

Snow Bunting

Plectrophenax nivalis

The family *Emberizidae* encompasses a variety of widespread species, including Emberizid buntings, longspurs, juncos, sparrows and towhees. Derived from the German word "*bunt*" (meaning mottled), buntings are named for their multicolored plumage. The "Snow" portion of the name refers to their early arrival to the Arctic, when snow may still be on the ground. Indeed, the specific name, "*nivalis*," is derived from the Latin word for snow! Snow Buntings are ground birds of open fields and tundra. Various seasonal and immature plumages may complicate their identification. Use distinctive head and wing patterns and habitat to distinguish these buntings.

Inhabitants of barren, open ground, tundra, scree and talus slopes, the Snow Bunting commonly occurs in flocks. At 17cm, these birds display diagnostic long, black and white wings, with flashing white wing-patches. The breeding male flaunts a distinctive solid-white hood, black back and black and white tail. Breeding females are white underneath and streaked in brown across the crown and back, with a characteristic triangle-shaped, brown cheek-patch. Juvenile birds are similar to females but also display streaking across the throat and breast. Also, watch for their "fluffy" plumage and shuffling gait to identify this species in the field.

The song of the Snow Bunting is a low, husky warble. In a repeated pattern they sing, "hudidi, feet, feet, feew, hudidi, feet, feet, feew, hudidi." Although their song is similar to that of the Lapland Longspur, the repetition of their notes is distinctive. Their call is a low, husky rattle, "didididi" or a short, nasal and buzzy "zrrt," when in the flock. On the fly, the call is a nasal but clearly whistled "cheew."

Built by the female in only four days, the nests are placed on cliffs, in artificial cavities, beneath rocks or occasionally underneath moss in ground depressions. At times, old nests are reused. Loose and bulky, the nests are constructed of grasses, mosses, lichen, rootlets, and leaves. Lined with fine grasses, rootlets, plant down, feathers and fur, the nest softly cushions the 3-9, 23mm eggs of the enormous clutch. The dedicated female will continue to add nest lining for 2-3 days after laying the first egg. Eggs are greenish, pale-bluish or creamy white and are marked, or occasionally wreathed or capped, in browns and black. Although the female alone incubates the clutch for 10-16 days, the male feeds her during egg-laying and incubation. Young birds fledge in 10-17 days post-hatching and are cared for by both parents. Remarkably, hatching occurs asynchronously so that fledging is staggered. At independence, young birds will aggregate together in large flocks.

Snow Buntings eat insects, spiders, seeds of grasses and forbs, buds and also leaves in spring. During migration, they are known to eat mollusks and

crustaceans along the coast. As ground gleaners, they forage by picking prey and seeds from the ground and vegetation as they walk along the tundra.

Snow Buntings winter in open, grassy fields and along the coasts. In winter, they stretch from coast to coast across North America, from the coast of southeastern Alaska, south across southern Canada to the northern United States. These birds are some of the earliest spring arrivals, reaching interior Alaska in early- to mid-March. During the breeding season, they range throughout most of mainland Alaska, northern Canada, coastal Greenland and their associated islands.