

TRAPPING THE SNOW BUNTING

BY OSCAR MCKINLEY BRYENS

BIRD banders who wish to trap the Snow Bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis nivalis*) will not have much trouble in doing so, if they reside in a region containing the type of environment that this species frequents. I began banding birds in early summer in the year 1924, and during the few past winters up to that time, I had put out feed for birds, here where I now reside near McMillan in Luce County, Michigan. The Snow Bunting is one of the species that came to my feeding station, and when I began banding, it was one of the species that I most desired to trap. I failed to get any in my first winter (1924-25), and due to absence the next two winters, no trapping was done. I returned in the year 1927, but did not get any Snow Buntings, as I was not in a section that they frequent. In March, 1928 I returned from the western part of Luce County, to the old home where I have resided since, and have not missed a winter since then in getting at least some Snow Buntings.

The kind of place to select for a feeding station so as to attract the Snow Bunting, is open country. Farm lands are one of its favorite haunts, although it frequents open marshes, and I have seen them on lakes after they were frozen over, feeding on seeds of birches that the wind had blown from trees along the shore. Although I have attracted them to within twenty feet of the house and had some fairly good results during a season, better results may be obtained if the station is fifty or one hundred feet from buildings. At my trapping station here, I do not get as many within fifty feet from the buildings as I do at over fifty feet. A station may be near, or even in, an orchard. I have one station that is not over thirty feet from an orchard, and one that is by an apple tree at the east side of the orchard. All of my traps are operated off of the ground, except for a period from about March 1st, until the last of April, or first part of May, when I have one on the snow, or when no snow cover exists, on the ground. If possible, when establishing a station in, or near an orchard, it should be so arranged that when the bander goes to his traps, that the orchard (or most of it) will be on the opposite side. The reason for this is that the birds, fly to nearby trees instead of going somewhere out of sight when disturbed by my approach. Just before leaving, I put some feed at the station and it often happens that within a few minutes after I have left, that some, at least, have come back to the station that had flown to the trees.

The station may be on the snow, or on a stand or table. I prefer to have the station on a stand or table, rather than on the snow, as the feed does not become covered as much with snow. The table should be large enough so that it will be at least six inches wider all

around than the trap that is to be used on it. I have had better results with extra space around the trap, than if the trap covers nearly all of the table. The Snow Bunting feeds in flocks, and a larger area than that covered by the trap permits a greater number to feed there.

The kind of feed to use in attracting the Snow Bunting is much the same as with most species of birds that are trapped in winter. Oats, wheat, millet, cracked corn, buckwheat, and other grains, screenings from the threshing machine, hay chaff with clover, timothy and other seeds are among their favorites. I have found that suet, if cut in small particles will also form a part of their diet.

During the several winters that Snow Buntings had patronized my station, it appears that they do not come, until for some reason or another, the natural feeding conditions have become unfavorable. The Snow Bunting is an early riser; I have often heard them in the morning before it was light enough to see to read, and I have seen them at my stations at such times.

Although I have now given a list of the different grains and seeds that seem to me to be the most attractive to Snow Buntings, I feel that there is one point that should be mentioned regarding the manner of putting out feed to be the most attractive, and to be sure of winning them as customers at a station. Hay chaff will be of great assistance, even though there may be very few seeds in the chaff. Put other feed that is to be used, with the chaff, and put a handful or two on the top of the trap. Thus, with a trap on a stand and chaff on it, it serves to attract the Snow Buntings; then as the wind blows this feed off, it makes an attractive spot on the snow about the station, and very closely resembles bare ground.

I have trapped the Snow Bunting in funnel type traps, and also the Glenhaven 4-cell and other type trip-door traps. The funnel type (a Dodson Sparrow Trap) brings very good results, since captive birds are not frightened as they enter, as in some of the trip-doors but, of course, are not safe from enemies that can enter the funnel. In the thirteen winters that I have trapped Snow Buntings, two have been killed; each being in the funnel trap, and a Northern Shrike as the killer. It has always been my aim to get the birds as soon as possible after being trapped. Trapped birds do, at times, give notes of distress, and some of the others will return and hover above their captive comrades, and on some occasions leave the station for the rest of the day.

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