

A Black-headed Bunting *Emberiza melanocephala* Record from South-East Asia

On 27 November 1994 at Vang Vieng (18° 35'N; 102° 28'E), 200 km north of Vientiane, Vientiane Province, Lao P.D.R. I observed an adult winter-plumaged male Black-headed Bunting *Emberiza melanocephala* in harvested rice fields 1 km to the west of the town, at 240 m altitude. It was watched for about three minutes at 0830 h as it sat in the rice stubble singing, at a distance of approximately 15 m. At first sight it was clearly an adult male Black-headed Bunting, being rich rufous-chestnut above on the mantle and nape. The underparts were a vivid rich yellow across the breast, belly, flanks and vent. It possessed a jet-black crown and face down to the lower edges of the ear coverts. The black area on the head was clearly defined and did not extend to the nape. Many of the black head feathers were fringed with very pale whitish tips showing that it was in winter plumage. The wings appeared dark grey with whitish fringes to all the coverts and tertials. When the bird took off, its tail appeared generally dark. On the ground and especially in flight it looked like a typical large bunting and fluttered its wings in a drooping style recalling that of Skylark *Alauda arvensis*. It departed several hundred meters to another area of paddies and I did not follow it up.

The bird was initially found by its song, which was first assumed to be that of Chestnut-eared Bunting *E. fucata*, at least 20 of which were present in the area at the time. The song was vaguely familiar and on seeing the bird it recalled memories from Turkey where I had seen it last. Many of the Chestnut-eared Buntings were also seen singing, usually from the tops of tall stems of unharvested rice. Furthermore many of the latter species actually appeared to be in pairs, a female being nearby whilst a male was singing. Pairs were also observed feeding together.

There were many other species of Palaearctic migrants also wintering in the paddies at Vang Vieng, namely Richard's Pipit *Anthus novaeseelandiae*, Olive-backed Pipit *hodgsoni*, Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus*, Stonechat *Saxicola torquata* and Lanceolated Warbler *Locustella lanceolata*.

Black-headed Bunting has not been previously recorded in Indochina (MLIVKOVSKY & INSKIPP, in prep.). It has only been recorded once in Thailand (one market specimen from peninsular Thailand: LEKAGUL & ROUND, 1991). KING ET AL. (1975) traced no other record for South-East Asia. Although there is some trade in captive wild birds in Laos, records of non-Lao species in captivity are very uncommon, and caged birds appear not to be imported from other countries. This would make it seem very unlikely that this Black-headed Bunting record was a result of a bird escaping from captivity. It has occurred in Nepal where it is a vagrant (INSKIPP & INSKIPP 1991). It breeds in Turkey, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and South-eastern Europe (Greece, Rumania, Bulgaria, Italy) in Mediterranean scrub and Steppe areas. Birds leave the breeding grounds in late July and August. They migrate Eastsoutheast, passing through Jordan Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq and Sind and Baluchistan Provinces of Pakistan. The entire population winters in western and central India in the provinces, of Punjab, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Karna Taka (CRAMP ET AL. 1994). Birds depart their winter quarters in March and April.

REFERENCES

- CRAMP, S., C.M. PERRINS AND D.J. BROOKS, 1994. Handbook of the Birds of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. Vol. IX. Oxford University Press, Oxford, U.K. 488 pp.
- INSKIPP, C. AND T.P. INSKIPP 1991. *A Guide to the Birds of Nepal*. Second Edition. Croom Helm, London. 392 pp.
- KING B.F., M. WOODCOCK AND E.C. DICKINSON, 1975. *A Field Guide to the Birds of South-East Asia*. Collins, London. 480 pp.
- LEKAGUL, B. AND P.D. ROUND, 1991. *A Guide to the Birds of Thailand*. Saha Karn Bhaet, Bangkok.
- MLIVKOVSKY, J. AND T.P. INSKIPP, in prep. *Ornithological bibliography of Indochina, 1758–1992*. Oriental Bird Club.

Richard M. Thewlis
52 Long Reach Road
Chesterton
Cambridge CB4 1UJ
U.K.