

A LITTLE BUNTING REACHES BAJA CALIFORNIA SUR

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At midday on 8 October 2008, we discovered a Little Bunting (*Emberiza pusilla*) at Rancho San José de Castro on the Vizcaino Peninsula, Baja California Sur (cover photo, Figure 1). This sighting represents the first record of this Old World species from Mexico and only the third for North America south of Alaska.

Rancho San José de Castro is located at 27° 32' 20.83" N, 114° 28' 24.29" W, approximately 3 km toward Bahía Asunción south of the main road from Ejido Vizcaino to Bahía Tortugas. The ranch consists of a few small structures and dwellings, a small livestock pen, a natural spring and a pond about 50 m wide, an orchard, and several large trees and plantings. It is one of several small ranches that dot the immense, xeric landscape of the Vizcaino Peninsula, a rugged and barren promontory jutting far out into the Pacific Ocean about midway down the Baja California Peninsula, south and west of Guerrero Negro. Its proximity to the ocean, isolation, and barren landscape, with only a few remote ranches and fishing villages, make it an ideal location for finding migrants and vagrants (Howell et al. 2001). Ever since the discovery of Mexico's first Arctic Warbler (*Phylloscopus borealis*) there (Pyle and Howell (1993), it has been birded nearly annually, producing a number of noteworthy sightings (1991–2000 results summarized by Erickson and Howell 2001).

On 8 October 2008 we arrived around noon and shortly thereafter discovered a small emberizid about the size of a Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella passerina*) foraging on the ground at the livestock pen. Because of its bold chestnut cheeks and small ear covert spot (a field mark characteristic of some Old World buntings), Radamaker suspected the Little Bunting, but seconds later the bird disappeared from view behind the livestock pen. After several tension-filled minutes, Powell relocated the bird some meters from its original location along the shore of the pond, but the bird abruptly disappeared again. After 15 minutes, we relocated it several meters away in the orchard.

This time the bird stayed in the general area, but, frustratingly, it kept mostly hidden in some tall dense clumps of Bermuda grass (*Cynodon dactylon*), betraying itself with only teasing glimpses and slight movements of grass. We waited several long minutes, and eventually it came into the open, where Radamaker was able to photograph it at close range. We studied it for about an hour, taking note of the field marks: bold chestnut face outlined at the rear and below with black, obvious white eye ring, pale spot on the ear coverts, buffy central crown stripe, broad supercilium, strong white malar stripe, fine black streaking on the breast and flanks, and, in flight, conspicuous white outer tail feathers. We compared these field marks directly to the descriptions and plates in several field guides (WBSJ 1982, Jonsson 1993, and Svensson et al. 1999)—Old World references we brought along in hopes they would be needed! The combination of the bird's small size, distinct pale eye ring, and chestnut face eliminated confusion with other similar looking Old World buntings, such as the Rustic (*E. rustica*) and Reed (*E. schoeniclus*) buntings. The bird likely was an immature on the basis of the shape of the rectrices and condition of the primary coverts (P. Pyle pers. comm.), grayish back, pale and indistinct lateral crown stripes and supercilium, and the dense black streaking on the breast (Cramp and Perrins 1994). For a thorough treatment of the identification of and age criteria for the Little Bunting see Wallace (1980), Bradshaw (1991), and Cramp and Perrins (1994).

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Figure 1. Little Bunting at Rancho San José de Castro, Vizcaino Peninsula, Baja California Sur, 8 October 2008.

Photo by Kurt Radamaker

Because of the bird's erratic movements and flighty behavior when initially seen, followed by its settling down and staying in one place, allowing close approach until we walked away from it, we surmise the bird had arrived recently, probably that morning. Furthermore, the location had been checked for birds three days earlier on 5 October 2008 by R. A. Erickson, M. J. Billings, and P. A. Gaede, who did not see the bunting (Erickson pers. comm.).

Other migratory birds at Rancho San José de Castro that day were one Long-billed Dowitcher (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*), one Red-naped Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus nuchalis*), one Hermit Thrush (*Catharus guttatus*), two Yellow-rumped Warblers (*Dendroica coronata*), and one vagrant from eastern North America, a Blackburnian Warbler (*Dendroica fusca*). However, earlier that morning at the nearby coastal town of Bahía Asunción, we observed a noteworthy 17 species of warbler, indicating an influx of migrants.

The Little Bunting breeds across the far northern part of Eurasia from the Russian Far East to northern Scandinavia. Southward migration begins in mid-August, with the majority of birds leaving the breeding grounds by mid-September and arriving on the wintering grounds mostly in October (Cramp and Perins 1994). The winter

NOTES

range extends from China to eastern Nepal and northeastern India. The Little Bunting is a vagrant to most European and Middle Eastern countries (Byers et al. 1995) and is a regular migrant and winter visitor to Japan (Brazil 1991). The first documented occurrence in North America was of one found 6 September 1970 on a U.S. Coast Guard icebreaker operating in the Chukchi Sea 150 miles off Icy Cape, Alaska (Watson et al. 1974). The Little Bunting is now casual during fall in western Alaska, with 13 reports of 26 individuals (ABA 2008). With the advent in the late 1990s of regular fall coverage of western Alaska, the Little Bunting has been found from 25 August to 3 October in most years at Gambell, St. Lawrence Island (P. Lehman pers. comm.), with a high of 10 individuals in 2007 (Tobish 2007). In contrast, there is only one spring record for Alaska and North America, of one bird photographed at Gambell 2–4 June 2008 (P. Lehman in litt.). The only previous North American records south of Alaska are of single Little Buntings photographed at Point Loma, San Diego County, California, 21–24 October 1991 (McCaskie 1993) and at Southeast Farallon Island, San Francisco County, California, 27–28 September 2002 (Hamilton et al. 2007).

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NOTES

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Little Bunting

Sketch by George C. West