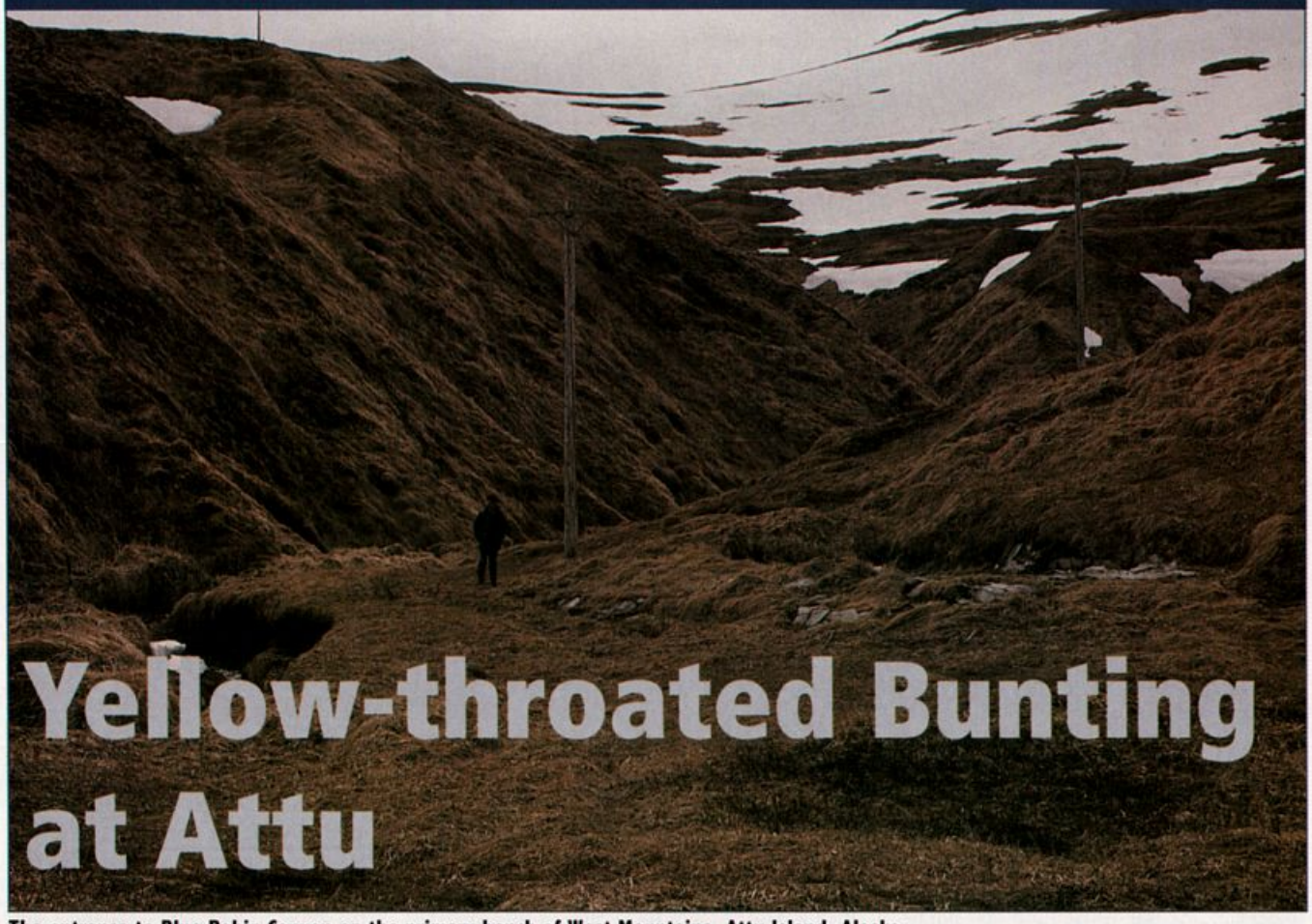
first north american record



Yellow-throated Bunting at Attu

The entrance to Blue Robin Canyon on the primary bench of West Mountains, Attu Island, Alaska. The secondary bench along the shoreline is in the foreground. Snowfields still dominated the background when this photo was taken in early June 1998, a few days after the first Yellow-throated Bunting for North America was found in the canyon. Photograph/ Paul W. Sykes Jr.

PAUL W. SYKES JR.*

Attu, the westernmost island of Alaska's Aleutian Chain, is a popular destination for many North American birders. A chance to see Palearctic species in the American Birding Association (ABA) area is the primary attraction. As it turned out, the spring 1998 migration of Asian birds at Attu was nothing short of phenomenal (see Tobish's Alaska Region report in this issue; also Smith 1998). All previous trips to Attu pale in comparison to 1998 (Lawrence G. Balch, pers. comm.). This remarkable season may have been related to the strong El Niño/Southern Oscillation in 1997–1998.

The find of the year at Attu was a male Yellow-throated Bunting *(Emberiza elegans)*, furnishing the first sighting of this Asian species in North America (A.O.U. 1998).

Attu (888 sq. km) is the largest of the five Near Islands in the Western Aleutians and is a part of the Aleutian Islands Unit of the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge. The island (Map 1) is about 1540 km west-southwest of the Alaska Peninsula and 700 km east of the Kamchatka Peninsula, Russia. It is 67 km long east to west and 28 km at its widest north to south (Map 2, page 400), mountainous (highest elevation 921 m), with an irregular rocky coastline interspersed with sand and gravel beaches, valleys with swift-flowing rivers, and a number of lakes and ponds. The climate is maritime with fog, frequent rain, and intense storms, often with sustained winds in excess of 50 kph (Gibson 1981). The island is treeless, the upland vegetation being of dense, low-growing, arctic-montane plants of circumpolar species (Hultén 1968).

The Yellow-throated Bunting was discovered on the afternoon of May 25, 1998, under a partly cloudy sky, temperatures between 4 and 5°C, little wind, and no precipitation. The canyon where the bird was found is located between Krasni and Murder Points and has no official geographic name, but has been referred to by Attu birders as Blue Robin Canyon since the discovery there of a Siberian Blue Robin *(Luscinia cyane)*, another North American first, on May 21, 1985 (Gibson and Kessel 1992).

Blue Robin Canyon (Lat. 52° 47.5' N, Long. 173° 91' E; Map. 2 inset) is oriented along an east-southeast axis. It is relatively small (about 250 m long and 30 m deep) and narrow with several slight bends and moderate slopes with a swift-flowing stream and two short side canyons near its north end. The canyon was formed by the erosion of the primary bench on the lower southeast flank of West Mountains (also called Weston Mountain on some maps). The entrance to the canyon begins where the line of bluffs forming the outer

Map 1 (right). Distribution of the Yellow-throated Bunting *(Emberiza elegans)* in relationship to Attu Island, Alaska. Breeding, wintering, and year-round ranges are indicated. Adapted from Byers et al. 1995.

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edge of the primary bench meets the low flat secondary bench along the ocean shoreline. The walls of the canyon are vegetated by Tall Forb Meadow habitat (Kessel 1979), except in a few places where recent small landslides have exposed underlying soil or rock. The canyon vegetation consists mainly of sedges (*Carex* spp., etc.) and grasses (*Agrostis* spp., *Deschampsia* spp., *Poa* spp., etc.) with ferns (*Botrychium* spp., etc.) in sheltered areas, forbs (cow parsnip *Heracleum lanatum*, wild geranium *Geranium erianthum*, etc.), and a few low-growing scattered shrubs (primarily mountain ash *Sorbus sambucifolia* in sheltered depressions and a few willows *Salix* spp. along the stream). Spring green-up on Attu had just begun at the time when the bunting was discovered. The snow pack was rapidly retreating, hence the vegetation was mostly the dead dried remains from the previous growing season, providing minimal cover for the bird. Snow patches of varying size were scattered throughout the canyon with the larger patches higher on the slopes.

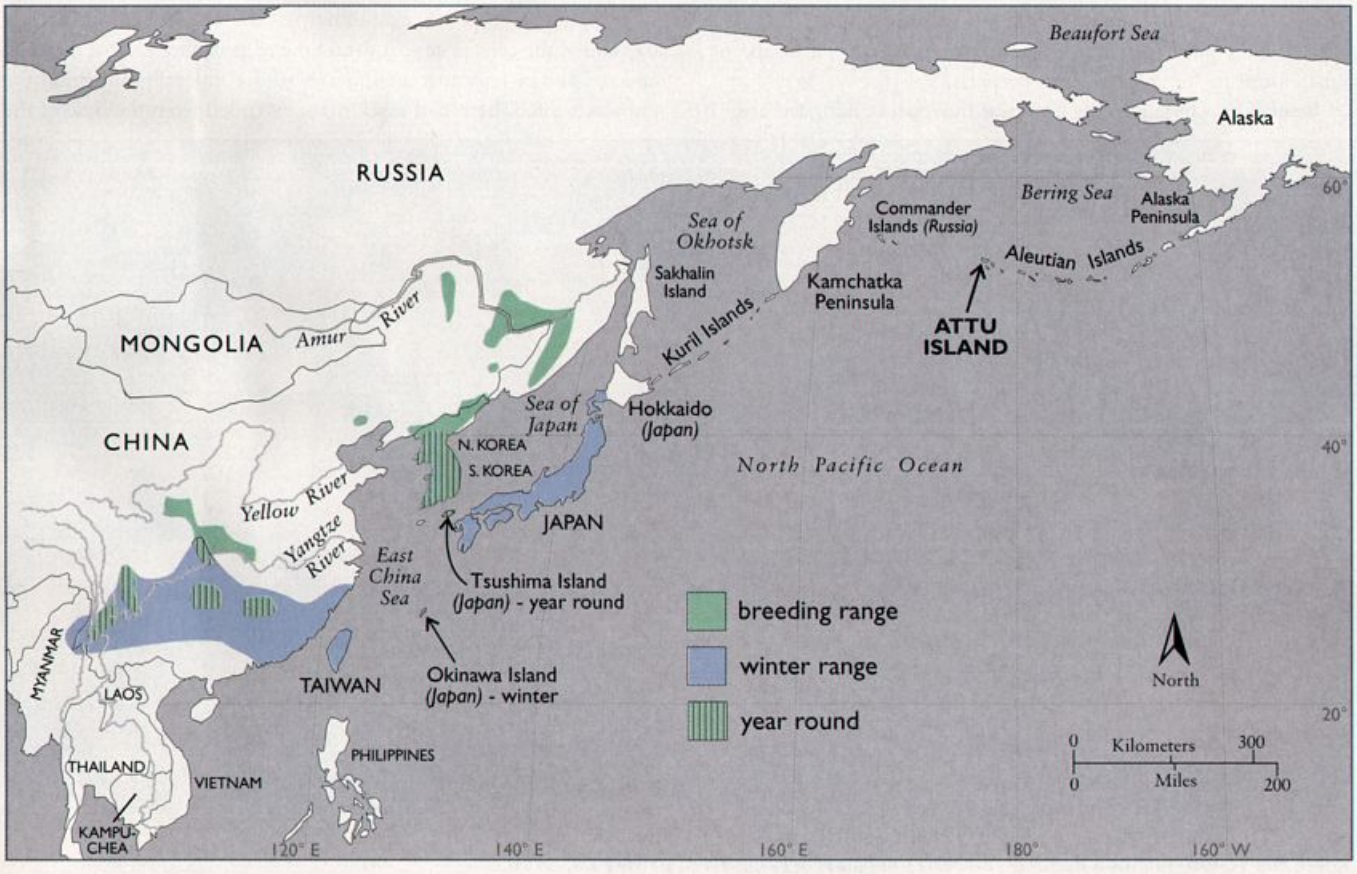
I found the Yellow-throated Bunting while leading a small group of birders along the southern shore of Attu just east of Krasni Point. Members of our group were Valerie Elliott, Ron Finch, Carol and Ted Hartwell, Bud Johnson, Ann Kovich, and Roy Morris. We worked our way through Blue Robin Canyon where we observed an Olive-backed Pipit *(Anthus hodgsoni)* and several Rustic Buntings *(E. rustica)*. At approximately 4:10 p.m. Bering DST, just as we were leaving the canyon, I discovered an unfamiliar bunting foraging on the ground. It was foraging among matted grasses and ferns that had recently been uncovered by melting snow in a shallow depression about 4 m wide on the lower slope on the south side of the stream. The bird was similar in size to a Rustic Bunting, with erect crest with a black front edge, bold head pattern with a bright yellow supercilium and throat and broad black mask, grayish-brown streaked back, white underparts with brown streaks on the sides, and a black patch in center of the breast. I urged the others to carefully study the bird. Everyone in the group saw the bird on the ground briefly before it flew up the canyon and disappeared. Excitement was running high! I did not know what the bird was until I was able to retrieve my copy of *A Field Guide to the Birds of Japan* (Massey et al. 1982) which I had left in my pack just outside the canyon entrance. Immediately upon returning to my gear and determining the positive identification of the bunting, I radioed the good news to the others on Attu at about 4:15 p.m.

Thus commenced the frantic hike by many birders coming to the canyon, some arriving from as far away as 7 km. Birders straggled in over the next four hours to look for the bird. By 9:00 p.m., 75 happy campers had seen the bunting with binoculars and scopes, and at least four people photographed the bird at a distance. Four of us relocated the bird just before midnight at the exact place it had initially been seen, but efforts to collect it were not successful. This was the last time the Yellow-throated Bunting was seen by multiple observers. I wrote my notes that evening when I had the time with no interruptions.

The following sections on behavior and description are a composite from the notes of Paul J. Baicich, Terry J. Doyle, Steven C. Heinl, Greg T. Scyphers, and myself, all notes being written independently. The bunting was studied at two meters briefly by Scyphers, but most of the time it was at a much greater distance. On several occasions we were able to study the bird at 10 m.

BEHAVIOR

The Yellow-throated Bunting was kept under almost constant observation from 5:15 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. Bering DST as it moved throughout the main canyon and the two side canyons. For the most part, it foraged on the ground among the vegetation recently exposed by melting snow, staying on the sunny southwest-facing slopes most of the time. It tended to feed along the edge of several melting patches



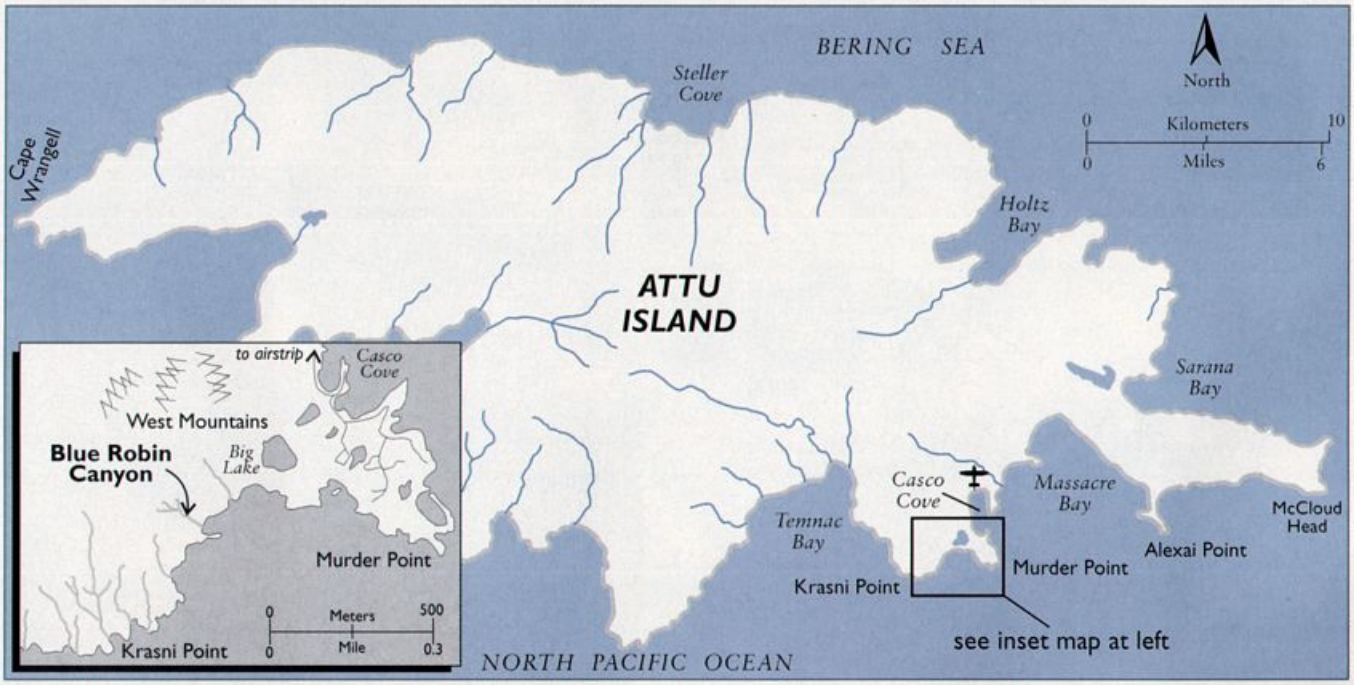
The view from within Blue Robin Canyon, Attu Island, Alaska, with the North Pacific Ocean in the background. This photo was taken in early June 1998, a few days after North America's first Yellow-throated Bunting was found here. Spring green-up had just started; the previous year's vegetation is dried and matted. Photograph/ Paul W. Sykes Jr.

of snow, often flying directly from one to the other (in this manner it behaved much like its congener, the Rustic Bunting). The bird moved frequently, flying just above ground level. It also seemed to prefer areas of flattened vegetation or the few small patches of shrubs, which provided the only cover. It was frequently seen near one or more Rustic Buntings, but there did not appear to be any direct association per se; still, on such occasions we had a good comparison of the two species. Despite people standing at the bottom of the canyon laughing and talking loudly in celebration of their good fortune, the bird remained within the canyon. Most observers, including myself, did not hear the Yellow-throated Bunting call, but those few that did, said it sounded similar to the Rustic Bunting.

DESCRIPTION

The bird was a small passerine with raised crest, distinctive facial pattern, a short pointed bill, and overall was the size and shape of a Rustic Bunting but with paler upperparts.

Head. The plumage of the head was the most striking feature. The short crest came to a sharp peak, was held erect, and was relatively smooth along the rear edge. The black on front of the crest extended from the forehead to the peak. The black of the crest was duller than that of the mask. On the rear of the crest below the black was pale yellow fading to buff to reddish brown on the nape. The supercilium was bright lemon yellow extending past the eye and continuing up the side of the crest. The yellow met the edge of the black of the crest and mask. The rearmost one-quarter of the supercilium behind the eye was white. The broad black mask extended from the base of the



Map 2. The island of Attu in the Western Aleutians, Alaska. The inset shows the location of Blue Robin Canyon where the Yellow-throated Bunting *(Emberiza elegans)* was observed on May 25, 1998.

Four views of the male Yellow-throated Bunting *(Emberiza elegans)* in Blue Robin Canyon, Attu Island, Alaska, May 25, 1998. Conditions for photography were difficult, to say the least; four observers managed to obtain photographs, but these were the best of the lot. Even in these distant shots it is possible to see various characteristics of the species: black crest and mask, yellow supercilium and throat, brown back, two pale wing-bars, and (in the blurred flight photo) black tail with white outer rectrices. See text for a complete description. Photographs/ David W. Sonneborn

bill rearward through the lores, the eye being within the mask, and including the auriculars but did not reach the rear of the head. The width of the mask was slightly wider than the base of the bill and gradually became a little wider in the auricular region. There was no eye-ring. The chin and throat were bright lemon yellow. A band of white below the yellow throat extended rearward on the side of the neck and upward around the rear of the auriculars to the posterior edge of the supercilium, separating the black mask from the nape.

Upperparts. Compared to Rustic Bunting, the Yellow-throated Bunting appeared much paler overall. The upperparts were grayer and not as brightly colored. This was apparent even from a distance or in flight. The back was distinctly streaked buffy-brown, reddish-brown, and black. The outermost row of back feathers were a light buff forming a pale streak along each side. The unmarked rump and upper tail coverts were a pale gray. The scapulars were light gray streaked with black. The wings were brown with tips of the primaries darker. The primaries, secondaries, coverts, and tertials had thin buffy edges. Tips of the median coverts were white forming a white wingbar, and tips of the greater coverts were a pale buff forming a second wingbar. Centers of the greater coverts and tertials were black.

Tail. The tail appeared long compared to that of Rustic Bunting and was slightly notched at the tip. The rectrices were dark brown with white in the outermost. In flight, the white in the outer tail feathers appeared to run most of the length of the tail.

Underparts. A large dull black breast patch was the shape of a compressed inverted triangle with imperfect points; the top edge ran straight across the lower throat area, and the bottom extended downward to a point. This patch did not reach to the sides, nor extend into

the lower part of the breast. The patch was separated from the yellow throat by a white band and was completely surrounded by white breast feathers on its "other two sides." The underparts rearward of the central breast patch were a dirty white with two thin reddish-brown broken streaks on the sides and flanks that did not extend into the undertail coverts.

Bare Parts. The eye appeared dark. The bill was short, conical, and similar in size to that of Rustic Bunting. The bill was black, although some thought it to be gray. The tarsus and toes were a pale flesh-color.

Sex and Age. The bird on Attu was a male close to or in full alternate plumage. According to Byers et al. (1995), the adult male in basic plumage has the crown and auriculars to some extent obscured by brown edgings, the nape brown instead of gray, mantle and rump browner, with streaking on the mantle less distinct than in alternate plumage, and the breast patch partly obscured by pale edgings. The first-winter male is similar to the adult in basic plumage, but the dark patterns of the head and breast are less well developed and more obscured, and the throat is buffier (Byers et al. 1995). The Attu bird did not have the auriculars obscured by brown feather edgings, and the back (mantle) streaking was very distinct. Nor was the rump brownish, but the black on front of the crest was not as intense as the black of the mask, the nape was brown rather than gray, and the black breast patch was small (compressed and angular) rather than a full, rounded half-moon shape. Thus, the Attu bird was probably a one-year-old male.

DISTRIBUTION

The breeding range of the Yellow-throated Bunting is disjunct (Map 1). The northern population breeds in eastern Russia (Siberia) in the Amur River region west to at least the Bureya River, and in Ussuriland; in northeastern China in the Greater and Lesser Khingan Mountains, Heilongjiang, eastern Jilin and eastern Liaoning; throughout the Korean Peninsula; and at Tsushima Island, Japan. The southern population breeds in central China from southern Gansu and southern Shaanxi, south to Yunnan, Guizhou, and Hunan (Byers et al. 1995). The northern population winters (Map 1), November to April, from northern Korea and northern Japan south to Guangdong, Fujian, and Taiwan. The population in central China is partly resident, but probably winters at lower elevations in the southern part of the breeding range, including mountains of northeast Burma near the Yunnan border. The six or so reported from western Europe have been considered escapees (Byers et al. 1995).

STATUS

This species is fairly common throughout much of its breeding and wintering range (Byers et al. 1995). It is considered a common to abundant breeder in eastern Russia (Dement'ev and Gladkov 1954), a fairly common resident and short-range migrant in central and eastern China, and rare to uncommon during winter in Taiwan Providence (Tso-hsin 1987). It is also a common resident and abundant winter visitor in Korea (Gore and Pyong-oh 1971), a locally common breeder on Tsushima Island, Japan, a common migrant and winter visitor in western Japan, and uncommon to rare elsewhere (Brazil 1991).

HABITAT

The Yellow-throated Bunting breeds on grassy slopes in hilly terrain and mountain highlands. It prefers relatively open, dry deciduous forests, shrub thickets, forest clearings, and edges of deciduous or mixed forests, often along streams (Dement'ev and Gladkov 1954, Vaurie 1959, Gore and Pyong-oh 1971, Tso-hsin 1987, Brazil 1991, Byers et al. 1995). The species winters in open mixed woodlands, shady coniferous forests, forest edges, orchards, agricultural areas where there are shrubs and trees, thickets along river courses, and wooded hillsides from sea level to lower elevations of mountains (Vaurie 1956, Tso-hsin 1987, Brazil 1991, Byers et al. 1995).

DOCUMENTATION

A number of color photographs were taken of the Yellow-throated Bunting at Attu. Several taken by David W. Sonneborn are included with this article, and seven are on file with VIREO (S23/12/001–007) at the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia (Matt Sharp pers comm.).

Sonneborn's photographs, shown here, are the clearest available The notes of five observers (Baicich, Doyle, Heinl, Scyphers, and Sykes) and a set of Sonneborn's photographs have been filed at the University of Alaska Museum (Daniel D. Gibson pers. comm.), and a set of the same notes with several color photographs by Sonneborn were submitted to the ABA Checklist Committee.

DISCUSSION

The Yellow-throated Bunting, given its distribution in eastern Asia and the fact it is a short-range migrant, was not a bird anticipated to occur on Attu. The closest breeding area to Attu is on the Amur River, Russia, at approximately 2600 km, and about the same distance to the nearest wintering area on the southern part of Hokkaido, the northernmost of the main islands of Japan. However, a number of other equally unexpected species have been found in the Near Island Group of the Western Aleutians in the past. These include Chinese Egret *(Egretta eulophotes)* at Agattu Island (Byrd et al. 1978), Oriental Pratincole *(Glareoda maldivarum)* at Attu (Gibson and Kessel 1992), Wood Warbler *(Phylloscopus sibilatrix)* at Shemya Island (Gibson 1981), and Narcissus Flycatcher *(Ficedula narcissina)* twice at Attu (Gibson and Kessel 1992, Tobish 1994), to mention a few.

Of course, it is not known how long the bunting may have been on the island prior to its discovery. The occurrence of many Asian species on Attu, however, is weather-related. Storm systems that produce westerly winds over a large part of the North Pacific Region provide the most favorable conditions for Asian birds to reach the island. On May 5, 1998, a low pressure system passed Attu on an easterly track. This system moved northward into the Bering Sea where it merged with another low and created one large stationary low This resulted in westerly winds from the time of our arrival at Attu on May 5 until well past the middle of the month. Whether the presence of the Yellow-throated Bunting on Attu was the result of this prolonged period of westerly winds, we cannot be sure, but there is the distinct possibility that it was connected to this observation and many others during this extraordinary 1998 season.

Three races of the Yellow-throated Bunting are recognized the nominate *Emberiza elegans elegans* that breeds in eastern Siberia and Manchuria; *E. e. ticehursti,* whose breeding range is uncertain but thought to be Korea and adjacent China; and *E. e. elegantula* of central China (Vaurie 1956, 1959; Byers et al. 1995). The races differ primarily in degree of color saturation, *ticehursti* being the palest, *elegantula* the darkest, and *elegans* intermediate between the two *E e elegans* and *E. e. ticehursti* are migratory and *E. e. elegantula* is resident (Vaurie 1956, 1959). In August and September 1998 I examined a small series of museum skins (N=21, all males, mostly late winter and spring individuals), representing all three races, and concluded it is not possible to separate *elegans* from *ticehursti* in the field Given that *elegantula* is resident in central China and has much darker

plumage, that race can probably be eliminated with a reasonable degree of certainty in case of the Attu bird.

Several points of the description of the Yellow-throated Bunting in the literature (Byers et al. 1995) versus our field descriptions need clarification. Among the *elegans* and *ticehursti* specimens examined, some have the yellow of the supercilium extending forward of the eye grading to white, while in others it was all white forward of the eye. Given the narrowness of the supercilium forward of the eye, this feature might appear yellow in the field, even among those with white forward of the eye. Also, a narrow line of white extends from the supercilium and meets across the forehead in some individuals, and in others it does not. The shape of the black breast patch is half-moon-like in adult males rather than a crescent as described in the literature (Byers et al. 1995), the depth (top to bottom) of the patch varying among individuals. The narrow black line across the chin, just below the base of the bill, is not a character that can be seen in the field. Even with specimens in hand it is not obvious, and varies among individuals. The eye of the Attu bird was all dark, some thought black, but Byers et al. (1995) describe it as clear dark chestnut-brown in adult males and dark gray-brown in first-winter males. Apparently we did not see the eye of the Attu bird under conditions that enabled us to see its true color.

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