Snow bunting

Plectrophenax nivalis

By Jim Pashby

SCIENTIFIC NAME *Plectro* is from the Greek *plektron*, a clawlike tool for striking a lyre, an ancient stringed instrument. This refers to the bird's long, straight hind claw. *Phenax* is Greek for "false" (because the claw isn't actually a *plektron*). *Nivalis* is Latin for "snowy," which refers to the snow bunting's color and Arctic home range. "Bunting" is a name given by early ornithologists to several North American species that looked like Old World buntings, though it turns out that they are not closely related. Naturalists of the 19th century commonly referred to snow buntings as "snowflakes."

I was driving home from central Phillips County, two late-season roosters in the backseat with my springer spaniel, who was fast asleep. Through the fogged-up windshield I saw ahead what looked like a large flock of white sparrows pecking at gravel on the dirt road. As I passed, more than 100 of these oversized "snowflakes" flittered off, creating what looked like a tiny snow squall.

Once home, I looked them up in my *Sibley's Guide to Birds*. Ever since then, I've watched for these hardy little winter survivors on my end-of-the year pheasant hunting travels.

IDENTIFICATION

The snow bunting shows more white than any other passerine (songbird) in the Lower 48. The breeding male sports a sharp, all-white head with black shoulder feathers and wingtips and some black on the tail. The breeding female appears similar but with more black and brown streaking in the head, back, and wings. The nonbreeding versions of both sexes take on some rusty tones that help them blend in with bare ground and crop stubble.

TOP TO BOTTOM: DONALD M. JONES; DAVID STIMAC

NORTH AMERICAN RANGE

This hardy little flier nests in the high Arctic, farther north than any other songbird. In winter it descends to the "milder" climes of Canada and the northern United States from Idaho to Maine, feeding on spent grain and weed and grass seeds in open fields and stubble. It can survive temperatures down to minus 50 degrees Fahrenheit, burrowing into the snow to keep warm. By springtime, snow buntings have returned north to the Arctic, where their mostly white plumage blends in with the snowy landscape.

REPRODUCTION

In spring, the male snow bunting puts on a mating display. While fluttering in the air or perched on a rock, he sings in a broken twittering warble, hoping to attract a female. After mating, the female builds a nest in crevices between rocks and lays up to nine streaked, pale blue eggs. After about two weeks, the eggs hatch, and two weeks later the young fly for the first time.

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The male stays nearby, bringing food to the female so she can remain on the nest, and defending his family against gull-like predators known as jaegers. If a snow bunting can survive its first year, it may live for up to nine years—downright ancient for a small bird.

CONSERVATION STATUS

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature lists the snow bunting as a "species of least concern." The birds are common and widespread, and numbers appear stable. The species' breeding range is far from human activity like road construction and housing developments that elsewhere have damaged or eliminated bird habitat.

SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE

According to the Alaska Native Knowledge Network website, Inuit people so highly regard snow buntings that they build nest boxes and place them among rocks on the tundra. The traditional practice stems from the belief that snow buntings have spiritual significance and bring good fortune to those who build nest boxes. The wooden structures are regularly cleaned and repaired, allowing the birds to reuse them year after year. "According to Inuit elders, before construction wood was commonly available, families heaped stones together and fashioned special cavities to attract nesting birds," the website says.