

## Pine Bunting, 1<sup>st</sup> winter female, Felmingham, Norfolk, 21<sup>st</sup> January, 2017

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With a flurry of Pine Bunting records in autumn 2016, the thought that a few individuals may still be lurking in local winter Yellowhammer flocks was in the minds of many active field birders. Daydreams mainly - but if the increasingly rare opportunity arose to have a look through a good sized bunting flock then it was surely worth a go. At the end of the day the process was hardly a chore as Yellowhammers are such beautiful birds and the sight of a large flock perched along a dark hawthorn is one of winter's highlights.

I'd checked several North Norfolk Yellowhammers flocks, including two flocks of 100+, and had walked some large areas of wild bird seed crops on local farms that I'm fortunate to have access to (and also a couple where I don't have permission). In an unrelated text to Ash McElwee I mentioned that I'd checked several areas. In his reply he mentioned that he'd got a flock of 150+ Yellowhammers on some land he had access to but with work and short daylight hours he hadn't had a chance to look at them. I'd been sitting in cold hedgerows painting geese almost every day for two weeks and needed a break so we hatched a plan that incorporated a catch-up with his family and a day looking at buntings.

Ash gained permission from the landowner for me to visit the site and we met up early morning on the 21<sup>st</sup> Jan. At around 10am we walked into the site - immediately a flock of over 150+ Yellowhammers, 100+ Reed Buntings and 450+ Linnets erupted out of the cover, swirled around for a few minutes before dropping down several hundred metres away. It was an incredible sight and quite quickly it was clear that there were over 250 Yellowhammers feeding in the set-aside and seed crops - it was going to be a long day!

We were faced by a bewildering array of Yellowhammer plumages - some stunning adult males and an incredible range of female plumages. I've sketched winter flocks of Yellowhammers many times and I always struck by how variable they are (in common with winter Snow Buntings and Bramblings seemingly no two look exactly the same). Luckily the birds would regularly perch up along the

length of a low hawthorn hedge so we muddled our way through the flock. The females were really interesting - many having bold but highly variable head markings while in contrast others were quite drab with rather poorly marked heads. Quickly it became clear by looking at the shape of the tail feathers that on the whole the birds with the most striking head markings were adults and the poorly-marked, less contrasting birds, 1<sup>st</sup> winters.

We picked out some standout individuals - for example a very grey and white bird with just a slight yellow wash on the rear supercilium and the primary edges. Other birds were really dull brown with just a hint of yellow on the throat, sub-moustache and primary fringes. It was great fun with so many birds to look at and all the time we were half expecting a male Pine Bunting to perch up on the hedge.

Around mid morning a first winter bird was picked up sitting tucked in the side of the hedge it was easy to age as its tail was protruding out from the bush and with the zoom at x55 the central tail feathers could clearly be seen to be very sharply pointed - blackish brown with a thin crisp, pure white fringe on both sides of the feathers. The viewing angle and lighting wasn't very good but I couldn't see any hint of yellow in the bird's plumage and asked Ash's opinion. He too couldn't see a trace of yellow. I thought it was a really weird bird - I wasn't even thinking of a possible Pine Bunting more of how odd it looked.

I think the first feature that struck me as different was a surprisingly striking creamy white submoustachal stripe highlighted by a blackish border to the ear-coverts and a broad dark malar stripe. Very dark, bold breast streaking merged to form a dark breast-band - these dark streaks continued obviously into the lower edge of the nape where they merged with the blackish mantle streaks and was a characteristic of this bird when compared to the Yellowhammers. It then turned to face us revealing further features such as a neat creamy-white throat, and the impression of a small paler spot on the forehead that merged into a grey-brown crown stripe bordered by very contrastingly dark lateral crown stripes. The

impression it gave really shocked us for it suddenly had the look of a rare bunting! No sooner had we seen this when the bird hopped up a branch to show a bold white median wingbar with blackish centres. It then stretched a wing away from us then performed a double-wing stretch with head lowered and the closed wings raised upwards revealing striking, gleaming white underwing coverts and axillaries – this was not simply an impression as the wings were held stretched up for long enough to double check the feather tracks. Predictably after wing-stretching the bird flew back into the crop to feed.

We were not sure what the bird was at this stage it didn't fit our preconceived ideas of what a 1<sup>st</sup> winter female Pine Bunting should look like but we were ruffled by it and knew that we had to see it again and at close range in good light. If the truth was known I think we were ill prepared as to what a female Pine Bunting should look like, expecting a dazzling grey and white bird to obviously stand out from the flock. At this stage the weather was quite overcast and dull and the bird appeared much darker than we expected for a Pine Bunting. The light-hearted atmosphere of the day was instantly replaced by serious concentration and focus. Ash had planned to leave around midday for a picnic lunch with his family but was so ruffled by what we had just seen that he made a tough decision to cancel and I flinched as he made the awkward phone call. So with Ash firmly in the doghouse we focused on re-finding the bird.

My lasting impression of the initial views was of the creamy white submoustachal stripes and throat patch that stood out so boldly from the surrounding contrastingly dark markings – from my past experience this combination looked so unlike anything I'd ever encountered on a Yellowhammer. I was also taken by the pattern of the crown and the white underwing coverts. We discussed how strange the combination appeared to us particularly why, on a first winter female Yellowhammer seemingly lacking yellow, would the head markings be so bold and contrasting? We were, at this stage, not at all sold on the bird being a candidate for a Pine Bunting and were very prepared for our next views to show that the bird was an unusually patterned Yellowhammer.

Over the next couple of hours we gained two further brief and distant views which included another double wing-stretch again showing the white underwing. The field impression remained the same but the views still needed to be much better. At last it appeared close by again and fortunately for a long period although for much of the observation it was inactive, facing away with its flanks and rump fluffed up. It remained an intriguing and exciting bird. While it was inactive I tried to draw as much of the bird as was possible.

I started sketching 'classic' parts of the plumage – noting exact pattern of tertials and greater covers, scapulars, Mantle, uppertails...etc. However there were many obscure features on the plumage that struck me as unusual – these thoughts, I think, mainly stemmed from previous experience of drawing Yellowhammers and were not what I considered to be recognised Pine Bunting features. (I believe that if you habitually draw birds in the field you see differences that are subtle and not always easy to articulate – it's akin to 'jizz' but subtly different). My attention was quickly drawn to a palish patch on the hindcrown /upper nape, but what struck me as more unusual was that this 'patch' was bordered by two blackish bars that extended from the lateral crown stripes and, surprisingly, cut into the top of the nape tract. This too was visible from the side as a disjointed extension of the lateral crownstripes. Ash was actively pointing out interesting features but I'd completely switched off from everything else and was fully concentrating on drawing what I could see.

As the bird started to become more active it sleeked down its fluffed up feathers and started fidgeting around. It was then much easier to fully appreciate its head pattern. It had a really striking head pattern – a really wide grey-brown supercilium, striking blackish border to the ear coverts with an eye-catching creamy-white spot at the rear and a crisp pure white eyering. The lateral crown stripes were darker brown than the central crown, with really crisp black lines that almost merged to form crisp black lines. As it became more restless it habitually held its crown feathers raised which made it look even more striking.

As it hopped up it exposed the feathered tops of the legs which were dazzling white. Its breast was a darker cream/buff than the throat and submoustache and heavily marked with bold blackish-brown streaks. Importantly there was no trace of yellow in the fringes of the primaries instead these appeared white particularly towards the feather tip but the fringes of the rest of the wing looked dirty white or brown-washed. It was clearly ready to feed again – it stretched one wing away from us then raised both wings showing the underwing very clearly once more. Then it stretched its closest wing towards us and simultaneously fanned the corresponding half of its tail before repeating the upward double wing stretch – showing its white underwing then flying off to feed. Ash was really taken by the tail pattern and instantly remarked at how much white could be seen in its tail, although I saw its spread tail I wasn't fully concentrating on it as I was prioritising really grilling the underwing coverts on full zoom.

By this stage the penny had dropped that this was in fact a very strong candidate for a 1<sup>st</sup> winter female Pine Bunting but we were still not allowing ourselves to become too excited by it – personally speaking I think this was mainly due to the fact that we knew that it had to be a Pine Bunting but didn't want to get too excited for fear of further views proving to be something nasty like a hybrid then we'd be left feeling disappointed.

After another hour or so of scanning the flock we suddenly noticed it perched up in the hedge and, at last, quite close to us. Initially the weather was quite overcast and the light pretty dull but even so the bird looked really smart and rechecking all the features we had previously noted I realised that it had to be a pure Pine Bunting but it still felt like a big call! As we were really grilling the features the cloud was quickly thinning and the light, directly behind us, became perfect for assessing colour and tones – suddenly the bird looked absolutely incredible and the ID process went from really challenging and cautious to relatively straightforward. It was one of those truly special moments that will always stay with you. After the bird took flight I completely lost it – I've been fortunate in being involved in finding some really good birds but seldom had I felt so euphoric over finding a rarity. I guess it was a release from four-five hours of intense, very cautious watching.

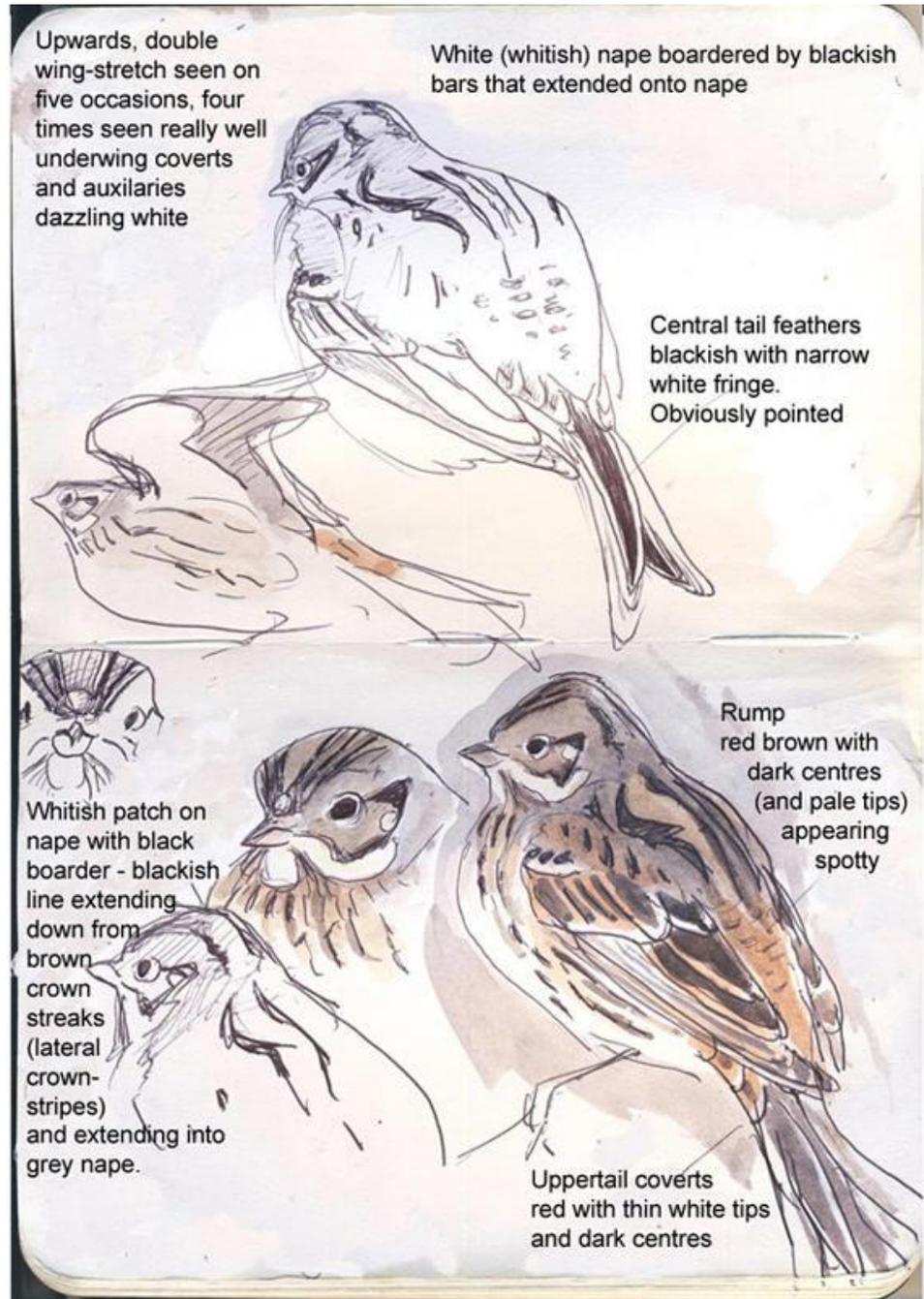
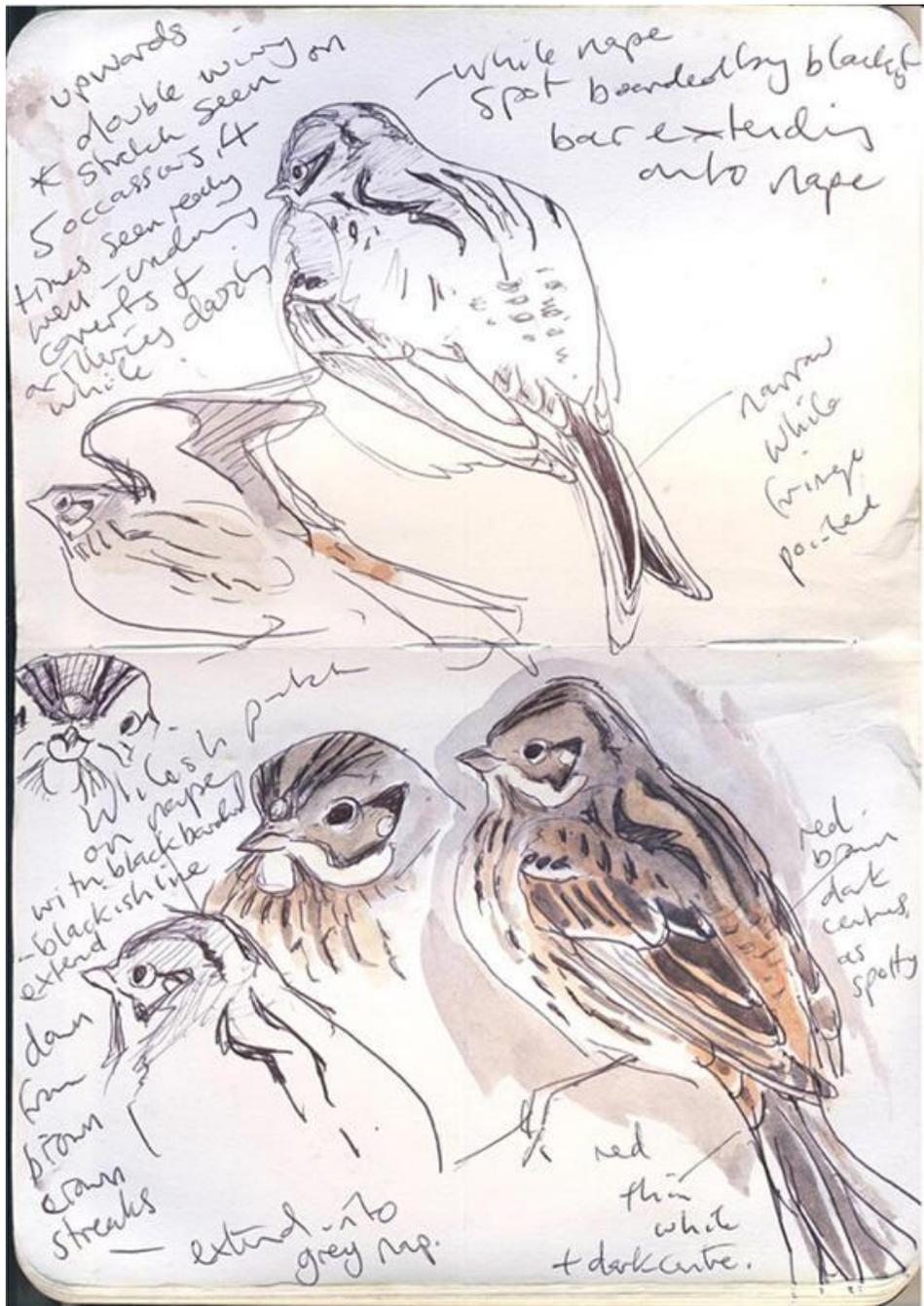
A little later Ash picked it up once more and again we were treated to great views of the bird in bright but overcast light – there was no doubt that we were watching a Pine Bunting!

On returning to Ash's we had a flick through the '*Advanced Bird ID Handbook*' and it was really satisfying to read that some of the 'odd' features that we had noted in the field e.g. the pale nape spot bordered by two blackish bars that extended onto the nape was in fact said to be characteristic of a first winter female Pine Bunting, the gleaming white underwing and also Ash's observations of the extensive white in the two outer tail feathers!

After a coffee I headed home as I was keen to turn my field notes into paintings while everything was clear in my mind and before reading any other literature that could influence my thoughts. The resulting images and original notebook pages form my description. The overall impression is accurate to how I saw the bird – certain plumage features may appear more basic than others but I'd rather present an authentic representation of my experience than overly detailed plates that would require further reference to field guides and photos.

We returned the following morning armed with cameras, videos...etc. The weather was still, frosty and sunny – great conditions and we were pretty confident that we would soon find the bird, get some decent images and footage before discussing whether the site could cope with a 'twitch' before we contacted the landowner to seek his permission. However, the day didn't work out as we envisaged and despite staying on site until dusk there was no sight of the bird. There were still around 200 Yellowhammers but 50+ were missing. We tried again the following weekend but there were only 150 birds present so we extended the search to a nearby seed crop but this area completely lacked any buntings and was dominated by Chaffinches and Bramblings. Ash made several further attempts, including thorough searches over his half term holiday, but each visit revealed steadily decreasing numbers of Yellowhammers. It was clear that the bird along with the majority of Yellowhammers had moved on and this made the decision of meeting the landowner to discuss the possibility of releasing of news pointless.





Page from field notebook with handwritten notes then with typed equivalent



Overcast

Overcast



Overcast but bright - sun breaking through

Bright - sun through clouds

Changes to colour hues and contrast in different light conditions

Breast creamy-buff heavily streaked blackish-brown, becoming more blotchy on breast-sides. These blotchy streaks cutting into the lower edge of the nape and merging with back streaking

Underparts off white, cleaner white on belly but flanks having duller wash of buff. Heavily streaked blackish-brown. The streaking on flanks was crisp but having a blurry brown washed background. I never saw the bird perched totally head-on but side-on views indicated that no yellow was present on central belly. Feathering at the top of the legs was pure white - not sure if this has any relevance but was striking in the field. Undertail coverts gleaming white. There was no hint of any streaking when viewed from the side

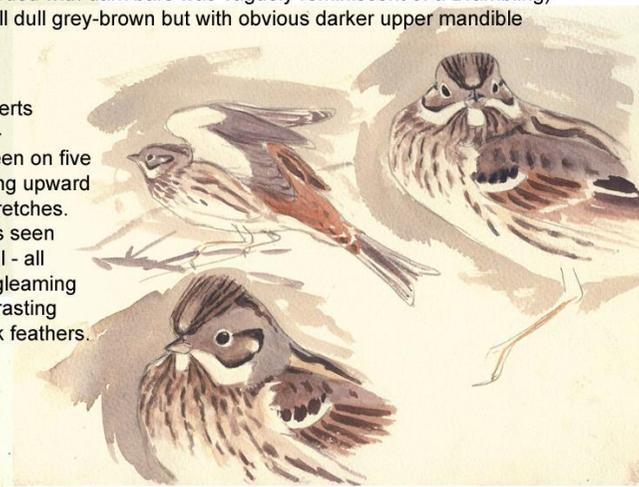


Light conditions - Overcast

Head Pattern

Malar obviously brown washed with well defined blackish-brown streaking  
 Submoustachal stripe creamy-white and very eye-catching. One of the first features that drew attention to the bird. Throat also striking and creamy-white  
 Ear-coverts grey-brown with striking dark brown border and buffy-white spot  
 Eye-ring pure white  
 Supercilium broad and grey-brown  
 Lateral crown-stripes obviously washed dark brown with crisp, pencil-fine blackish streaks. Blackish-brown stripe extending from lateral crown-stripe onto upper half of nape.  
 Crown-stripe grey-brown, appearing paler on forehead which frequently appeared as a pale spot. Also paler patch at top of nape (this pale nape spot boarded with dark bars was vaguely reminiscent of a Brambling)  
 Bill dull grey-brown but with obvious darker upper mandible

Underwing coverts and auxiliaries - Surprisingly, seen on five occasions during upward double wing-stretches. On 4 occasions seen remarkably well - all feathers were gleaming white and contrasting with duller flank feathers.

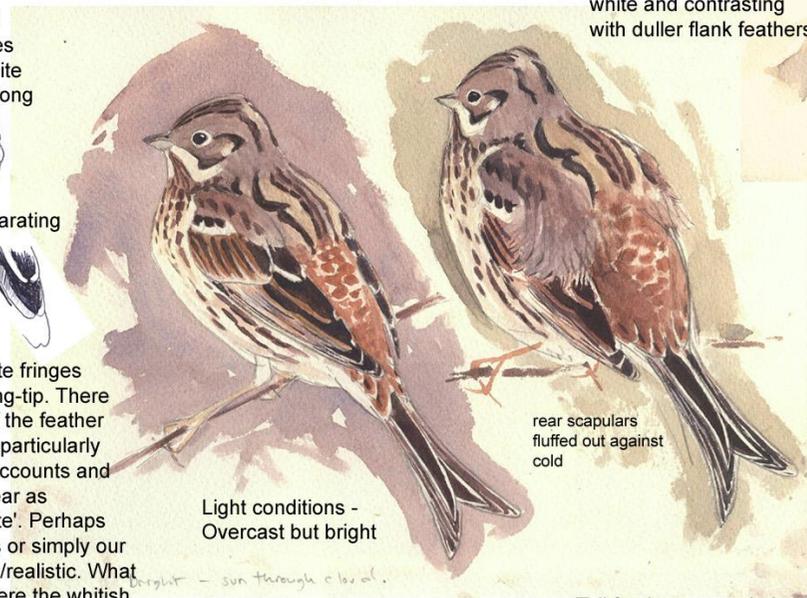


Median coverts striking with broad pure white tips and blackish centres (this feature combined with the white edged inner tertial stood out over long distances)

Greater coverts red-brown with white tips, pale fringe and blackish centres.  
 Tertials having 'W' shaped tip, separating fringe of tip into two. inner tertial all white. Middle and longest tertial with white spot on inner tip - rest of fringe red-brown.



Primaries blackish-brown with white fringes especially obvious towards the wing-tip. There were no traces of yellow on any of the feather fringes but sometimes in the field, particularly at distance, (and contra to some accounts and literature) these didn't always appear as 'dazzling white' more of a 'dull white'. Perhaps this was due to the light conditions or simply our observations being more objective/realistic. What was more eye-catching at times, were the whitish fringes on the inner half of the secondaries which could merge to appear as a whitish 'block' which contrasted with the slightly browner washed fringes along the outer half of the feathers.



Light conditions - Overcast but bright

rear scapulars fluffed out against cold

Crest often raised high when alert. This combined with the head markings, creamy-buff washed breast and bold median wingbar put me in mind of an autumn Rustic Bunting.

Nape grey-brown, appearing greyer in brighter light.  
 Mantle grey-brown, again appearing greyer in brighter light and boldly streaked blackish-brown. Two obvious paler buffy braces on the mantle.  
 Scapulars brown-grey slightly browner towards wing-bend with dark brown mottled centres.  
 Rump dull rusty red the feathers at the centre having obvious pale tips and slightly darker centres giving the rump a very spotty look - particularly obvious in brighter light.  
 Uppertail coverts dull red with white fringes and dark centres

Tail feathers very obviously sharply pointed. The central tail feathers appearing black with a crisp white fringe. The remaining tail feathers blackish with crisp white fringes and no traces of yellow.

