

## Status and Occurrence of Painted Bunting (*Passerina ciris*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin and Don Cecile.

### Introduction and Distribution

The Painted Bunting (*Passerina ciris*) is a spectacular passerine found breeding in the southern United States in two distinct populations that are classified as two distinct subspecies. The nominate population of Painted Bunting is of the subspecies (*P. c. ciris*) and is found along the Atlantic Coast from North Carolina south to central Florida (Beadle and Rising 2006). The other population of Painted Bunting is of the subspecies (*P. c. pallidior*) and is found from the southern Mississippi Valley west to Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico; and south into northern Mexico (Beadle and Rising 2006). Though these birds are widely separate in breeding range, they are considered different enough to be separated into two distinct subspecies (Lowther *et al.* 2015). It should be noted that there are a few authorities that do not recognize that there are two subspecies (Beadle and Rising 2006). The western Painted Bunting population overwinters in Mexico from central Sinaloa on the Pacific slope, central Veracruz on the Atlantic slope, and the Balsas River drainage in the interior, and south throughout southern Mexico (Howell and Webb 2010). They are also found commonly in Guatemala on the Pacific slope and lowlands, and fairly commonly in the interior of the country to 1,850 m (Land 1970). The Painted Bunting is a passage migrant and occasional winter resident in Belize (Jones 2003). The Painted Bunting is found in Honduras below 1,400 m (Monroe 1968), El Salvador (Rand and Traylor 1954), and western Nicaragua (Howell and Webb 2010), although distribution in Nicaragua remains poorly known. In Costa Rica, the Painted Bunting is an uncommon and local overwintering resident on Pacific slope to 1,350 m and occurs chiefly in Tempisque Basin, around the Gulf of Nicoya and in the Térraba region (Stiles and Skutch 1989). In Panama, the Painted Bunting is a rare to uncommon overwintering resident on both slopes of western Panama, but chiefly on the coast of western Bocas del Toro Province with a few reports along the eastern Pacific slope to southern Coclé and the western Panama Provinces (Wetmore *et al.* 1984, Ridgely and Gwynne 1989). The eastern breeders overwinter in the Florida Keys and throughout much of the Florida peninsula (Robertson and Woolfenden 1992). They are found uncommonly in the Bahamas and are rare in Cuba (Raffaele *et al.* 1998). Small numbers of Painted Buntings also regularly overwinter on the Gulf Coast of the United States, throughout Louisiana, rarely in Alabama, and along the southern coast and the Rio Grande delta of Texas (Oberholser 1974).

Outside their normal breeding and wintering range, the Painted Bunting has been recorded as a vagrant species throughout North America (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). In some regions, records are treated as potentially escaped cage birds or of unknown origin (Beadle and Rising 2006).

There are, however, enough records to show that this species does wander out of range on a somewhat regular basis (Beadle and Rising 2006).

Along the west coast of North America, the Painted Bunting has been recorded with more frequency over the past few decades, but is classified as an accidental vagrant everywhere except in California where this species is a rare, but increasing vagrant with 107 accepted records by the California Bird Records Committee (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2014). In Oregon, there are 4 accepted records by the Oregon Bird Records Committee (OFO 2012). In Washington, there are 2 accepted records by the Washington Bird Records Committee (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2014). In British Columbia, the Painted Bunting is an accidental vagrant with 7 records. There are no records for Alaska (Gibson *et al.* 2013). In Alberta, there is 1 accepted record by the Alberta Bird Records Committee (Hudon *et al.* 2008).

Outside of North America, in Europe, the Painted Bunting is classified as a vagrant. There are at least 7 records between 1971 and 1981 in Britain (Evans 1994), but no record could be ruled out as a possible escaped cage bird. This species is regulated to Category D on the British list which is defined as suspected of captive origin, but some records could be of true vagrant birds (Dymond *et al.* 1989). This includes tideline corpses or those known to have had ship-assisted transport (Dymond *et al.* 1989).

### **Identification and Similar Species**

The identification of the Painted Bunting is covered in all standard North American field guides. Both sexes are very distinct and unique in their overall colouration (Beadle and Rising 2006). The Painted Bunting is 14 cm (5.5 inches) in length and weighs 15.5 grams (0.54 ounces) (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The adult males and females differ strongly in plumage (Beadle and Rising 2006).

The adult male in breeding plumage has a dark blue crown, sides of the face and nape. The eyes are dark with a dark red eye-ring. The bill is small, triangular and dark. The throat, chest, and breast down to the under tail coverts are dark red. The back is bright lime-green. The wings are blackish with green edges to the wing coverts, secondaries and tertials. The rump is the same dark red colour as the breast. The tail, legs and feet are dark.

The adult female is uniformly lime-green with the head, scapulars and tail darker than the underparts. The eyes are dark with a light eye-ring. The bill is triangular in shape and pale. The legs are dark. Adult males and adult females essentially retain their plumage patterns year round.

Plumages during the first cycle are similar to adult females. The first year males' exhibit delayed plumage maturation and wear female-like plumage until the Second Basic Plumage is acquired during the fall of their second calendar year (Lowther *et al.* 2015). Prior to this, and after the First Prealternate Molt, about 40% of these second-year males can be distinguished from females in hand by occasional blue feathers on the head (Lowther *et al.* 2015). These males are reproductively mature and often attempt to attract mates and breed (Lowther *et al.* 2015). Thus, in the field, these males are further distinguished from females during breeding season because males sing and females do not (Lowther *et al.* 2015).

The Painted Bunting's song is a sweet, continuous warble, similar in quality to an Indigo Bunting (*Passerina cyanea*), but with unbroken singsong rhythm (Sibley 2000). The call is a "pwich" that averages lower and softer than an Indigo Bunting with a rising inflection (Sibley 2000). In flight, the call is a buzzing, slightly rising "vvit" which is not as strong or as musical as in other bunting species (Sibley 2000).

The Painted Bunting is such an obvious species at any age that there should be no mistaking it for any other by observers in British Columbia.

### **Occurrence and Documentation**

The Painted Bunting is an accidental species in British Columbia with 7 records (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The first record for the Province came to light only recently thanks to Dennis Knopp, who provided information on an adult male he had seen in Chilliwack on October 15, 1983 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The next record was also of an adult male that was photographed in Richmond from August 1-4, 1995 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). Unfortunately the sighting didn't become known until after the bird had left, but this constituted the first photographed record for British Columbia. The third record was of an immature male found by Jeremy Gatten at his parent's feeder in Brentwood Bay, near Victoria, and was reported and photographed from March 21-April 6, 2006 (Cecile 2006c, Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The fourth record for British Columbia was of an adult male found and photographed by Gail Spitler and Marlene Johnston at Johnson's Landing August 14-16, 2007 (Spitler 2007, Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The fifth Provincial record was of an adult male found by Anne Niewerth and seen and photographed by many observers from November 17-23, 2011, in West Vancouver (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The sixth record for British Columbia was of an adult male found by Julie Dorfmann and seen by others from July 23-24, 2012, in Ucluelet (Charlesworth 2012, Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The seventh and most recent provincial record was of an adult female found and photographed by Penny Marshall November 25-December 3, 2013, in Bowser (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). So far the records for British Columbia have occurred throughout the year and there are too few records

to establish a definite pattern of vagrancy. Out of the seven Provincial records 3 have come from Vancouver Island, 2 from the Vancouver area, 1 from the Fraser Valley and 1 from the interior (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). These records show that this species can show up anywhere in the Province. The Painted Bunting will come to bird feeders and all that have been found in British Columbia were found at backyard feeders. This species does turn up all over North America well out of its normal range as a vagrant and it is highly likely there will be future records of this stunning species in the Province. As with any rare bird sighting, observers are encouraged to take photographs and get others out to confirm any such sighting.



Figure 1 & 2: Record #3: Painted Bunting immature male at 906 Damelart Way, Brentwood Bay on March 23, 2006. Photos © Mike Yip.



Figures 3 & 4: Record #4: Painted Bunting adult male at Johnson's Landing on August 14, 2007. Photos © Gail Spitler.

### **Table 1: Records of Painted Bunting for British Columbia:**

- 1.(1) adult male October 15, 1983: Denis Knopp: “at Harold’s” Wells Road, Sardis  
(Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 2.(1) adult male August 1-4, 1995: *fide John Ireland* (photo) Richmond  
(Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 3.(1) immature male March 21-April 6, 2006: Jeremy Gatten, mobs (photo) 906 Damelart Way,  
Brentwood Bay, Victoria (Cecile 2006c, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 4.(1) adult male August 14-16, 2007: Gail Spitler, Marlene Johnston (photo) Johnson’s Landing  
(Spitler 2007, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 5.(1) adult male November 17-23, 2011: Anne Niewerth, mobs (photo) West Vancouver  
(Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 6.(1) adult July 23-24, 2012: Julie Dorfmann, mobs: Ucluelet (Charlesworth 2012)
- 7.(1) adult female November 25-December 3, 2013: Penny Marshall (photo) Bowser  
(Toochin *et al.* 2014)

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