



## Siberian Accentor in British Columbia, 1991-2011

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Siberian Accentor (*Prunella montanella*) is a small passerine that breeds on both sides of the Ural Mountains, in Siberia, mostly north of the Arctic Circle. It also breeds on Wrangel Island. This species is highly migratory, wintering in southeast Asia from southern Manchuria, Korea, and Japan to central China. It is a rare vagrant in western Europe and has recently been reported frequently in autumn in Alaska and as a vagrant in the Pacific Northwest region of North America (Roberson 1980, Campbell et al. 1997, American Ornithologists' Union 1998). A brief summary of North American records is presented to put into perspective new records for British Columbia.

### **Alaska Records**

Siberian Accentor was first reported and collected in North America, in Alaska, at Cape Etolin on Nunivak Island, on 3 October 1927 (Swarth 1934) and 10 years later at Kangee Camp [Camp Collier; Gabrielson and Lincoln 1959] on St. Lawrence Island on 13 October 1936 (Murie 1938). Both islands are in the Bering Sea. Subsequently, Siberian Accentor was reported in Alaska at Point Barrow in "fall" 1951 (Pitkelka 1974) and different single birds were recorded on Shemya, in the Aleutians Islands, on 17 and 24 September 1978 (Gibson 1981, Gibson and Byrd 2007). There are about six additional Alaskan records through 1995, reported mostly between mid-September and mid-November (American Birding Association 1996).

Between 1999 and 2011, 15 additional records of Siberian Accentor have been recorded in Alaska, involving 16 individual birds, all observed as autumn

visitants between 29 August (2002) and 11 October (2010) (Lehman 2005, pers. comm.). Lehman considered the species a "very rare visitor" with most records from islands in the Bering Sea.

### **Records in the Contiguous United States**

Outside of Alaska, Siberian Accentor has been reported as a vagrant in the Pacific Northwest from British Columbia, Alberta, Washington, Idaho, and Montana. The British Columbia occurrences, with new records, will be discussed in detail below. Confirmed records for the contiguous United States are: Washington (one accepted record [the first south of Alaska] found along the beach on Indian Island, Jefferson County, on 30 October 1983; Tweit and Paulson 1994, Mlodinow 2005), Idaho (one at Haley from 27 December 1996 to March 1997; Mlodinow 2005, Hill 1997), and Montana (one from 22 November 2003 to 18 March 2004 in Park County, about 48 km south of Livingston; Trochlell 2004a,b,c).

### **British Columbia Records**

Siberian Accentor has been reported in British Columbia five times in 21 years between 1991 and 2011. Two of the records have been previously published (Jaramillo 1994, Kime and Kime 1995, Campbell et al. 1997). Details of all records, with additional information for published accounts, follow.

1991

In October 1991, Vic Ford, a Victoria resident, dropped off a small bag of "sparrows and juncos" at the author's house in Saanich that his cat had caught in

his yard earlier in the year. Vic had hoped the salvaged carcasses might be useful as museum specimens. The paper bag was put directly into the freezer without examining the contents. Over two decades later, in April 2011, the unused freezer was being cleaned out and its contents discarded. Vic's paper bag contained six carcasses, all in small separate plastic bags and each with a date. The species included two Dark-eyed "Oregon" Juncos (*Junco hyemalis oregonus*; 12 January and 23 February), a Golden-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia atricapilla*; 6 February), a Fox Sparrow (*Passerella iliaca*; 1 March), a Bushtit (*Psaltriparus minimus*; 17 March), and a Siberian Accentor (5 July). All carcasses were freezer-burned and dehydrated (Figure 1).

I called Vic, who had since died, but his wife remembered delivering the dead birds along with one that they could not find in their bird books. This turned out to be a Siberian Accentor. The bird had been seen in the yard on 4 July, feeding on the ground under shrubs in the late afternoon. The following morning, the accentor flew into a large window and their cat caught it on the ground.

The frozen and dehydrated Siberian Accentor carcass was delivered to the Beaty Museum on the University of British Columbia campus in Vancouver by the author. It was photographed (Figures 2 and 3) and prepared as a skin and wing (Figure 4). Later, the specimen was added to the Cowan Tetrapod Collection with the following information:



**Figure 1.** Carcass of Siberian Accentor caught by a house cat in Victoria, British Columbia, on 5 July 1991. Photo by R. Wayne Campbell, 17 April 2011. BC Photo 4009.

**Catalogue number:** B016867.

**Date:** 5 July 1991.

**Location:** Henderson Road, Victoria, British Columbia.

**Collector:** Vic Ford (*vide* R. Wayne Campbell).

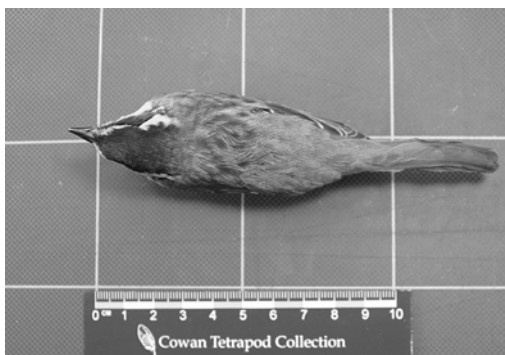
**Age:** After hatch year (i.e., year of hatch unknown but before year found).

**Sex:** female (oviducts present but convoluted and stretched, suggesting an egg had been laid earlier in the year).

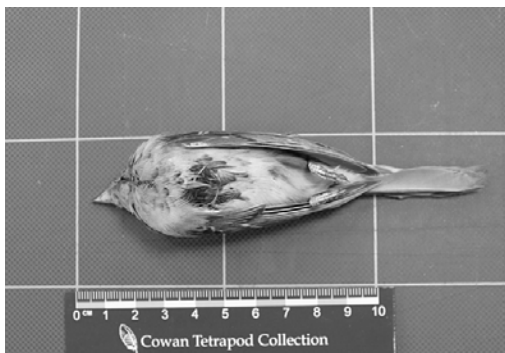
**Weight:** 14.7 g (dehydrated).

**Measurements:** Wing span (175 mm), wing chord (71.0 mm), total body length (132 mm), tarsus (20.6 mm), exposed culmen (8.96 mm), and culmen from nares to tip (6.54 mm).

**Gut contents:** Empty.



**Figure 2.** Dorsal view of Siberian Accentor. *Photo by Ildiko Szabo. BC Photo 4009.*



**Figure 3.** Ventral view of Siberian Accentor. *Photo by Ildiko Szabo. BC Photo 4009.*



**Figure 4.** The Siberian Accentor was prepared as a skin and spread-wing specimen. *Photo by Ildiko Szabo. BC Photo 4009.*

All information associated with this record and specimen, including correspondence, data sheets, and images have been added to the “British Columbia Photo File for Wildlife Records” (BCPFWR) as BC Photo 4009 (see Campbell and Stirling 1971).

This occurrence now constitutes the first record for British Columbia and Canada and the fifth for North America.

1993

A single bird was found in Everett Crowley Park in south Vancouver on 15 December 1993 by Al Jaramillo. The sighting was listed by Campbell et al. (1997) but was considered hypothetical as details of the single-person sighting were not examined. Later, seven pages of documentation were submitted to the B.C. Field Ornithologists bird records committee and the record was accepted (Davidson 1994, Jaramillo 1994). Correspondence, including a detailed sketch of the bird, has been added to the BCPFWR as BC Photo 4011.

1994

In 1994, a single male Siberian Accentor was discovered by Frank Kime on 5 March in his yard at Tappen, 10 km northwest of Salmon Arm, in the south-central interior. The following day, a female arrived and both birds remained in the vicinity of the front

yard until 10 April 1994 (Campbell et al. 1997).

They occasionally drank and bathed in a small pool and foraged daily around garden scrub and picked up bits of suet from under a garden feeder. As the occurrence was the first confirmed record for Canada (see 1991 above), several articles were published (e.g., Jaramillo 1994, Kime 1994, Kime and Kime 1995). The reference to Bowling (1994c) listed by Campbell et al. (1997) could not be located.

The two birds showed differences in plumages, one decidedly darker than the other. Kime and Kime (1995) suggested that they appeared to be a male and female although behaviour that suggested pair-bonding was not noticed during the days in Tappen and each bird foraged in discreet areas of the yard.

Documentation in the form of field notes, sketches, and photographs of the Siberian Accentors and the residential habitat were added to the BCPFWR as follows:

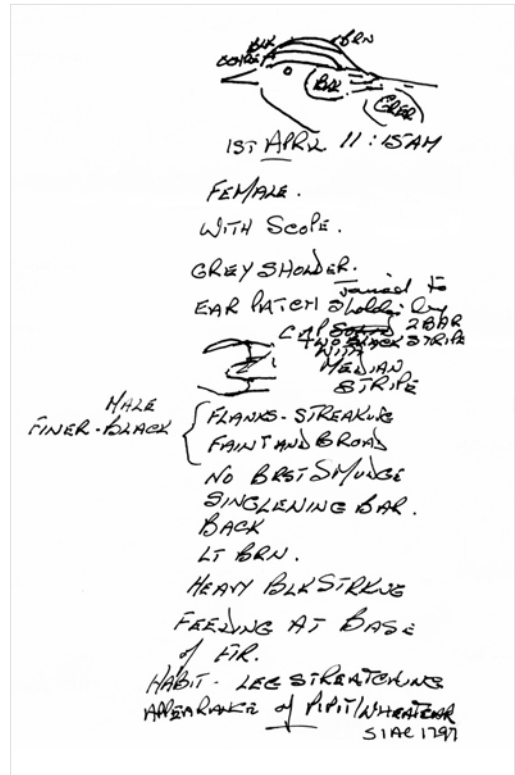
BC Photo 1968 – two colour prints of a single bird foraging at the edge of scrubby forest habitat and one perched on a branch were photographed by Tom Plath on 4 April 1994.

BC Photo 1797 – seven prints, inter-negatives, a rare bird report form, field sketches (Figure 5), and North American summary information were contributed by Frank Kime, Phil Gehlen (Figure 6), Ruth Sullivan (see Campbell et al. 1997), and Bob Mumford (see Kime and Kime 1995).

Kime and Kime (1995) provided additional information on the behaviour, habits, and spring plumage changes of the two accentors during their 37-day visit in Tappen. Both individuals were suddenly gone on the 38<sup>th</sup> day.

1998

On Sunday, 8 March 1998, Patricia Senft (pers. comm.) discovered a bird had killed itself by flying into a window in her Maple Ridge home located about 40 km east of Vancouver, British Columbia. The window casualty could not immediately be identified so the following week Patricia took the bird to the Wild Birds Unlimited Nature Shop in nearby Abbotsford. A quick search of reference books in the store could not find a confirming identification. Later in the week, Muriel Carlson, a birder visiting the store



**Figure 5.** Sketch of plumage characteristics for the suggested male and female Siberian Accentor at Tappen, BC, compiled during spring. Sketch and notes courtesy Frank Kime, 1 April 1994. BC Photo 1797.



**Figure 6.** Siberian Accentor at Tappen, BC, 2 April 1994. The image was enlarged many times from a 35-mm slide. Photo by Phil Gehlen. BC Photo 1797.

from Saskatchewan, was enquiring about reports of rare birds in the area when the owner showed her the unidentified carcass. Muriel thought it might be a Siberian Accentor. About mid-March, Sylvia Pincott, naturalist advisor for Naturescape British Columbia, was advised of the rare bird and she contacted friend Bruce Klassen to photograph it. Colour images were sent to me, and I confirmed the identification as a Siberian Accentor. The event was reported in the *Abbotsford-Mission Times* newspaper (page 12) in the 8 May issue with the title “Rare Siberian Bird lost its Way” (Pincott 1998; Figure 7).

This occurrence was the fourth confirmed record for the province and third spring record for North America.



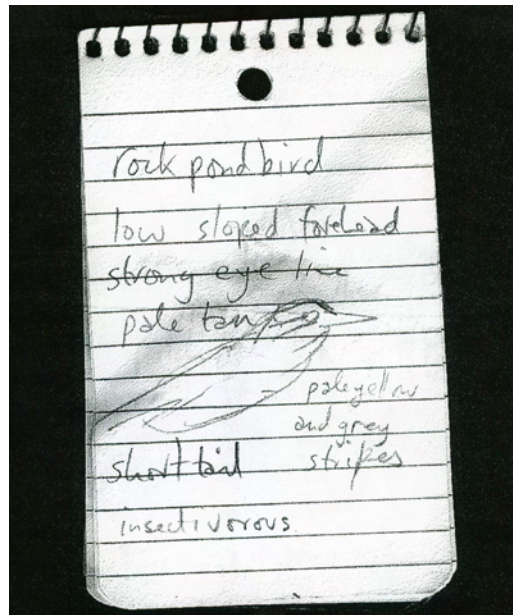
**Figure 7.** Siberian Accentor killed by colliding with a window in Maple Ridge, BC, on 8 March 1998. Photo by Bruce Klassen. BC Photo 1719.

1999

On 20 September, while on a kayaking expedition at Nuchatlitz Park on the central west coast of Vancouver Island, David Shipway noticed a small colourful bird feeding on a small rock. As it was one that he had never seen before he recorded the following notes:

“I sat on a rock about 40 feet away and watched it through 10X binoculars, and attempted a crude sketch (Figure 8), with notes on main features. Slightly bigger than a sparrow, it was feeding on small insects at the edge of a small brackish forest edge pool on the western side of the northwestern-most small island

of the Nuchatlitz group, exposed to the ocean swells that roll into Esperanza Inlet. It kept its head down, as it looked around in a fashion similar to a sandpiper, but more relaxed.”



**Figure 8.** Field notes of David Shipley for the Siberian Accentor sighting highlighted “a low sloped forehead, strong eye line, pale tan eyebrow, pale yellow and gray stripes on chest and belly, and short tail.” He further noted it was “insectivorous.” Courtesy David Shipway, Nuchatlitz Park, BC, 20 September 1999. BC Photo 2060.

“The lemon-coloured breast feathers were the most striking feature, along with the dark stripe behind the eye. I watched the bird long enough to get a good mental image of it, and when I returned to Cortes Island, I looked it up in Peterson’s guide. The picture of the Siberian Accentor was the closest to what I remembered.”

“I wasn’t 100% convinced about the identification until I looked it up in the new National Geographic field guide. The picture in that book is much better than Peterson’s, and convinced me I had actually seen a rare Siberian Accentor on the outer coast of Vancouver Island.”

When David returned to Cortes Island, he discussed the sighting with George P. Sirk who confirmed the identification and encouraged him to prepare a more detailed summary of his observation and send them to me. Four pages of notes were received and catalogued and added to the BCPFWR as BC Photo 2060. Two other features noted during the discussion with George (pers. comm.) were a “slender pointed bill” and a “buffy eyebrow.”

### ***Current Status in British Columbia***

The five records of Siberian Accentor in British Columbia are all vagrants with no seasonal pattern of occurrence, although two records are from early March. The record from Tappen, BC, is the first reported in spring for North America. Since then, the species has been reported in early spring (March and April) in Haley, ID in 1997 (Hill 1997), Park County, MT (March) in 2003 (Trochlell 2004, 2004b, 2004c), Maple Ridge, BC, in 1998 (March, this article), and Calgary, AB, in 2002 where a single accentor was present from 20 March to 5 April (Hudon 2005).

The unusual July record from Victoria, BC, remains the only summer occurrence for North America. The September record from Nuchatlitz Park, BC, falls within the range of autumn dates reported for Alaska. South of British Columbia, in the contiguous United States, Siberian Accentor has been documented from October through March.

Siberian Accentor remains a vagrant in British Columbia (see Campbell et al. 1990), having been recorded in five different months (March, April, July, September, and December). The longest period of continuous residence was 37 days. †

### ***Acknowledgements***

Documenting details of the occurrence of a rare bird, especially a new provincial record, requires the cooperation of many individuals. In 1971, David Stirling and RWC established a provincial photo file to document and archive the occurrence of rare vertebrates in British Columbia. Most of the details presented in this article were extracted from information submitted to that file over the years by Phil Gehlen, Frank and Doris Kime, Bruce Klassen, Sylvia Pincott, Tom Plath, David Shipway, George P. Sirk, and Ruth Sullivan.

Vic Ford occasionally saved dead birds found in his neighbourhood and gave them to RWC for possible use in education programs or as additions to museum collections.

Gary Davidson provided details for the 1993 Siberian Accentor record and Chris Siddle searched back issues of seasonal reports published by the *National Audubon Society* for references to Siberian Accentor. Paul E. Lehman assisted with some references for Alaska.

The Victoria carcass was donated to the Beaty Museum on the University of British Columbia campus in Vancouver. External measurements were made by Curator Dr. Darren E. Irwin and the specimen was prepared by Assistant Curator Ildiko Szabo (Figure 9).

I am grateful to these individuals for their support. Spencer G. Sealy provided editorial comments.



**Figure 9.** Ildiko Szabo recording data prior to preparing the Siberian Accentor specimen in the vertebrate lab of the UBC Beaty Museum in Vancouver, BC. *Photo by R. Wayne Campbell.*

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