

## Where do our Lapland Buntings come from?

*Martin Garner*

Where do the Lapland Buntings *Calcarius lapponicus* seen in Britain come from? The species is a scarce but regular migrant in Britain, with most seen on the east coast, with Lack (1986) indicating that about 200-500 (with more in some years) winter almost exclusively along the east coast from Borders to Kent. Understandably, therefore, a common assumption is that most Lapland Buntings seen in Britain originate from Lapland, or at least Scandinavia (or, more generally, from northern Eurasia). However, it may be that, in some years, the majority of individuals reaching Britain actually come from the northwest - Greenland or even north-eastern Canada - rather than the northeast. The BOU has yet to recognise the subspecies which comes from this area - *C. l. subcalcaratus* - as having occurred in Britain, and this short article explores this subject a little further.

There are five recognised forms of Lapland Bunting. Nominate *lapponicus* breeds from Scandinavia eastwards across Arctic Eurasia to the Far East, where the forms *coloratus* and *kamtschaticus* occur. There are then two forms

in North America: *subcalcaratus*, which breeds in the northeast as far west as the Mackenzie River, and *alascensis*, which breeds from the Mackenzie westwards to Alaska. Thus only nominate *lapponicus* and *subcalcaratus* are reasonably placed to occur in Britain. The main winter range of *lapponicus* is to the southeast of its breeding range, in the Russian steppe, while the main wintering range of *subcalcaratus* is to the south of its breeding range in North America, so large numbers of either form should not be expected in Britain.

There has been no ringing recovery of the form *subcalcaratus* in Britain, and a significant factor in its non-appearance on the BOU British list might be that this form is not included in Svensson (1992), the 'Ringer's Bible' (where it is mistakenly placed as a synonym of '*calcarius*', which appears to be an error for *lapponicus*), so the particular measurements needed to confirm the presence of *subcalcaratus* may be being passed over. Nevertheless, the occurrence of *subcalcaratus* in Britain and elsewhere in Europe is acknowledged in *BWP* (Cramp & Perrins 1994).

Plate 1. American Lapland Bunting *Calcarius lapponicus subcalcaratus*, Newfoundland, Canada, September 2005 (Bruce MacTavish).

Despite there being no ringing recovery yet, there seems little doubt that North American Lapland Buntings of the subspecies *subcalcaratus* do occur every year in Western Europe, even though this form is not on any official lists.





Plate 2. First-winter female Lapland Bunting *Calcurius lapponicus*, Flamborough Head, East Yorkshire, 16th September 2005 (*Martin Garner*). This bird occurred following a strong westerly airstream, which then turned northerly, producing a huge movement of Sooty Shearwaters. Circumstantial evidence, plus biometrics from elsewhere on North Sea coasts, suggests that Lapland Buntings from Greenland and northeast Canada might be encountered anywhere in Britain.

For a number of regular observers at Flamborough Head, East Yorkshire, 16th September 2005 will remain most memorable for a huge movement of Sooty Shearwaters. In a pooled effort, we took turns at counting the flocks streaming past and believe we achieved a British record day-count for Sooty Shearwater of 2,721. With a few Leach's Petrels and a couple of Long-tailed Skuas thrown in, it was clearly a seawatching day. The shearwaters and other seabirds had been brought into the North Sea by a strong westerly airstream (with winds of force 6-8 off the Northern Isles over the previous 48 hours), which veered into a force 6 northerly feeding into the North Sea. Having completed my 'watch', I headed off to explore the surrounding land, but with relatively low expectations. The strong northerly did not bode well for the finding of passerine migrants. To my surprise, however, I found a Lapland Bunting near South Landing. It was an obligingly tame individual: an apparent first-winter female. It remained in the area for the next two days. The less than ideal weather conditions for a Scandinavian arrival caused me to wonder as to its origins and, more intriguingly, a Lapland Bunting (apparently a first-winter male) was found the same day in Shetland, very near to a Yellow Warbler (which had been found the previous day). I began to wonder if my confiding Flamborough Lapland Bunting could have been of Nearctic rather than Scandinavian origin.

Musing on Lapland Bunting origins is not new.

I first became interested in the subject several years ago during conversations with the Rocky Point (Co. Donegal) birding trio of Anthony McGeehan, Ian Wallace and Dave Allen. They had concluded that, given the location and weather conditions, many of their September Rocky Point Lapland Buntings were more likely to be of Nearctic, rather than Scandinavian, origin, even though, as with Britain, *subcalcaratus* is not officially recognised as having occurred in Ireland. However, the notion that some autumn Lapland Buntings arrive in Ireland and Britain from the west (presumably from Greenland or Canada) was raised long before this, following an exceptional invasion of the species in 1953 (Williamson & Davis 1956). This paper is worth careful study, as it is both thorough and convincing in its conclusions that *subcalcaratus* may be more frequent in some years in Britain than nominate *lapponicus*. The authors even cite the autumn weather conditions most suited to irruptions of *subcalcaratus*:

'The biggest influxes occur under conditions of anti-cyclonic development in the north-east Atlantic, with a westerly airstream between south-eastern Greenland and the British Isles. Smaller and usually more localised influxes occur in cyclonic weather, with a low centred on or near Iceland or Faeroe and a backing airstream, NW-SW, between Greenland and Britain... Small numbers reach Fair Isle from the continent under conditions of SE winds in the Skagerrak and North Sea: it is suggested that these, and the birds appearing irregularly in southern Norway are more likely to be Greenland migrants which have previously drifted to Norway than north European breeding birds.'

The dawning of realisation that birds from Greenland and the Nearctic may be occurring can be followed by reference to the handbooks. My 1943 edition of *'The Handbook'* (Witherby *et al.*) deals only with nominate *lapponicus*, but the concise version by Hollom (1968) suggests that more Lapland Buntings in Britain probably come from Arctic North America and Greenland than from Scandinavia. Cramp & Perrins (1994) then simply declares that *subcalcaratus* winters partly in Europe. This is based on a mix of considerable circumstantial evidence and also biometric data. According to Cramp & Perrins, such biometric data supports some *subcalcaratus* reaching Iceland, southwest Norway and as far as North Sea coasts (including the Netherlands) during the autumn.

#### Identification of *subcalcaratus*

According to Cramp & Perrins, *subcalcaratus* is at the dark end of a plumage cline, while nominate *lapponicus* becomes progressively paler to the east (although, in summer plumage, the nape and feather-edges of the mantle are paler in *subcalcaratus*). Differences in plumage are slight, however, and require more study.

The Nearctic *subcalcaratus* has longer wings than *lapponicus*, and also a slightly larger bill (which averages longer, heavier and deeper at the base). Males are slightly larger than females, and the following values are given for wing lengths of male *lapponicus*: from Norway (which could include some *subcalcaratus*) 87-98mm and 90-96mm, from the Yamal 88-95mm, from Kola to Kolyma 86.4-95.8mm and from Sweden (in Svensson 1992) 88-97mm. From these '*lapponicus* only' zones, the maximum wing length for male nominate *lapponicus* reaches 98mm (which away from Norway and the potential contamination of data by migrant *subcalcaratus* becomes a maximum of 97mm). This compares to the wing length for male *subcalcaratus* from Greenland given as 95-101mm. Thus there is overlap but, based on this data, any Lapland Bunting with a wing length greater than 98mm should be *subcalcaratus*.

Pennington *et al.* (2004) indicated that both forms have occurred on Fair Isle, and Deryk Shaw has kindly provided the data for all 52 Lapland Buntings trapped on Fair Isle since 1949. Of these, seven males have wing lengths above 98mm (specifically, 98.5, 99, 99, 99, 100, 100 & 101) and a further three have wing lengths of 98mm. In the absence of contrary data, these measurements alone would seem to provide sufficient solid evidence for the addition of *subcalcaratus* to the British list.

Additional circumstantial evidence includes the regular passage of Lapland Buntings through the Isles of Scilly in September and October. These seem likely predominately to involve *subcalcaratus*, not only from their westerly location, but because they tend to arrive earlier than Lapland Buntings on the British east coast. Some of these birds are likely to winter in Brittany, northwest France (where they also tend to arrive earlier than the presumed *lapponicus* in north-eastern France). Typically, the first records of Lapland Buntings each year come from northwest Ireland and north and northwest Scotland during late August and September in circumstances strongly suggestive of a Nearctic origin.

Another intriguing attribute, which seems at least suggestive of *subcalcaratus*, is tameness. Birds on Britain's east coast in midwinter conform well to the description of being 'rather wary' and 'rises quite highly' (Collins *Bird Guide*, Svensson & Grant 1999) or 'shy and easily disturbed' (*The Atlas of Wintering Birds in Britain & Ireland*, Lack 1986), but many birds which appear in circumstances suggesting *subcalcaratus* (eg on Scilly) can be remarkably confiding. This situation is analogous to the tameness of native Rock Pipits *A. p. petrosus* versus the flighty, easily spooked, migrant and wintering Scandinavian Rock Pipits *A. p. littoralis*. Such a difference in behaviour is obviously not a secure basis for claiming a lone individual, but it seems at least to be somewhat indicative.

There seems little doubt that Nearctic Lapland Buntings do reach Europe on a regular basis, particularly during September and October. The

Plate 3. First-winter female Lapland Bunting *Calcarius lapponicus*, Flamborough Head, East Yorkshire, 16th September 2005 (Martin Garner). This bird was so tame that I had to 'stand back' to take pictures. Tameness may be the first suggestion that a Lapland Bunting may be more likely to be from the Nearctic than the Palearctic.





Plate 4. Lapland Bunting *Calcarius lapponicus*, Garths Ness, Shetland, September 2005 (Hugh Harrop). This is probably a first-winter male of the Nearctic form, *subcalcaratus*. It was found on 16th September, close to a Yellow Warbler that had been discovered the previous day. A strong westerly airstream was passing through Shetland at the time.

Plate 5. Lapland Bunting *Calcarius lapponicus*, St Mary's, Isles of Scilly, October 2003 (Paul Gale). Confiding individuals, most likely of the form *subcalcaratus*, are a regular feature of the October Scilly season.





Plate 6. Male Lapland Bunting *Calcarius lapponicus*, St Martin's, Isles of Scilly, May 2004 (Bryan Thomas). The date and location are indicative of *subcalcaratus*, but plumage differences from nominate *lapponicus* require further research.

pattern of records with a strong west coast bias in late August to mid September indicates that they arrive earlier than Palearctic birds and, in some years, quite large numbers may be involved (see Pennington *et al.*). They may occur in movements with other species from a similar vector, such as Greenland Wheatears, Greenland Redpolls and Snow Buntings. They may occur anywhere in Britain (*eg* Flamborough Head!), although birds along the western seaboard are likely to warrant the closest attention when *subcalcaratus* is being considered.

An example of the type of movements that *subcalcaratus* Lapland Buntings may undertake is provided by the record of a Snow Bunting, which was ringed on Fair Isle in April 1959, and recovered in Newfoundland, Canada, in May 1960 (Pennington *et al.* 2004). It was probably a Greenland bird that had wintered on the eastern side of the Atlantic.

#### Conclusion

The circumstantial evidence that *subcalcaratus* Lapland Buntings reach Britain each autumn is overwhelming, as carefully argued by Williamson and Davis over 50 years ago and as accepted by Cramp & Perrins (1994).

An analysis of biometric data from Fair Isle indicates that at least seven males trapped there fall outside of the maximum wing length for nominate *lapponicus* and within the range for *subcalcaratus*. Lapland Buntings from Greenland and northern Canada could occur anywhere around the British coast and, in some years, they may even outnumber records of birds of the nominate form.

#### References

- Cramp, S. & Perrins, C. 1994. *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Vol. 9. Oxford.  
 Hollom, P.A.D. 1968. *The Popular Handbook of British Birds*. London.  
 Lack, P. *The Atlas of Wintering Birds in Britain and Ireland*. Calton.  
 Pennington *et al.* 2004. *The Birds of Shetland*. London.  
 Svensson, L. 1992. *Identification Guide to European Passerines*. 4th edn. Stockholm.  
 Svensson, L. & Grant, P.J. 1999. *Collins Bird Guide*. London.  
 Williamson, K. and Davis, P. 1956. The autumn 1953 invasion of Lapland Buntings and its source. *Brit. Birds* 49: 6-25.  
 Witherby, H.F., Jourdain, F.C.R., Ticehurst, N.F. & Tucker, B.W. 1943. *The Handbook of British Birds*. London.

#### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following for their assistance with this short article: Mick Cunningham, Paul Harvey, Bruce Mactavish, Tim Melling, Roger Riddington, Deryk Shaw and Yann Kolbeinsson.

*Martin Garner, South Yorkshire.*

Garner, M. 2006. Where do our Lapland Buntings come from. *Birding World* 19 (????): ????????

