

## A BIRD TO WATCH

# Yellow-breasted Bunting

## *Emberiza aureola*

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The Yellow-breasted Bunting *Emberiza aureola* is a common migrant, breeding in the Palearctic regions of Russia and China and wintering mainly in South-East Asia. Two subspecies are recognised: *ornata* in south-eastern Russia, north-eastern China and Japan, and the nominate race found from Siberia and north-eastern China to eastern Europe.

On migration, Yellow-breasted Buntings pass in large numbers through eastern China, where they have historically been trapped in large numbers, a practice that we know has taken place for at least 2,100 years (Gao Yuren 1996). Elsewhere in the region, it is reported that thousands of buntings were killed for food during spring migration in the 1950s and 1960s, and this practice still continues in Cambodia where birds are caught for food, and also increasingly to be released during religious festivals (Colin Poole *in litt.* 13 June 2003).

In recent times, Yellow-breasted Buntings, or 'Rice Birds' as they are known locally, have been trapped during October and November and sold at markets in Sanshui City in China's Pearl River Delta. From 1992 until 1997, when the practice was banned, more than 10,000 tourists visited Sanshui City for the annual food festival, where an estimated several hundred thousand birds were caught and served as food (Gao Yuren 1996). Today, a black market still persists (Nanfanwang website, 27 October 2000), and nationally an estimated one million Rice Birds are still sold, around 10,000 of them daily in a single market in Sanshui (Xinkuaibao, china.com, 19 October 2001). Trapping of these protected birds is not confined to the traditional hunting grounds in Guangdong province, but is rampant in Tianjin also, where buyers purchase birds from local villagers for as little as 0.5 yuan and sell them cooked for 30 times this price in Guangdong (People's Daily website, 21 November 2000). The authorities have not turned a blind eye to this illegal trade, and 200 raids on markets in Sanshui took place in 2000 (Dayangwang website, 1 November 2000). In August 2001, around 100,000 birds from Tianjin were found in trains in Shaoguan and Guanzhou (news.www.eastday.com, 17 August 2001). In October that year, 5,300 birds were found dead in Nanhai City, Guangdong (www.southcn.com news, 19 October 2001), a further 3,000 dead birds were discovered in a car at Enping, Guangdong (www.southcn.com news, 1 November 2001), and 700 birds were confiscated

and released at Lanshi Town, Zhanjiang (www.ycwb.com, 2 November 2001). The following year more than 20,000 birds were confiscated in Guangzhou in August (www.southcn.com news, 22 August 2002) and about 3,000 birds were found at Tianjin Airport, en route to Guangzhou in October (www.caajournal.com, 4 December 2002).

Hunting is not the only threat to Yellow-breasted Buntings—changes in agricultural practices, particularly the loss of wetlands, and the increasing use of agricultural pesticides, are both serious problems.

The above factors are taking their toll on the population of this attractive species, and although it is still reasonably common in the middle reaches of the Amur, Russia, its density has declined since 1998, despite reduced human activities in the area. The decline may be because of dry weather in recent years, leading to wetland reduction and more frequent steppe fires. These have both affected populations of cranes *Grus* spp. and Eastern Marsh Harriers *Circus spilonotus* (Sergei Smirenskii *in litt.* 11 June 2003), but their effect on Yellow-breasted Buntings is unknown. Likewise the bunting has declined in the Dauria region, probably for similar reasons (Oleg Goroshko *in litt.* 10 July 2003). Although numbers breeding in Finland have never been large, they have declined from two dozen breeding birds in the 1980s to only the occasional summer sighting (Harry Lehto *in litt.* 12 May 2003).

On migration, there has been a significant drop in numbers of Yellow-breasted Buntings in China, and in South Korea the species is apparently declining, possibly because of habitat loss and changing agricultural practices (Nial Moores *in litt.* 21 May 2003), and there is a suspected decline in Laos too (Will Duckworth *in litt.* 17 May 2003).

On its wintering grounds, the species is no longer found at some sites where it formally occurred in thousands in the 1950s, although this may reflect a population shift because of changing agricultural practices (Colin Poole *in litt.* 13 June 2003). The species is regarded as near-threatened in Thailand, although large-scale hunting of it persists (Phil Round *in litt.* 12 May 2003).

In August 2000, the Chinese authorities listed the Yellow-breasted Bunting as nationally protected, and it was listed as a protected species in Guangdong in July 2001, with a fine of 10,000 to 100,000 yuan for anyone selling them. However, many dealers

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First-winter Yellow-breasted Bunting *Emberiza aureola*, Khosi, Nepal, January 1997.



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Adult female Yellow-breasted Bunting *Emberiza aureola*, Irkutsk, Russia, June 1987.



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Adult male Yellow-breasted Bunting *Emberiza aureola*, Irkutsk, Russia, June 1987.

flagrantly break the law (Xinkuaibao, china.com, 19 October 2001) and advertisements offering Rice Birds as food are still found in newspapers and websites in Hong Kong and southern China.

Clearly there is an urgent need to monitor numbers of Yellow-breasted Buntings, particularly at their migration bottlenecks such as Beidaihe and Tianjin, China, and this programme should involve co-operation between relevant countries in the region: Japan, China, Russia and South-East Asia. Studies of pesticide use in the region, and ways to reduce their levels of application are needed, as is an education programme to reduce the exploitation of wild birds.

Currently the Yellow-breasted Bunting is considered Near Threatened. This is a timely indication of concern that this formerly superabundant passerine is in trouble and it is clearly a bird we should be watching.

**References**

Gao Yuren (1996) Ginsengs from Heaven – Rice Birds (Yellow-breasted Bunting). *Daziran* 1: 34–35.

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