

BIRD OF THE MONTH

SNOWFLAKE BIRDS

This month's feature bird visits the Flathead in winter, seeking relief from the harsh weather of its breeding grounds in the tundra and has the distinction of being the only winter songbird in our area that is mostly white.



A circumpolar bird, the sparrow-sized Snow Bunting breeds farther north than almost any other land bird, and its appearance in our part of the world heralds the approach of winter. Look for small flocks of these white beauties in open fields and along shorelines, where they feed mainly on seeds by walking or running along the ground. According to Radd Icenoggle in his book Birds in Place, the winter flocks roost together on the ground in tight, huddled masses, sometimes burrowing into the snow for insulation; they are often seen "bathing" in the snow.

While visiting the Flathead, Snow Buntings are most easily identified in flight by their large white wing patches. The wintering male is white overall with a buff, streaked back, a white rump patch, black wing tips and a yellowish-orange bill. The female is similar, except that she is more brownish and lacks the rump patch. The wintering flocks are alive with buzzy calls and whistled "tew" notes.

Cornell Labs' Online Bird Guide says that the male Snow Buntings return to their Arctic breeding grounds in early April when the temperatures can still dip to - 20° F and snow still covers most of the ground. Soon after their arrival, the males set up and defend territories that include good nesting sites. However, they will still flock together to forage and usually roost in loose groups of 30 to 80 birds. The females do not return until four to six weeks later.

In breeding plumage, male Snow Buntings are almost pure white except for their black back, central tail and primary wing feathers. After the arrival of the females, the Snow Buntings place their nest deep in cracks or other cavities in rocks. These secluded sites are chosen to avoid predators such as Arctic Foxes and Snowy Owls, and, although they are relatively safe from predators, the rocks are extremely cold. For this reason, the open cup-like nests are lined with a thick layer of fur, lichen and feathers to help keep the eggs and nestlings warm. Also, the female must remain on the nest for most of the incubation period and the male feeds her during this time. The 2-7 eggs are creamy white with various brown spots and scrawls. Incubation takes 10-16 days and newly hatched babies are helpless, with long, gray-brown down. Both parents share the responsibility of feeding the babies for the 10 to 17 days until they fledge.

Although breeding and non-breeding males look quite different, the Snow Bunting has only one molt per year and no true "alternate plumage." After the molt, which occurs in late summer, the male looks brownish with a brown and black striped back. Underneath the colored feather tips, the dark feathers are pure black and the body feathers are all white. The male wears off all the feather tips by actively rubbing them on the snow until he is immaculate white and jet black by the time the next breeding season arrives.

In 2005, the area Christmas Bird Counts recorded 2 Snow Buntings in Bigfork, 35 in Kalispell and 200 in Eureka, so keep your eyes peeled for these interesting visitors as you drive around the valley this winter. The farm lands in Lower Valley and West Valley are among my favorite places to search for these rather tiny birds. Although they're somewhat hard to spot while on the snow-covered ground, watching a sizable flock swirling over a field in winter can be a spectacular sight. Snow Buntings and the chance to see them are one of the reasons that the Flathead Valley is such a great place to live!

By Jeannie Marcure



Tom Ulrich
photo

* The Bird of the Month articles, which appear regu- *
* larly in your Pileated Post, have been accepted by Scott *
* Crandell, news editor of the Daily InterLake, and will appear *
* in the Outdoor section of the newspaper. Watch the Inter- *
* Lake for articles with a Flathead Audubon Society byline. *
* Thank you to Karen Nichols for making this happen! *
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