

**Status and Occurrence of McCown's Longspur (*Rhynchophanes mccownii*) in British Columbia.
By Rick Toochin and Don Cecile.**

Introduction and Distribution

The McCown's Longspur (*Rhynchophanes mccownii*) is a small passerine that breeds in Canada on Prairie Grasslands from southeastern Alberta to southwestern Saskatchewan the overall population has seriously declined since 1900 due to intensive agricultural practices that have destroyed the species' preferred breeding habitat of arid, sparsely vegetated native grassland with patches of bare ground as provided by shortgrass prairie or heavily grazed mixed-grass prairie (COSEWIC 2006). As a result, the Canadian population numbers approximately only 375,000 breeding birds (COSEWIC 2006). Long-term trend analyses based on Breeding Bird Survey data indicates an overall decline of 98% in McCown's Longspur numbers in Canada since 1968 (COSEWIC 2006). This decline appears to have slowed over the last decade; however, the shrinking population has given this species the status of Special Concern in Canada (COSEWIC 2006). In the United States the McCown's Longspur is found breeding in Montana, southwestern North Dakota and extreme northwestern South Dakota, Wyoming, western Nebraska and northern Colorado (With 2010, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The breeding range was formerly more extensive prior to intensive agricultural practices and range extended to northeastern North Dakota, southwestern Minnesota and south to Oklahoma Panhandle (Rising 1996). This species is a short distance migrant and winters in Oklahoma, Texas, and more localized into southern New Mexico and southeastern Arizona (With 2010, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The McCown's Longspur also winters in northern Mexico on the Plateau from the northern Sonora, Chihuahua and western Coahuila, south to northern Durango (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Howell and Webb 2010). As a vagrant this species has wandered well east and north of its range throughout North America (With 2010, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). In California, the McCown's Longspur is regular enough that it is not a review species of the California Bird Records Committee with most records involving single birds, occurring in sparsely vegetated habitats across the state, especially in the southern half, where most birds are found amongst flocks of Horned Larks (*Eremophila alpestris*)(Hamilton *et al.* 2007). In Oregon, the McCown's Longspur is an accidental species with 6 accepted records by the Oregon Bird Records Committee (OFO 2012). There are no accepted records for Washington State (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2013). In British Columbia, the McCown's Longspur is an accidental species with only a handful of records (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). There are no records for Alaska (Gibson *et al.* 2013).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the McCown's Longspur is covered in all standard field guides. The McCown's Longspur measures 15 cm (6 inches) in length and weighs on average 25 grams with a wing length of 80-94 mm (3.1 – 3.7 inches), with males having longer wings (Beadle and

Rising 2002). In all plumages this species shows a very flat head and a large triangular bill (Beadle and Rising 2002, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Identification of immature and winter longspurs can be challenging and observers are encouraged to read Dunn and Beadle (1998) or Beadle and Rising (2002) for further information. The following description has mostly been taken from Beadle and Rising (2002) unless otherwise stated.

The adult male McCown's Longspur in breeding plumage holds its plumage from May to August. The forehead and anterior part of the crown is black, but with wear can appear buff-tipped. The supercilium, supraocular spot, and lores are white with the ear coverts white under and behind the eye. The large triangular bill is black and the eyes are brown or black. There is gray towards the neck with a thick black malar stripe. The throat is white. The nape is gray with brownish streaks and the mantle, scapulars and tertials are brown with pale edges. The upper tail-coverts are grayish, with darker centers and the uppertail-coverts are long in shape, extending half way down the tail. The tail pattern of the McCown's Longspur is the most obvious and different of the longspurs (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). The black tail band across the tip of the tail and the black that is found only on the innermost tail feathers, give the tail a perfect inverted T pattern (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). The rest of the tail has extensive white feathers (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000). On the wings, the coverts are chestnut with the greater-coverts and secondaries broadly, but not distinctly edged with white. In flight the wings are fat and are rounded (Sibley 2000). The upper wing is mostly gray from the secondaries to the primary tips (Sibley 2000). The greater coverts show a distinct chestnut bar. The underwing is pale white (Sibley 2000). The chin and throat are white with a white breast with a crescent-shaped broad black band. The belly and flanks are grayish-white and the undertail-coverts are white. The legs and feet are grayish-brown.

The adult female McCown's Longspur in breeding plumage holds its plumage from May to August. The crown is grayish-brown, with indistinct brown streaks and a whitish-buffy supercilium. The ear-coverts are whitish-buff becoming brown towards the neck. The malar and eye line stripes are grayish-brown. The bill is large and triangular in shape and is pinkish to light brown. The eye is black. The back is brown with dark brown centers to the mantle feathers which give the back a streaked appearance. The uppertail-coverts are brown and the tail pattern is the same as the adult males. The throat is buff to grayish coloured and there is a grayish-white breast band with a pale belly. The wings are brown with varying amounts of cinnamon on the lesser and medium-coverts which vary with age. The inner webs of the wing feathers are whitish. The legs and feet are brownish.

The adult male and female hold their winter plumage from September to April. The adult males in winter plumage are similar to birds in breeding plumage, but black areas on the head are

concealed by brown tips to the feathers and also have buffy tips to the breast feathers. The adult females in winter plumage are also similar to birds in breeding plumage, but have buffy edged feathers and the back streaks are not as distinct.

The McCown's Longspur holds its juvenile plumage from May-August and resembles females in winter plumage. These birds are more distinctly streaked on the breast and flanks.

Birds change into first-winter plumage after August and resemble adult birds, but are less brightly coloured and show more extensive buff all over. These birds also have less distinct back streaks.

The call notes of the McCown's Longspur include a soft "*poik*" and a short soft rattle (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Sibley 2000).

Occurrence and Documentation

The McCown's Longspur is an accidental species in British Columbia with only 6 records. The first record for British Columbia was an adult male collected by Allan Brooks on June 1, 1887 on his family property in Chilliwack (Brooks 1917). Incredibly three years later at the exact same spot in Chilliwack, Allan Brooks collected two adult females on June 20, 1890 (Brooks 1917). Brooks felt these birds were migrants as they were not later found in the interior of British Columbia (Brooks 1917). It will never be known if these birds were trying to breed in the area or if they were in fact heading to an unknown area to breed in the interior of the Province. The next record was a female collected by Dr. Austin L. Rand at the Tobacco Plains across the Kootenay River near Newgate on May 29, 1930 (Rand 1943). The fourth record for the Province was an adult male found by Bill Nicholson and Dave Lewis on Mitton Lake Rd., West of Parson on May 24, 2002 (Cecile 2002c, Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). This record was accompanied by detailed notes and field descriptions by the observers that left no doubt as to this bird's identity. The fifth record was an immature found by Mike Boyd in Stanley Park, Vancouver from October 10-14, 2009. This bird was well documented and seen by many lucky observers. (Boyd 2011, Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The sixth Provincial record was an adult male found by Phil Ranson and photographed by Sandy Proulx west of William's Lake, Becher's Prairie on June 29, 2014 (P. Ranson Pers. Comm.). This bird was in perfect breeding habitat that in the past had confirmed breeding Sprague's Pipits (McConnell *et al.* 1993). This location looks very similar to breeding habitat in Alberta and the entire area should be checked in the future by observers to see if more "Prairie Grassland" species can be found. There is also a record listed in Cannings *et al.* (1987) as hypothetical of an immature bird seen by J. A. Munro at Okanagan Landing on August 18, 1926. The bird was not collected and prior to the early 1970's

exceptional records without specimens or at least multiple observers was not accepted as confirmed. As a result there is nothing more that can be done with this intriguing record. The McCown's Longspur is a very rare bird away from its core range. The low population, restricted breeding range, and short migration of this species, makes finding vagrant strays that much harder. From the few Provincial records that have been found it is clear that this species follows the same vagrancy window seen in other grassland species, with late May and June as best period to be on the look-out for this species. As with other grassland species like Lark Bunting, the cluster of spring records likely refers to overshoots on their spring migration. There is only one fall record from the month of October which is not enough to gauge the peak migration period in the fall. The McCown's Longspur is definitely a very unusual find in British Columbia, but likely will be found again in the future. As with all unusual species, observers should try to get good photographs and get other observers out to confirm such a rare find.



Figure 1: Record #5: McCown's Longspur immature at Stanley Park, Vancouver on October 11, 2009. Photo © Rick Toochin.



Figure 2: Record #5: McCown's Longspur immature at Stanley Park, Vancouver on October 11, 2009. Photo © Rick Toochin.



Figure 3: Record #6: McCown's Longspur west of William's Lake, at Becher's Prairie on June 29, 2014. Photo © Sandy Proulx.

Table 1: Records of McCown's Longspur for British Columbia:

- 1.(1) adult male June 1, 1887: Allan Brooks (specimen: MVZ 106635) Chilliwack (Brooks 1917)
- 2.(2) females June 20, 1890: Allan Brooks (MCZ 106636 & 244679) Chilliwack (Brooks 1917)
- 3.(1) female May 29, 1930: Dr. Austin L. Rand (NMC 24633) Tobacco Plains across the Kootenay River near Newgate (Rand 1943)
- 4.(1) adult male May 24, 2002: Bill Nicholson and Dave Lewis: Mitton Lake Rd., West of Parson (Cecile 2002c, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 5.(1) immature female October 10-14, 2009: Mike Boyd, mobs (photo) Stanley Park, Vancouver (Boyd 2011, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 6.(1) adult male June 29, 2014: Phil Ranson, Sandy Proulx (photo) west of William's Lake, Becher's Prairie (P. Ranson Pers. Comm.)

Hypothetical Records:

- 1.(1) immature August 18, 1926: J. A. Munro: Okanagan Landing (Cannings *et al.* 1987)

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Sandy Proulx for allowing us to use her photo of an adult male McCown's Longspur from Becher's Prairie. Also wish to thank Phil Ranson for providing us more information on that record. All photos are used with permission of the photographer and are fully protected by copyright law. These images are not to be retransmitted or used for any purpose without the expressed written consent of the photographer.

References

- Beadle, D. and J. Rising. 2002. Sparrows of the United States and Canada: The Photographic Guide. Princeton University Press, New Jersey. 328pp.
- Boyd, M. 2011. First record of McCown's Longspur for the Vancouver area, British Columbia. *British Columbia Birds* 21:9-10.
- Brooks, A. 1917. Birds of the Chilliwack district, BC. *Auk* 34:28-50.
- Cannings, R. A., R. J. Cannings, and S. G. Cannings. 1987. Birds of the Okanagan Valley, British Columbia. Royal British Columbia Museum, Victoria. 420pp.
- Cecile, D. 2002c. Summer season – British Columbia – Yukon. *North American Birds* 56: 474-475.
- COSEWIC. 2006. COSEWIC assessment and status report on the McCown's Longspur *Calcarius mccownii* in Canada. Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada. Ottawa. vi + 23 pp. [Online Resource] Retrieved from: www.sararegistry.gc.ca/status/status_e.cfm [Accessed: August 10, 2015].
- Dunn, J. and D. Beadle. 1998. Longspurs: Identification and distribution in basic plumage. *Birders Journal* 7: 68-93.
- Gibson, D.D, L. H. DeCicco, R. E. Gill Jr., S. C. Heinl, A. J. Lang, T. G. Tobish Jr., and J. J. Withrow. 2013. Checklist of Alaska Birds. 19th Edition: 2013. [Online Resource] Retrieved from <http://www.universityofalaskamuseumbirds.org/products/checklist.pdf> [Accessed: May 2, 2015].
- Hamilton, R. A., M. A. Patten, and R. A. Erickson. 2007. Rare Birds of California: A work of the California rare bird record committee. Western Field Ornithologists, Camarillo, California. 605pp.

- Howell, S. N. G. and S. Webb. 2010 (eds). A guide to the birds of Mexico and northern Central America. Oxford University Press Inc., New York. 851pp.
- McConnell, S. D., R. van den Driessche, T. D. Hooper, G. L. Roberts and A. Roberts. 1993. First occurrence and breeding of Sprague's Pipit, *Anthus spragueii* for British Columbia. Canadian Field-Naturalist 107: 222-223.
- OFO. 2012. Oregon Field Ornithologists - Records Committee. [Online resource] <http://www.oregonbirds.org/index.html>. [Accessed: May 14, 2015].
- Rand, A. L. 1943. On some British Columbia birds. Canadian Field-Naturalist 57: 60-63.
- Rising, J. D. 1996. A guide to the identification and natural history of the sparrows of the United States and Canada. Academic Press, San Diego, CA.
- Sibley, D. A. 2000. The Sibley field guide to birds. Alfred A. Knopf, New York. 545pp.
- Toochin, R., J. Fenneman and P. Levesque. 2014b. British Columbia Rare Bird List: Casual and Accidental Records: January 1, 2014: 3rd Edition. [Online resource] Retrieved from <http://ibis.geog.ubc.ca/biodiversity/efauna/documents/BCRareBirdListVersionXZABC.pdf> [Accessed: August 2, 2015].
- Wahl, T. R, B. Tweit, and S. Mlodinow. 2005. Birds of Washington: Status and Distribution. Oregon State University Press, Corvallis, Oregon. 436pp.
- WBRC. 2013. Washington Bird Records Committee – Summary of Decisions. Washington Ornithological Society, Seattle, WA. [Online resource] <http://www.wos.org/wbrsummaries.html>. [Accessed: August 10, 2015].
- With, Kimberly A. 2010. McCown's Longspur (*Rhynchophanes mccownii*), The Birds of North America Online (A. Poole, Ed.). Ithaca: Cornell Lab of Ornithology [Online Resource] Retrieved from the Birds of North America Online: <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/096>