

NOTES

A LITTLE BUNTING REACHES CALIFORNIA

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At mid-morning on 21 October 1991 I visited Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery on Point Loma in San Diego, California. While searching for a reported Scarlet Tanager (*Piranga olivacea*), I stopped to look through a small flock of Chipping Sparrows (*Spizella passerina*) feeding in the short grass. I was immediately attracted to a rusty-colored bird with prominent chestnut cheek patches that was about the size of the Chipping Sparrows. The flock was alarmed by my presence and flew up into the trees. As the bird flew I saw white on the outer tail feathers and heard a junco-like "tick" note, and when it landed I saw black streaks on the underparts. I felt the bird was one of the Asiatic buntings, and suspected it was probably a Rustic Bunting (*Emberiza rustica*), but had no books to consult for verification. Realizing I needed confirmation, I rushed to the nearest telephone and told Richard E. Webster of the bird's presence. Webster alerted birders in southern California before leaving his office for the cemetery.

I had relocated the bunting and was observing it from a distance when Webster arrived. After looking at it for a couple of minutes, Webster correctly recalled that the Little Bunting (*Emberiza pusilla*), not the Rustic Bunting, has chestnut cheek patches and that a Rustic Bunting should be noticeably larger than the Chipping Sparrows. We kept the bunting under observation for about half an hour, during which time I noted field marks and Webster took photographs. Once back in my office I contacted Kimball L. Garrett at the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History and discussed the identification of the bunting with him. Garrett was able to compare winter specimens of a Little and a Rustic Bunting against my description and concluded the bird was most likely a Little Bunting.

When I returned to Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery in the afternoon about thirty observers had the bunting under observation. I then studied it at distances as close as 30 feet with the aid of a Kowa TSN-4 telescope for about 2 hours. That evening Brian E. Daniels, Michael A. Patten, and I compared our field notes with photographs, illustrations, and written accounts in the various books and journals in my library and concluded the bird was indeed a Little Bunting. The following is a summary of my notes on the bird.

The Little Bunting was a little smaller than a Chipping Sparrow. The head and upperparts were rusty brown, with the head being the brightest. The forehead, crown, and nape were dark chestnut brown, with a broad diffused paler chestnut-brown median crown stripe. A broad cinnamon-buff supercilium extended from above the eyes, over the ear coverts, and onto the sides of the nape. The ear coverts were a rich chestnut, with this color extending forward to encompass the lores. A blackish line framed the top, back, and rear portion of the lower edge of the ear coverts, this line broadening at the corners to form prominent dark patches. A fine buffy-white ring encircled each dark eye. The chestnut cheek patches were bordered below by broad pale cinnamon-buff to white stripes, this color extending a short way upward immediately behind the ear coverts. The chin and throat were white, bordered on the sides by thin but well defined blackish malar stripes. The bill was mostly blackish with some pale coloration at the base of the mandible, the culmen was straight or slightly concave, and the gonyx angled upward.

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The mantle, scapulars, back, rump, and uppertail coverts were dark brown to blackish, with each feather broadly fringed with chestnut brown, making the upper parts look chestnut brown with broad diffused blackish streaks, but with a slight grayish cast that made the upperparts appear less rusty than the head. The wings were the same color as the upperparts, but the greater and median coverts also were tipped with yellowish buff to form two indistinct wing bars, the yellowish buff being more extensive and paler on the median coverts, making the upper wing bar a little broader and paler than the lower. The tertials were blackish, broadly fringed with chestnut, and finely tipped with white. The primaries and secondaries were blackish, finely edged with chestnut, and with a thin line of white at the tip of each feather. The rectrices were blackish, finely edged with chestnut, except that the two central rectrices were mostly chestnut brown and the inner webs of the outermost rectrices were mostly white. The tail was notched.

The underparts were whitish tinged buff, with a pale cinnamon-buff wash across the breast, well defined black streaks across the breast and along the flanks, and with the vent and undertail coverts unmarked. The legs and feet were pale pink.

Although the identification of the Little Bunting is covered in most books on European and Asiatic birds, I found the accounts of Wallace (1980), Harris et al. (1989), and particularly Bradshaw (1991) to be the most useful. All three emphasized markings that separate the Little from the Rustic Bunting, and Wallace and Bradshaw also emphasized markings that separate it from the Common Reed Bunting (*Emberiza schoeniclus*).

Point Loma is heavily birded during the fall, and the weekend of 19 and 20 October was no exception. Flocks of sparrows are always of interest, and the flock of Chipping Sparrows was scrutinized by multiple observers on 20 October and by at least one observer early in the morning on 21 October, with no one seeing the Little Bunting. I therefore believe that the Little Bunting arrived in Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery shortly before being found on 21 October. It could be found with relative ease with the Chipping Sparrows through 24 October, and was seen and photographed by interested birders from throughout the United States. Although many observer hours were expended on 25 October and through the following weekend, and even though the Chipping Sparrow flock was under almost constant observation, there were no substantiated reports of the bunting, indicating it departed during the night of 24-25 October.

A long list of vagrant land-birds has been found on Point Loma during the past thirty years, and a remarkable variety, originating from a variety of directions, were present between 21 and 24 October 1991. The flock of Chipping Sparrows also contained an Indigo Bunting (*Passerina cyanea*) and a Clay-colored Sparrow (*Spizella pallida*). Scarcer vagrants present in Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery during these four days included a Magnolia Warbler (*Dendroica magnolia*), a Blackburnian Warbler (*Dendroica fusca*), a Hooded Warbler (*Wilsonia citrina*), and a Scarlet Tanager, along with more regular occurring Palm Warblers (*Dendroica palmarum*), Blackpoll Warblers (*Dendroica striata*), American Redstarts (*Setophaga ruticilla*), and a Rose-breasted Grosbeak (*Pheucticus ludovicianus*). However, the Little Bunting is the most unexpected vagrant found there to date.

The Little Bunting breeds from northeastern Siberia across northern Asia to northern Finland, and winters from southeast Asia west to northern India and occasionally to continental Europe and north Africa. A recently dead Little Bunting recovered near Rodgers Bay on Wrangel Island off the northeast coast of Siberia on 8 September 1933 (Portenko 1973) was northeast of the species' normal range. In Alaska, Watson et al. (1974) reported one collected on a U.S. Coast Guard icebreaker operating in the Chukchi Sea about 150 nautical miles northwest of Icy Cape on 6 September 1970. Gibson (1981) collected one on Shemya Island at the extreme western end of the Aleutian Islands on 8 September 1977, and M. E. (Peter)

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Isleib (Am. Birds 38:235, 1984) saw a "flighty" individual on Attu Island at the extreme western end of the Aleutian Islands on 22 September 1983. The Point Loma bird is the only one yet found in North America outside extreme western Alaska. The record (CBRC 145-1991) was endorsed by the California Bird Records Committee. Eight descriptions and ten color photographs of the bird are archived at the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology in Camarillo, California, and a color photograph of the bird has been published (Am. Birds 46:169, 1992).

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