



Snow bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) -- BTC Species of the Month, Jan. 2011



Did you know?

- A group of buntings is called a "drift"
- Snow Buntings have feathered ankles (rarely seen in passerines) as an adaptation to their snowy habitat.
- No other passerine can winter as far north as the Snow Bunting, apart from the Common Raven.

Habitat: Winter: open weedy and grassy fields or along shores of water bodies in southern Canada; Summer: Rocky tundra in the high Arctic.

Diet: Wildflower and grass seeds, insects, and spiders.

Status: Common (S5; Not threatened)

Weight: 31 - 46 g (both sexes)

Length: 15-17 cm (both sexes)

Along the Niagara Escarpment, the arrival of Snow Buntings signals the approach of winter. After migrating south from their Arctic breeding grounds where they spend their summers, these sparrow-sized birds are often seen in huge flocks, huddling together on the ground.

Identification:

Breeding-season Snow Buntings are a brilliant white and black, but develop a brown back and head over winter, with a faint brick-red band across top of the chest. Their beaks are orange-yellow with a black tip in the winter.

Males transform into their breeding (summer) plumage by actively rubbing their brownish feather tips in the snow, revealing the white and black breeding colours. The beaks of males turn black in breeding season. Females have a duller, dusky breeding plumage, and their beaks remain orange-yellow.

Range:



Bruce Trail
CONSERVANCY



Snow Buntings winter across southern Canada and northern United States from Oregon to Pennsylvania. They breed in Arctic regions from northern Alaska and Arctic islands south to northern Quebec. Also found in Eurasia.

Nesting:

Snow Buntings build nests deep in cracks or cavities in rocks where they are protected from predators. A thick nest lining of fur and feathers helps keep the eggs and nestlings warm. The female stays on the nest for most of the incubation period, having food brought to her by the male.

Song:

Snow Bunting song is a musical, high-pitched "chi-chi-churee."
Call is a whistled "tew."

Behavior:

Snow Buntings are a sociable bird outside of the breeding season and will form flocks in the hundreds, often grouping with other finch-like species.

Male Snow Buntings head to the high Arctic breeding grounds to establish territories in early April, when temperatures can still dip as low as -30° C F) and snow still covers most of the ground. Females arrive four to six weeks later.

Snow Buntings have evolved to survive in the harsh cold of the Arctic Circle by huddling together and can often be seen in large flocks in an open field or along the edge of a water body. They spend much of their time shuffling along the ground where their small legs can hardly be seen. This is an adaptive form of behaviour to reduce the surface area of their body to reduce heat loss.

You can help protect Snow Bunting habitat on the Niagara Escarpment.

Give a [Present for Preservation](#) to symbolically adopt a **Bobolink**, a creature that shares its **meadow habitat** with the Snow Bunting (using it at different times of the year).