted warbler. The local park naturalist, Bert Szabo, called a local birder, Larry Rosche, whose thoughts raced to a possible brambling. Here's how Larry described the events that followed for the Bath newspaper, Villiage View:

"I called Helen and discussed the field characteristics of her "mystery" bird. The bird seemed too large by her description and for a warbler to be eating sunflower seeds seemed absurd. I asked what, if anything, made her think it was not a bay-breasted warbler. Helen said it had a large orange area above the wing. My pulse quickened and I asked her to look up brambling and she excitedly exclaimed, "That's the bird!" I told her to expect me right after work.

I met Pat Haddad and Bill Osborne at the feeders. We were soon joined by Bert Szabo and the vigil began. Alas, no luck, the bird did not reappear. On Friday, Helen saw the elusive bird again. Once again Pat held a long lasting sentry duty to no avail. The weekend was upon me and my hopes of being at the feeder early Saturday were dashed by a foot of snow. Again the Hargers saw the bird, photographing it several times. In the afternoon I braved the snow and met with the Hargers to discuss the bird further. My belief that the bird truly was a brambling became stronger as I watched the feeder and listened to Helen and Horace identify each species that appeared.

Sunday morning began unauspiciously as fog lay over the entire area. Undaunted, Cleveland Bird Calendar Editor Ray Hannikman and I drove to Bath. After an hour the bird appeared! It was indeed a brambling. My faith in the Harger's observations had been rewarded. Now a brambling is big news in the birding community, not just locally, but nationally. This bird was not only a rarity, but a strikingly plumaged male. I informed the Hargers of the possibility of many people wanting to see the bird. They said they would be delighted to share their Eurasian beauty.

Helen called the Bath police to warn them of an influx of binocular clad strangers and Horace kept the feeders filled. Rare bird hot lines alerted Ohio's bird lovers and the North American Rare Bird Alert spread the news across the country. Soon crowds of birders descended onto the quiet Bath neighborhood.

The groups assembled with anticipation Sunday afternoon only to be frustrated. By Monday, birders from as far away as Cincinnati and Columbus were nervously stationed in front of the Harger house. Many saw the bird in the early morning, but again the brambling seemed to know that he was in control of the minds of many. He was going to make the curiosity seekers wait. He seemed to say, "If you want to see Ohio's first brambling, then you are going to have to put your time in."

The bird made a few brief appearances Monday afternoon, but only the few who had waited patiently got to see him. By Tuesday morning the brambling had become reluctant to appear at all. The snow cover had abated and easier foraging was to be found elsewhere. As if to taunt the 50 plus people gabbing on the street, he flew in briefly to be seen only by those intently watching the feeding stations.

All and all, well over a hundred people came to view the bird. Many came and were disappointed but such is the way in birding. A bird like a brambling comes along once in a birders lifetime and Helen and Horace cannot be thanked enough for letting us all share in the sighting of the brambling."

This brambling remained at the Harger's feeder from 3/31/87 to 4/7/87. It was only the fourth Spring (March 1st to May 31st) record for the lower 48 states (see chart and map in this article) in the last ten years. It is also the second latest Spring record in this category. Surely the two snow storms were instrumental in driving this bird to the feeder. (The bird at Foland, Colorado in 1984 "disappeared during balmy weather and returned during periodic snowstorms.") March 30 and 31 produced 4.7" of snow and April 4 and 5, 14" of snow. The great majority of all brambling records (in the chart) are at feeders and in association with juncos. As the snow melted in the days after April 5, the bird became more difficult to find. It was last found April 7. Cold weather extremes seem to be an important factor influencing the vagrancy of bramblings. Of the thirty records in the lower 48 in the last ten years, eleven occurred during the

winter of 1983-1984 which was termed the winter of the "Siberian express" by American Birds, Changing Seasons Editor Paul Lehman who termed it the "coldest December ever in many locations."

Curiously all of the "Spring" records for the lower 48 in the last ten years are eastern whereas the "Winter" and "Fall" records are spread down the western coast of North America and across the northern half of the western and central states (with three records in the east). Where do these vagrants come from? Are the eastern Spring records from the U.S.S.R., China and/or Japan or from the British Isles and/or Norway?

The brambling is a migratory eurasian species. It breeds in north eurasia from the northern tree limit south to north Norway, central Russia, forested Siberia and north Amurland to the Kamchatka Peninsula in eastern Russia. The species winters south to the British Isles, southern France, northern Italy, Balkan Peninsula (but very rarely in Greece), northern parts of Asia Minor, Syria, Iran, Afganistan, northwest India, Tibet, China and Japan. In the U.S.S.R. it winters in small numbers in southern Russia.

It's Spring passage though the Caucasus (southern European Russia) begins at the end of February or in early March and the species arrives at its nesting grounds in central and northern European Russia (Arkhangelsk) around April 19 to May 22. "On migrations flying often in huge flocks, bramblings are very abundant everywhere. Especially large numbers of these birds fly over western parts of the U.S.S.R. and through the Caucasias. In some areas of Transcarpathian Region massive concentrations of bramblings occur at winter quarters. For 1 - 1 1/2 hours, an almost uninterrupted stream of birds passes through the air in a continuous band 300-500 m. wide. Approximately the same spectacle is occasionally seen in the foothills of northern Caucasus." (Birds of the Soviet Union.)

On Attu and Shemya Islands, the western most of the Aleutian Islands in Alaska, the brambling arrives in the Spring in small numbers (1-33) around May 12 through May 20 following its normal s.e.-n.e. Asia flight path. Unparalleled flocks up to 48 birds with a maximum flock of 156+ birds were seen in 1980.

In autumn migration the brambling departs the southern Urals (central European Russia) by October 4 through 26. The earliest date ever for fall flocks in this region was September 27, 1907.

On Attu the record fall early arrival date (in the last ten years) was September 11, 1983 with a maximum of 20+ birds seen September 23, 1983. Normal fall arrival seems to be September 17 through October 12 with a maximum of 24+ birds on September 27.

Three of the eastern U.S. records of the brambling (except for Nova Scotia 5/18/83) seem to correlate with the dates of the beginning of the european spring migration of this species and not the dates of the Asian migration (as typified by Attu) although no departure dates from China or Japan have been found. In addition the proximity of the Spring U.S. records to Europe argue for that source as well as the more defined pattern of the more numerous fall and winter U.S. records indicating an Asian source.

This of course assumes that the Spring U.S. records are not simply Asian vagrants that have remained in northern Canada throughout the winter.

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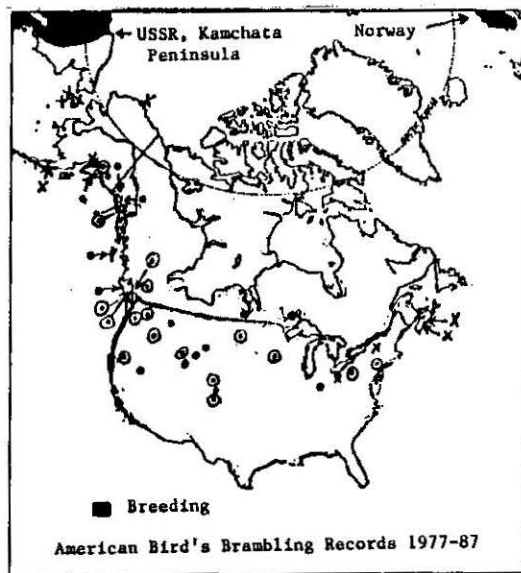
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FALL ●

WINTER ○

SPRING X

| DATE | LOCATION | DATE | LOCATION | DATE | LOCATION |
|-----------------------|--|------------------|-----------------------------|----------------|--|
| 10/23-28/86 | Juneau, Alas. | 12/84-3/85 | Petersburg, Alas. | 3/31/87-4/7/87 | Akron, Ohio |
| 11/28/85-late Jan. 86 | Brigham City, Utah | 2/5/-3/28/84 | Crescent City, Calif. | 3/6-8/86 | Mosher river, Nova Scotia |
| 11/23/85-3/86 | Ketchikan, Alas. | 2/21/84 | Vancouver, Vancouver, Is. | 6/2/84 | Ganbell, Alas. |
| 11/20-12/4/85 | Seward, Alas. | 1/21-28/84 | Ladner, British Columbia | 5/31/84 | Ganbell, Alas. |
| 11/18-30/85 | Sheridan, Wyoming | 1/19-2/25/84 | Vancouver, British Columbia | 5/13/84 | Anchorage, Alas. |
| 11/13/85-4/20/86 | Juneau, Alas | 1/15-3/84 | Owatonna, Minn. | 3/1-27/84 | Pleasant Valley, N.Y. |
| 11/10-26/85 | Daboia, Wyoming | 1/11-18/84 | Tenino, Wash. | 5/18/83 | Lake Echo, Nova Scotia |
| 11/10/85 | Hendricks, Indiana | 12/17/83-3/3/84 | Foland, Colorado | "Spring" 83 | Ganbell, Alas. |
| "ten days in Nov."85 | Port Alexander, Alas. | 12/16-19/83 | Pueblo Res., Colorado | "Spring" 83 | Pt. Franklin, Alas. |
| 11/20/83-1/7/84 | Queen Charlotte City, British Columbia | 12/12-26/83 | Logan, Utah | 5/27/78 | Alas. "a few miles e. of normal migration" |
| 11/20/83 | Billings Pt., Vancouver Is. | 12/9/83-2/15/84 | LeGrande, Oreg. | | |
| 10/23-26/83 | Atikokan, Ontario | 12/4-6/83 | Kamloops, British Columbia | | |
| 10/22/83 | E. St. Paul, Manitoba | 1/6-3/22/82 | Lake Samanish, Wash. | | |
| 10/20-11/4/83 | Colorado Springs, Colorado | 1/26-2/2/80 | Cordova, Alas. | | |
| 11/19-12/3/78 | Swan Lake, Montana | 12/15/79-2/29/80 | Bismarck, N.D. | | |
| 10/31-11/1/78 | Suzcliffe, Nevada | 12/78-3/79 | Mansfield, Mass. | | |
| 11/6/77-2/28/78 | Cordova, Alas. | 2/2/-4/1/78 | Allegheny Co., Penn. | | |