Status and Occurrence of Siberian Accentor (*Prunella montanella*) in British Columbia.
By Rick Toochin and Don Cecile.

Introduction and Distribution

The Siberian Accentor (*Prunella montanella*) is a beautiful passerine species that is found in the Old World (Jonsson 1992). It breeds in willows and birch forest bordering bogs, tundra and rivers, as well as in impoverished conifer forests from the Ural Mountains in Russia, east to the Chukotka Peninsula in Siberia with isolated populations found across central and southern Siberia. The Siberian Accentor winters in Northern China and Korea; it is a rare winter visitor to Japan. In North America, the Siberian Accentor is a casual fall vagrant in Alaska with over 13 records from Gambell, a few records from Nunivak Island and St. Paul Island, and accidental at Barrow, Ester near Fairbanks, Juneau, Anchorage, and along the outer western Aleutian Islands. Along the entire west coast of North America south of Alaska, there are only a few records. In British Columbia, the Siberian Accentor is an accidental vagrant with just 7 provincial records (Campbell 2012, Toochin *et al*. 2014). There are two accepted records for Washington State by the Washington Bird Records Committee: the first state record found and photographed on October 30, 1983 at Indian Island, Jefferson County; and the second state record found on January 10, 1991 on Orcas Island, San Juan County (Wahl *et al*. 2005, WBRC 2014). There are no records for Oregon (OFO 2012) or California (Hamilton *et al*. 2007). In the rest of North America, there are only three records: one from Hailey area, Blaine County, Idaho December 27, 1996 – February 28, 1997 (Svigen 1997, Morgan 1998); one from Calgary, Alberta from March 20-April 5, 2002 (Slater and Hudon 2004); and one from Park County, Montana from November 22, 2003 - March 18, 2004 (Trochell 2004). The Siberian Accentor is an accidental vagrant throughout Europe, primarily occurring during the months of October and November (Lewington *et al*. 1992).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Siberian Accentor is covered in some North American field guides, but not all, likely because of its rare status. This species represents a unique family of birds that is not represented by any other species in North America (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The Siberian Accentor is a small species measuring 14.5 cm on average (Lewington *et al*. 1992) and weighing 17.5 grams (Brazil 2009). This makes this species a little smaller than a Dark-eyed Junco (*Junco hyemalis*) which measures 16 cm (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The shy and extreme skulking nature of this Siberian Accentor makes it one of the most sought after vagrant species in all of North America (Howell *et al*. 2014).

Adult birds have a very distinct head pattern (Jonsson 1992). The head shows a dark crown with a paler centre; a prominent, bright buff supercilium; dark ear coverts with a pale spot at the

rear; and grey sides to the neck (Lewington *et al*. 1992). The throat is a bright buff, which extends down onto the breast and often onto the flanks (Lewington *et al*. 1992). The mantle, scapulars and flanks are variably streaked with rufous, often very prominently on the mantle and scapulars (Lewington *et al*. 1992). Sometimes the streaking is blackish and the rufous tones are almost lacking. Adults in worn plumage have large dark markings on the breast (Lewington *et al*. 1992).

First winter birds are similar, but are much duller overall than adult birds (Lewington *et al*. 1992).

The song of the Siberian Accentor is a buzzy thin series of "*see-see-see-see*" notes (Lewington *et al*. 1992).

In the context of North America and British Columbia, there are no similar looking species that would cause observers confusion.

Occurrence and Documentation

The Siberian Accentor is an accidental vagrant to British Columbia with seven provincial records. It was long thought that the species was first added to British Columbia's list of birds in 1993 (Jaramillo 1994); however, recent evidence has shown that the first record was of a bird found in a yard in Victoria by the late Vic Ford on the incredible date of July 4, 1991 (Campbell 2012). Sadly, the bird hit a window and was found years later in a freezer bag of dead birds (Campbell 2012). The second record was by Alvaro Jaramillo while walking his dog at Everett Crowley Park in east Vancouver on December 15, 1993 (Jaramillo 1994). Incredibly, the third provincial record was found a couple of months later by Frank Kime who found a bird coming to his suet feeder in Tappen, outside Salmon Arm from March 5 – April 10, 1994 (Kime 1994, Kime and Kime 1995). In his account of the species, Mr. Kime states that "Rick and Mike Toochin saw two birds" (Kime 1994, Kime and Kime 1995). Unfortunately this is some kind of misunderstanding in communications (R. Toochin Pers. Comm.). There was only one bird seen by us when we were there and any claims to the contrary are completely incorrect (R. Toochin Pers. Obs.). It has been stated in further accounts that there was the thought that there were two birds based on plumage colouration, but I think this is highly subjective and since two birds were never seen together; therefore, this record should be corrected to state that there was only one certain bird ever seen at a time (R. Toochin Pers. Comm.). The fourth provincial record involved a bird that had hit a window (Campbell 2012). The dead bird was found by the home-owner, Patricia Senft, in her yard in Maple Ridge on March 8, 1998 (Campbell 2012). This bird was identified later from the skin, the account of which was published in the local *Abbotsford-Mission Times* newspaper, but sadly had gone completely unnoticed by local observers (Campbell 2012). The fifth record for British Columbia, was found by David Shipway while on a

west coast adventure trip at Nuchatlitz Park, Vancouver Island on September 20, 1999 (Campbell 2012). The sixth provincial record was found in the Queen Charlotte Islands by local bird photographer and naturalist John Burrill of Tlell who had a bird coming to his suet feeder from September 16-20, 2015 (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.). Mr. Burrill knew he had something very different, and tried on several occasions to photograph the bird when it came to his suet feeder which is located a few feet away from his front window (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.). Unfortunately the bird was so skittish that every time he tried to get a picture, the bird would take flight and bury itself into the thick brush that surrounds his property (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.). By the time he figured out he had a Siberian Accentor and let local observers Peter Hamel and Margo Hearne know about the sighting, the bird did not return (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.). The most recent record of a Siberian Accentor in British Columbia was found by George Clulow while conducting the White Rock Christmas bird count in south Surrey along 160th Ave., where the bird, though shy, allowed many from all over North America to view and photograph it from January 3-20, 2016 (M. Hafting Pers. Comm.).

The timing of British Columbia's records is all over the map. There are too few records to form a pattern, but to date the records do not fall into the established migration vagrancy period found in both Europe and Alaska which is late September to November (Lewington *et al*. 1992). There are only 2 records that fall into the more established fall vagrancy period in the province. The majority of records appear to show that birds have wandered into British Columbia in the fall to spend the winter as there are 4 records that have occurred from December to early March. By far the most out of place is the summer record which doesn't fit into any known pattern of vagrancy and, for now, remains an amazing outlying record.

The skulking nature of the Siberian Accentor makes finding this species particularly difficult. Most birds have been on their own or in the company of Dark-eyed Juncos. This species is possible anywhere in the province, and should be watched for in known passerine vagrant trap locations and by backyard feeder watchers. It is highly likely another Siberian Accentor will occur in British Columbia in the future, but it might take a couple of decades for observers to wait to hear about a bird they can chase.

Figure 1: Record #7: Siberian Accentor along 160th Ave., Surrey on January 13, 2016. Photo © Melissa Hafting.

Figure 2: Record #7: Siberian Accentor along 160th Ave., Surrey on January 13, 2016. Photo © Ilya Povalyaev.

Table 1: Records of Siberian Accentor for British Columbia:

1.(1) after hatch year female July 4-5, 1991: Vic Ford (BC Photo 4009: Specimen B016867) Henderson Road, Victoria (Campbell 2012)

2.(1) adult December 15, 1993: Alvaro Jaramillo: Everett Crowley Park, Vancouver (Jaramillo 1994)

3.(2) adults March 5 – April 10, 1994: Frank Kime, mobs (photo) Tappen (Jaramillo 1994, Kime 1994, Kime and Kime 1995)

4.(1) adult March 8, 1998: Patricia Senft (Photo: specimen) Maple Ridge (Campbell 2012)

5.(1) adult September 20, 1999: David Shipway: Nuchatlitz Park, Vancouver Island (Campbell 2012)

6.(1) adult September 16-20, 2015: John Burrill: Tlell (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.)

7.(1) adult January 3-15, 2016: George Clulow, mobs (photo) 160th Ave, south of Highway 10 (M. Hafting Pers. Comm.)

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