

SNOW BUNTING

by Margo Guignion, Green Meadows

One looks out on a rather wintery bleak day and is practically blinded by the vast whiteness of snow cover. The lonely scene seems to add to the winter doldrums until suddenly a wave of swooping white birds makes its way into sight. Closer they come as they spy the grain strewn about out of pity for any poor creature looking for a morsel in a chilling, barren land after night's snowfall. Our visitors are snow buntings, south (as far as they are concerned) for the winter.

Snow buntings are inhabitants of the far north, beyond the tree line, etching an existence where much of our feathered wildlife could not sustain itself. During June and July they breed in a land of plenty, as this is the land of the midnight sun; working overtime to entice its shortlived bounty into bloom. Flowers and insects abound, providing a perfect nesting atmosphere.

Breeding further north than any other species, this bunting usually builds a secluded nest of moss, grass and sedges among rocks and bush foliage. A touch of luxury is achieved with the addition of feathers, fur or hair for a soft interior lining. After laying four to seven yellow, brown or black spotted eggs which may be white or various hues of blue-green, the female cuddles her eggs protectively for fourteen days. The whiteness of the sitting females is not nearly so obvious as it seems in overhead flight. The underside of both male and female is white, but the head, back, and wings are veiled in a blotchy brown with a touch of black added to the male's wings. During the breeding season, as in other species, males take on a more distinguished look for courting. His formal attire then, is mostly black in place of rusty brown.

While in the north, buntings feed a great deal on the lavish insect population until colder weather sets in. A seed eater by design, its menu is chosen from the variety of weed seeds available, as well as whatever bounty they may find in scattered low woody plants proffering buds for a future of brighter days. During sparse times they have been known to take advantage of civilization and may filtrate around Eskimo villages where they will feed on scraps occasionally.

During late fall snow buntings migrate south, some as far as northern United States, apparently following the snow as it blankets our world in winter. Snow is their element, providing their seed source does not become buried. Accustomed to the treeless tundra our visitors like to forage in open country.

Now as I watch this enthusiastic little flock scurry over the snow, indulging its appetite on our grain, the scene is no brighter, but a lot more cheery.

Our buntings stay on guard. My window approach must be slow since they are only two or three yards from the house, and any sudden movement scares them away. I note as I go about my day, that each time I might pass the window they perceive less danger, and fly to lesser lengths to escape. Stopping for a period of reflection, the buntings contribute a simple pleasure. A brisk breeze come up suddenly and individuals scurry for the small pines a few feet away. Others just seem to squat. It then becomes apparent that the buntings which headed for the pine trees, weren't really interested in the trees, but in the protective hollows, formed as a result of snow drifting around the trees. The others happened to find a footprint close at hand so ducked low and puffed up their feathers and conserved their energy.

Later in the day as we brought in wood (to conserve our own energy) the buntings were disturbed at first by our comings and goings. As trips increased, and the noisy aluminum door slammed shut with no greater threat, the buntings rather than fly out to the safety of the open field, just flew into the maple hedge above the food, and there sat patiently and eyed us beating the path from