

# McKay's Bunting makes extremely rare appearance on Kenai

by Todd Eskelin



*Photo of a Rare McKay's Bunting near the mouth of the Kenai River. Todd Eskelin/USFWS.*

While Peninsula residents have been focused on international visitors from throughout the Arctic region, other visitors have slipped in relatively unnoticed. Chunky white birds that also reside in the Arctic region have made an extremely rare appearance on the Kenai River Flats; three McKay's Buntings have been spotted at the end of Cannery Road, feeding on seeds among the dunes near the mouth of the Kenai River.

It all started on Monday the 27<sup>th</sup> of February. I checked the messages on the Central Peninsula Bird Hotline and there was a report over the weekend of two male McKay's Buntings mixed with a flock of 200-300 Snow Buntings. Toby Burke, a biological technician at the Refuge had been down at the beach with his kids and spotted the birds as they flew over and landed on the Kenai Flats. What a phenomenal sighting! The total world population of McKay's Bunting is estimated between 2500 and 6000 birds. I immediately went down to see if they were still around. Armed with scopes, cameras, and three different bird books, I launched my expedition.

I have chased a lot of rare bird sightings in the past with very limited success, so my expectations were low that they would even still be on the Kenai. After

a five minute search I spotted a huge group of Snow Buntings, and Toby was right on. I counted 350 in the group I was watching. I moved closer and closer and right in front of me, no more than 35 yards away were two beautiful male McKay's Buntings. With not a stitch of color on their backs, there was no doubt in my mind they were McKay's.

The last tell tale sign I needed to confirm that these birds were McKay's was to see the wing tips. Snow Buntings have relatively large black wingtips while McKay's have very small amounts of black in the wingtips. I followed the flock for 20 minutes and then a passing eagle spooked them and they all flew. It was as if three light bulbs were suddenly turned on in the night. There flying across the flats in front of me were three bright white male McKay's Buntings mixed with a large group of Snow Buntings. The birds were so lightly colored that it was like I was watching a FOX NHL hockey game when they digitally illuminate the puck.

These birds only breed on St. Matthew's and Hall Islands in the Bering Sea. Their winter range is up and down the western Alaska coast, but with only a few thousand birds in the population, they are never reported in any great numbers. If you get a chance to look for these birds, this may be one of the rarest endemic breeding birds you will ever see in Alaska. This species is not as rare as an Ivory-billed Woodpecker, no doubt, but it is certainly rarer than the Northern Spotted Owl. Outside of western Alaska and the Aleutians, there are probably less than 20 sightings of this species anywhere in the world.

Pack your binos, a camera, field guides, and a thermos of hot beverage and spend some time searching for a McKay's Bunting. You will feel quite rewarded if you are able to find one. Don't forget to report your findings to the Central Peninsula Bird Hotline at 262-2300.

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