

OBSERVATIONS OF SIBERIAN ACCENTORS AT TAPPEN, BRITISH COLUMBIA

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Abstract — We describe in detail two Siberian Accentors that spent part of late winter/early spring 1994 in our garden, including notes on changes in plumage between early March and early April. We also note behaviour of the birds, including interactions with other species. This record constitutes the first confirmed occurrence, with photographs in Canada. It follows a single person sighting in Vancouver in December 1993.

Key words: Extralimital occurrence, *Prunella montanella*, Siberian Accentor.

We observed two Siberian Accentors (*Prunella montanella*) between 5 March and 10 April 1994 in the outer scrub of our front garden at Tappen in the Shuswap Lake area of the southern interior of British Columbia. After first being seen on 5 and 6 March, the accentors disappeared, but one or both were seen again daily from 29 March to 10 April (Kime 1994). Plumage differences suggested that there were two different birds, as outlined in Table 1. The breast band of the darker bird broadened and became more defined between early March and early April. Over this period, the flank markings of the lighter bird changed from grey to buffier and signs of faint buffy smudging began to appear across its initially clear breast.

The features that we observed are consistent with descriptions of Siberian Accentors summarized in Cramp (1988). We believe that the darker bird was a male, the lighter a female.

Accentors are a Palearctic (Eurasian) family of unobtrusive, rather solitary birds of dense undergrowth (Cramp 1988). No accentor species occurs regularly in the Americas, and those that winter in eastern Asia migrate northwest, making their landfalls here unlikely. Siberian Accentors breed in Siberia and winter in Korea and eastern China (Cramp 1988). Most North American occurrences have been on Alaskan islands and at Alaskan coastal locations (Armstrong 1990; Jaramillo 1994). There is also one interior Alaska record and one from near Port Townsend, Washington (Armstrong 1990; Jaramillo 1994).

The Tappen sightings represent the first confirmed occurrence in Canada (including photographs: Figure 1; Campbell *et al.* 1997: Figure 625) and the first spring record for North America. Other records, from coastal western Alaska (e.g., Nunivak Island, Point Barrow, St. Lawrence Island), were all during autumn (Roberson *vide* Campbell *et al.* 1997). A Siberian Accentor located in Vancouver, British Columbia on 15 December 1993 was unfortunately seen by only a single observer (Bowling *vide* Campbell *et al.* 1997).

In Tappen, the darker bird was seen on four occasions at our pool, first on 5 March, both drinking and bathing, after which

it preened in a pond-side Lilac (*Syringa* sp.) bush. The lighter bird was first seen on 6 March, then daily from 29 March until 10 April. It developed a regular routine and route around the outer garden scrub, feeding on suet under the garden feeder. These observations were consistent with their winter use of river and stream bank thickets, tangles and scrub, including human settlements, in Asia (Cramp 1988). Ground movement by the lighter accentor was skulking with rapid running, occasionally stretching as on tiptoes, similar to the actions of a Northern Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*), apparently in an alert posture. Flight was fast and direct. This accentor was passive until the arrival of a female Spotted Towhee (*Pipilo maculatus*), which became territorial and aggressive when she encountered the accentor. Further disturbance was created by daily influxes of female Red-winged Blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus*). After a period of overcast with low clouds throughout the stay of the accentors, the clouds cleared to sun on 10 April, the last day that the lighter bird was seen, and strong south winds followed on 11 April.

The fact that two birds arrived in interior British Columbia at about the same time suggests that they travelled together. Siberian Accentors are normally solitary or in small loose parties outside the breeding season. Two observed together in winter in eastern Russia were thought possibly a pair (Cramp 1988), while up to five vagrants have been reported together twice in Japan (Brazil 1991).

Since geographical variation in plumage in this species is slight, and the moult period is in late summer (Cramp 1988), two birds together in March/April having as much difference in plumage as the two Siberian Accentors at Tappen seem likely to have been male and female. Although their association suggests pair bonding, they had separate foraging areas, maintaining loose company by using the common source for drinking and bathing.

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TABLE 1

FEATURES OBSERVED ON ACCENTORS AT
TAPPEN, B.C., 1994

FEATURE	BIRD 1	BIRD 2
Optical instrument(s) used	10x40 binoculars	10x40 binoculars & 30x scope
Overall plumage	dark	light
Size	Song Sparrow (<i>Melospiza melodia</i>)	Song Sparrow (<i>Melospiza melodia</i>)
Form	Accentor (like Dunnock, <i>Prunella modularis</i>)	Accentor (like Dunnock, <i>Prunella modularis</i>)
Supercilium	tawny / buff	ochre with fine black border
Cap	blackish	brown, streaked with black
Ear coverts	blackish	blackish with two bars reaching to shoulder; ochre dot between
Shoulders	light grey patch	light grey patch
Throat / Breast	tawny / buff	ochre; darker at throat
Breast	black (smudge) band	clear; no trace of band
Flanks	two lines – fine black streaks	two lines – broad grey streaks
Nape / Mantle	tawny / red with black streaking	tawny / red with brown / black streaking
Rump / Tail	unmarked black / brown	unmarked black / brown
Wings	two fine wing bars	one fine wing bar; white mark at alula
Legs	form – strong; bright yellow	form – strong; bright yellow



Figure 1: Siberian Accentor, Tappen, British Columbia, March 1994 (photo by Bob Mumford)

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