

## Lapland Longspur

*Calcarius lapponicus* (Linnaeus)

**RANGE:** Holarctic. In North America, breeds from western and northern Alaska, northern Yukon, Banks, Prince Patrick, Melville, and northern Ellesmere islands south to the Aleutians, south-coastal Alaska, northern Mackenzie, southern Keewatin, northeastern Manitoba, northern Ontario, northern Quebec, and northern Labrador. Winters from southwestern British Columbia, southern Alberta, and southern Saskatchewan east to southern Ontario and Nova Scotia, south to northern California, northern Utah, Colorado, Oklahoma, northwestern Texas, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Maryland. Also occurs in Greenland and the Palearctic.

**STATUS:** On the coast, an *uncommon* to occasionally *fairly common* migrant and winter visitant and *very rare* in summer in the Georgia Depression Ecoprovince, particularly in the Fraser Lowland; in the Coast and Mountains Ecoprovince, generally a *rare* spring and autumn transient on Western Vancouver Island, *casual* there in summer; *rare* spring and autumn transient, *casual* in winter on the Northern Mainland Coast; *casual* spring and *rare* autumn transient on the Queen Charlotte Islands, *casual* there in winter; and *casual* in spring and autumn on the Southern Mainland Coast.

In the interior, *very common* to *abundant* (occasionally *very abundant*) transient in the Boreal Plains Ecoprovince; *common* to locally *very common* in the Taiga Plains and Northern Boreal Mountains ecoprovinces; *uncommon* to locally *fairly common* transient in the Southern Interior and Central Interior ecoprovinces; *rare* spring and *common* autumn transient in the Southern Interior Mountains Ecoprovince; *uncommon* in the Sub-Boreal Interior Ecoprovince. In winter, *casual* in the Southern Interior and Southern Interior Mountains; *accidental* in the Sub-Boreal Interior and Boreal Plains.

**OCCURRENCE:** The Lapland Longspur (Figs. 403 and 404) is a widespread but sparsely distributed transient throughout much of British Columbia. It is a bird of open, treeless habitats ranging from rocky offshore islets on the coast to low-elevation grasslands and alpine tundra in the interior. This longspur is one of the earliest spring migrants and begins its northward movement through the province at about the same time as the American Pipit and well over a month before the much scarcer Smith's Longspur. A spectacularly large spring and autumn movement occurs east of the Rocky Mountains through the Boreal and Taiga plains and along the British Columbia/Yukon border area of the Northern Boreal Mountains.

In British Columbia, the Lapland Longspur has been recorded at elevations ranging from sea level to 2,660 m on the coast and from 280 to 2,440 m in the interior. During early spring, flocks of Lapland Longspurs begin sweeping north, seeking out the first snow-free areas, including low-elevation grasslands (Fig. 405), agricultural fields, and roadsides in the interior, and agricultural fields, estuaries, and beaches along



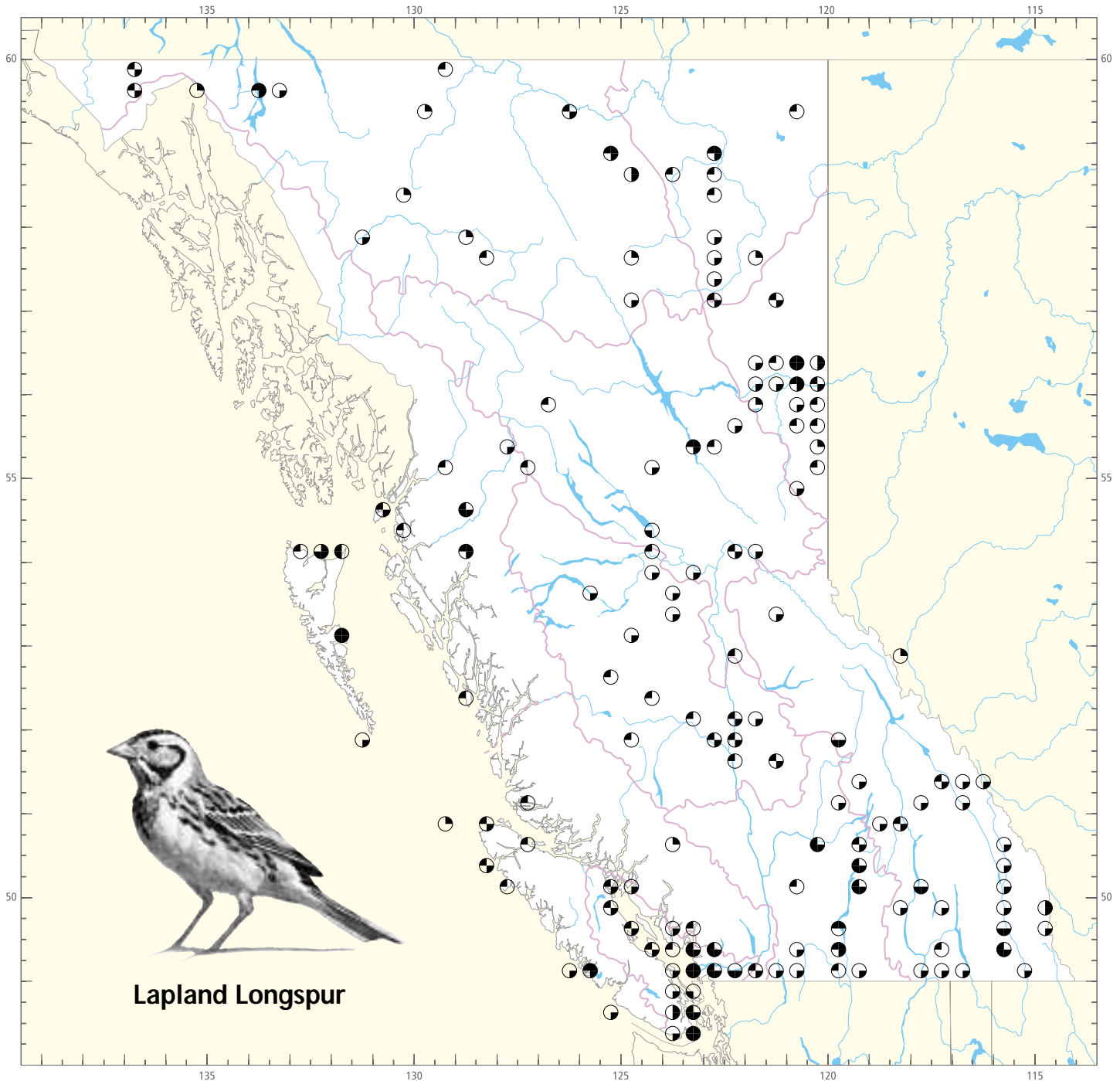
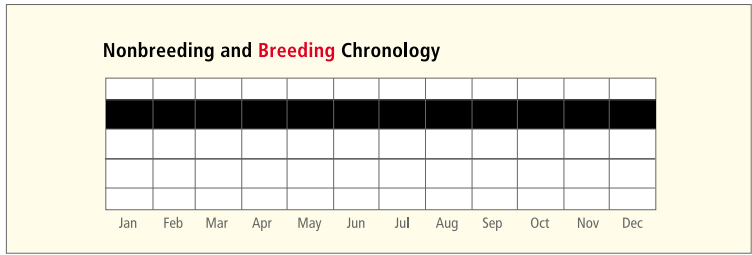
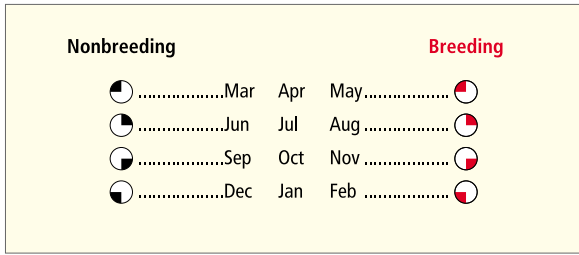
**Figure 403.** Male Lapland Longspur in breeding plumage (© Brian E. Small/VIREO). The Lapland Longspur migrates through British Columbia to and from its tundra breeding grounds in the far north.



**Figure 404.** Lapland Longspur in winter plumage (© S. Young/VIREO). A small number of Lapland Longspurs winter most years in extreme southwestern British Columbia.

the coast (Fig. 406). In northern portions of the province, where natural forest openings are less common, it makes greater use of human-created habitats, including fields, road edges, gravel pits and roadside clearings, sewage lagoon dykes, airstrips, gas and petroleum well sites, utility corridors, recent clearcuts, and settlement clearings. During the autumn migration, longspurs use habitats similar to those in spring, but also make use of the alpine areas. In winter, the Lapland Longspur is found primarily on the south coast in open grassy or sparsely vegetated habitats (Fig. 407), including cultivated fields, grazed pastures, roadsides, estuaries, rocky shorelines and islets, beaches, lagoons, jetties, causeways, sedge wetlands, golf courses, playing fields, and airports. On rare occasions it goes to bird feeders.

Order Passeriformes Family Emberizidae



Lapland Longspur

		Data Base												
		Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Totals
Nonbreeding		20	26	65	117	139	8	4	36	342	340	68	44	1,209
Breeding		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

## *Lapland Longspur*



**Figure 405.** During spring and autumn migration in the southern interior of British Columbia, the Lapland Longspur frequents low-elevation grasslands (Hat Creek, 4 November 1996; R. Wayne Campbell).



**Figure 406.** Along the coast of British Columbia, the Lapland Longspur is often found foraging on log-littered beaches during migration (Tlell, 20 May 1996; R. Wayne Campbell).



**Figure 407.** In winter, small numbers of Lapland Longspurs are most often found in open grassy or sparsely vegetated regions of the Fraser Lowland in the Georgia Depression Ecoprovince (Delta, 31 March 1997; R. Wayne Campbell).

In northeastern British Columbia, the Lapland Longspur is usually reported in large single-species flocks. Elsewhere in the province, it is more often observed in mixed flocks with 1 or more other species, usually Horned Larks, American Pipits, and Snow Buntings. It is also occasionally seen with Western Meadowlarks; Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches; Savannah, White-crowned, Chipping, and American Tree sparrows; and Smith's Longspurs.

The spring migration of the Lapland Longspur along the coast is small. In the Georgia Depression, it is difficult to distinguish migrants from wintering numbers, but migration likely begins in early March; migrants are reported in this ecoprovince throughout April, with a few stragglers recorded into late May (Figs. 408 and 409). Elsewhere on the coast, a very small movement occurs along the Southern Mainland Coast from the first week of March to the third week of April; the timing of arrival and departure is about 1 week later on the Northern Mainland Coast. The first spring migrants do not appear on Western Vancouver Island until the second week of April, and arrive 1 week later on the Queen Charlotte Islands; the last birds have left both areas by the third week of April. The majority of spring records on the coast are of single birds, with the largest flocks reported from the Georgia Depression.

In the interior, the first spring migrants begin to arrive in the Southern Interior during the second week of March and reach the Central Interior about 1 week later. Small numbers move through both areas until about the third week of April, but a few stragglers are reported into late May (Figs. 408 and 409). In the Southern Interior Mountains and Sub-Boreal

Interior, single birds and small flocks begin to arrive in mid-March and have passed through by early May.

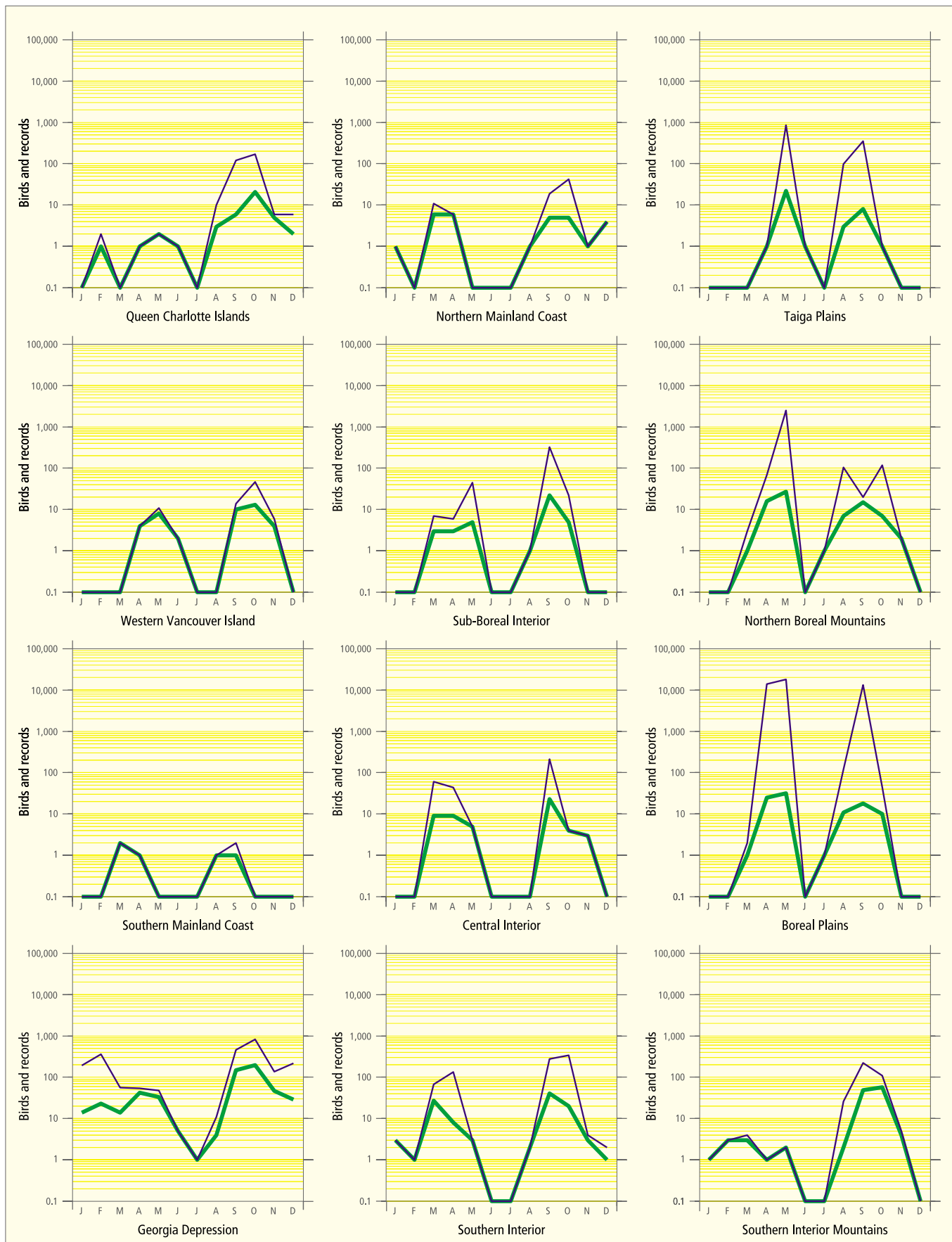
Further north, the first longspurs begin to arrive in the Boreal Plains in early April, heralding the beginning of a large migratory movement from the prairie and parkland regions of Alberta. From late April through early May, flocks of up to 1,000 birds or more quickly pass through this area; only a few small flocks remain by the third week of May. In the Peace Lowland, where most migrants are recorded, the Lapland Longspur is found in agricultural areas and shows a preference for grain stubble fields (Phinney 1998). Longspurs are also attracted to fields with standing water, small ponds, or water-filled ditches, where they gather to drink. Further north, in the Taiga Plains, the spring migration is less well documented but appears to begin in early May and is largely over by the third week of the month. In the Northern Boreal Mountains, the first migrants generally begin to arrive during the last week of April; by the third week of May the main movement has passed through.

The earliest spring migrants arriving at the Atlin Lake and Chilkat Pass areas of northwestern British Columbia and along the Alaska Highway in southwestern Yukon appear to precede the main "prairie" migration through northeastern British Columbia (Figs. 408 and 409). West et al. (1968) note that the arrival of these first migrants precludes the possibility that they are using the prairie route; they must therefore use alternative routes along the coast and through interior valleys of British Columbia. Although a spring movement is recorded along both routes, our data suggest that they are very minor in extent and do not fully account for the large



Figure 408. Annual occurrence for the Lapland Longspur in ecoprovinces of British Columbia. Records are shown for the week in which they occurred.

## Lapland Longspur



**Figure 409.** Fluctuations in total number of birds (purple line) and total number of records (green line) for the Lapland Longspur in ecoprovinces of British Columbia. Christmas Bird Count data have been excluded.

numbers that first appear in the extreme northwestern corner of British Columbia. The Lapland Longspur is a strong flier (Rising 1996), however, and may be capable of migrating quickly over these lightly populated areas, thereby avoiding detection. In northern Alberta, longspurs have been noted passing rapidly over forested areas during migration (Salt and Salt 1966).

During autumn, the main movement of longspurs retraces the spring route east of the Rocky Mountains through the Taiga and Boreal plains and into Alberta. A distinct southward movement is also noted along the coast and throughout the southern portions of the interior, where significantly more records and larger flock sizes than in the spring are reported (Fig. 409). There are several autumn records of longspurs using alpine habitats, mostly along the Rocky Mountains. On the coast, there is a single record from the alpine areas in the southern Coast Mountains, but this species was not detected during autumn surveys of alpine areas on Vancouver Island (Ogle and Martin 1997).

On the coast, the first migrants begin arriving in small numbers in mid-August, with the main movement occurring from late September through early October. Only a few stragglers remain after the end of October, except in the Georgia Depression, where some birds overwinter.

In the interior, the first southward movement is noted in most ecoprovinces when a few early migrants appear in late August (Figs. 408 and 409). In northern areas, peak movements probably occur during the first 2 weeks of September, but this is not well documented. In the Boreal Plains, the autumn migration is comparable in magnitude to the spring migration (Fig. 409), but flock sizes tend to be smaller, with most consisting of fewer than 50 birds (C. Siddle pers. comm.). Large aggregations occasionally occur, however, such as a huge gathering of approximately 12,000 longspurs recorded near Prespatou, north of Fort St. John. By mid-September most longspurs have passed through the north; a few stragglers remain into late October. In the southern ecoprovinces, the autumn movement peaks during late September except in the Southern Interior, where large flocks are occasionally reported into mid-October. Most migrants have passed through by the end of October; stragglers are occasionally reported into late November.

The Lapland Longspur is an irregular wintering species in British Columbia. Most winter records come from the Georgia Depression, especially the western portion of the Fraser Lowland (Fig. 407), including Iona, Sea, Lulu, and Westham islands, and the Ladner-Delta areas. A smaller number of winter records come from Greater Victoria on southern Vancouver Island. Elsewhere on the coast, there are a few records of from 1 to 4 birds on the Queen Charlotte Islands, at Terrace on the Northern Mainland Coast, and at the Squamish River estuary on the Southern Mainland Coast. In the interior, there are a few scattered records mostly of single birds near Kamloops

and in the north Okanagan valley in the Southern Interior, and near Cranbrook, Nakusp, and Wells Gray Park in the Southern Interior Mountains. There is a single record of 6 longspurs wintering in the Peace Lowland of the Boreal Plains, and a single longspur in winter at Fort St. James in the Sub-Boreal Interior.

On the coast, the Lapland Longspur has been recorded through most of the year but mainly from mid-September through mid-May; in the interior, it is reported regularly from late August to early November and from mid-March to late May (Fig. 408). There are several June and July records in British Columbia, mostly of single birds.

**REMARKS:** Known in Old World literature as the Lapland Bunting. Of the 3 subspecies found in North America, only *C. l. alascensis* occurs in British Columbia (American Ornithologists' Union 1957). Once known as the Alaska Longspur, this subspecies breeds in the Arctic tundra of western Canada and Alaska, including the islands in the Bering Sea (Rising 1996).

As with many passerines, the initial spring flocks of Lapland Longspurs consist predominantly of males. West et al. (1968) report that the first flocks of longspurs migrating through northern British Columbia and the Yukon into Alaska consist of 90% males, but as the migration progresses, the proportion drops to 25% males. Although the onset of spring migration can vary from year to year, the ratio of males to females provides an easy method for determining the stage of migration. Many records in our data base note the preponderance of males in these early spring flocks.

Phinney (1998) reports that the appearance of the Merlin in the Boreal Plains near Dawson Creek coincides with the spring arrival of the Lapland Longspur. Our data show several instances of Merlin following and preying upon longspurs in this region during both spring and autumn migration.

The Lapland Longspur's habit of foraging along roadsides and flushing at close range makes it vulnerable to vehicle collisions. Irving (1961) reported that while driving to Atlin, he found 15 longspurs that had been killed or injured by a vehicle travelling ahead of him. Similar incidents have been observed near Dawson Creek (M. Phinney pers. comm.) and along the British Columbia portion of the Alaska Highway.

The cryptic plumage of the Lapland Longspur during the nonbreeding season and its habit of mixing in flocks of more abundant species make it an easy species to overlook. Even during spring, the distinctively marked males are seldom in full breeding plumage when they migrate through the province. These factors, combined with its relative scarcity in populated areas of southern British Columbia, have likely resulted in this species being underreported. With experience, observers can readily identify the Lapland Longspur by its distinctive flight calls.

## NOTEWORTHY RECORDS

Spring: Coastal – Esquimalt Lagoon (Metchosin) 24 Apr 1985-1; Clover Point (Victoria) 24 May 1971-1 in breeding plumage (Tatum 1973); Central Saanich 5 Apr 1986-2 in field; Tofino 19 Apr 1996-1 on golf course; Delta 9 Mar 1975-22 flying over in 1 large flock; Sea Island 2 May 1965-8 at Vancouver airport; Iona Island 31 May 1971-1; Chilliwack 31 Mar 1888-1 (Cooke 1910); Delta 30 Mar 1980-5 at Brunswick Point; Campbell River 27 Apr 1975-2 on estuary; Cluxewe River 20 Apr 1991-1 on estuary (Dawe et al. 1995); Guise Bay 19 May 1974-2; Point Holmes 21 Apr 1952-1 (RBCM 10072); McInnes Island 25 Mar 1964-1; Sandspit 6 May 1979-1 at airport; Langara Island 23 Apr 1927-1 in muskeg (Darcus 1930); Kitimat River 15 Mar 1980-5 in short grass on estuary; Terrace 23 Apr 1976-1 in schoolyard (Hay 1976); New Aiyansh 30 Apr 1987-1. Interior – Christina Lake 20 Apr 1971-1 on dyke at s end (Walker 1996); Okanagan valley 31 May 1914-1; nr Quilchena 1 Mar 1997-1; Knutsford 4 Apr 1982-125 in ploughed field, 17 Apr 1983-1 in grassland; Dog Creek 17 Mar 1991-10, all males with Snow Buntings and Horned Larks (Stewart 1991); Chilcotin (Riske Creek) 13 Mar 1984-1 male at Wineglass Ranch; Farwell Canyon 16 Mar 1985-25 in grassland with Horned Larks; Deer Park (Chilcotin) 10 May 1991-1; Quesnel 15 Mar 1979-1; Giscome 15 Mar 1992-5; Moricetown 13 Mar 1979-1; Tetana Lake 12 May 1938-1 (RBCM 8995); Sunset Hill 27 May 1993-8 in recent clearcut; Dawson Creek 15 Apr 1990-1,000 (Siddle and Bowling 1993), 22 Apr 1994-10,000 (Bowling 1994a); Fort St. John 10 May 1982-2,500 in ploughed field; nw Fort St. John 3 May 1985-2,500, about 85% males; sw North Pine 27 Mar 1982-2 feeding in stubble field, 18 Apr 1988-600; Charlie Lake 21 May 1983-1; Sikanni Chief River 7 May 1992-40 in grassy field; Buckinghorse River 13 May 1982-10; Hyland Post 10 May 1982-10; Steamboat 3 May 1985-100 in mixed flock with White-crowned Sparrows and Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches; Fort Nelson 3 Apr 1987-1, 1 May 1987-250 at airport, 22 May 1982-1; Helmut 15 May 1982-50; Liard River 7 May 1975-3 (Reid 1975); s Cormier Creek 29 Apr 1965-30 along Highway 37 (West et al. 1968); Atlin 21 Mar 1981-3; Atlin Lake 2 May 1958-2,000 between Atlin and BC-Yukon border (Irving 1961); Chilkat Pass 7 May 1957-1 (Weeden 1960); Kusawak Lake 21 May 1977-1 feeding on ground with Snow Buntings, American Tree Sparrows, and 2 Smith's Longspurs.

Summer: Coastal – Esquimalt Lagoon 24 Aug 1980-2 with 6 Horned Larks; Saanich 20 Aug 1979-2; Sidney Island 29 Aug 1987-1; Tofino 10 Jun 1982-1 at airport in full breeding plumage; Iona Island 4 Jun 1990-1, 2 Jul 1985-1; Tsawwassen 7 Aug 1960-6 on beach (Boggs and Boggs 1961a); Meager Mountain 14 Aug 1932-1 in alpine area nr summit (Carter 1933); Triangle Island 13 Jun 1976-1 in breeding plumage; Sandspit 23 Aug 1991-1 (Siddle 1992a); Masset 26 Aug 1957-8 on gravel beach (Mills 1960); Chilkooot Pass 12 Jul 1975-10 feeding on snow patches with Snow Buntings. Interior – Naramata 27 Aug 1942-1; Harmer Ridge (Sparwood) 30 Aug 1984-16 on high-elevation, reclaimed mine spoil; Tonquin Ridge 30 Aug 1974-10 in alpine area at 2,440 m elevation (Cannings et al. 1974); Kelly Lake 30 Aug 1981-10 with 25 American Pipits; e Moberly Lake 25 Jul 1930-1 (Williams 1933b); Baldonnel 29 Aug 1982-100; Beatton Park 20 Aug 1988-1; Boundary Lake (Goodlow) 22 Aug 1984-3; nr Ipec Lake 28 Aug 1979-50 (Cooper and Adams 1979); Conroy Creek 9 Jun 1922-1 (Williams 1933a); Spatsizi Plateau Wilderness Park 15 Jul 1959-1; Summit Pass 30 Aug 1943-7 (Rand 1944); Fort Nelson 30 Aug 1987-10 on golf course; Cassiar 25 Aug 1962-44.

Breeding Bird Surveys: Not recorded.

Autumn: Interior – Haines Highway 23 Oct 1981-100; Atlin 1 Nov 1932-1 (RBCM 5760); Summit Lake (Stone Mountain Park) 7 Sep 1943-1 (NMC 29607); Fort Nelson 6 Sep 1986-80 (McEwen and Johnston 1987a); Stikine River 27 Sep 1971-1; 11.8 km n Buckinghorse River 12 Sep 1997-75, on edge of Alaska Highway; Nig Creek (n Prespatou) 15 Sep 1984-12,000 in large fields; Pink Mountain 4 Oct 1981-several small flocks in alpine area; Pesika River 4 Sep 1997-4 in alpine area on s side of valley; ne Fort St. John 5 Sep 1986-500 at sewage lagoons, 23 Oct 1982-1 at sewage lagoons with flock of Snow Buntings; Cache Creek (Peace River) 1 Sep 1985-34, n of Highway 29; Two Rivers 2 Oct 1982-1; Roman Mountain 19 Sep 1998-200 in alpine area; 32 km s Nation River 20 Oct 1973-10 along roadside; Willow River 7 Sep 1983-40; Beverly Lake (Prince George) 23 Sep 1957-20; Giscome 22 Oct 1994-1; Nulki Lake 29 Sep 1951-100 (Munro 1955a); n Ootsa Lake 1 Sep 1997-1 in well-grazed pasture; Indianpoint Lake 23 Sep 1929-1 (MCZ 285803); Mount Davidson 15 Sep 1982-20; Riske Creek 8 Sep 1978-20 with Horned Larks; Williams Lake 1 Nov 1950-1 (Jobin 1952); Buffalo Lake 24 Sep 1933-2

(RBCM 11439-40); lower Blaeberry River valley 7 Oct 1997-7 in cattle pasture; Revelstoke 30 Nov 1988-2; Knutsford 10 Oct 1983-25, 18 Nov 1984-2; Enderby 28 Sep 1954-1 (UBC 7777); Okanagan Landing 16 Oct 1934-100; Nakusp 22 Sep 1980-15; McDonald Creek (Nakusp) 2 Sep 1985-1; Harmer Ridge 17 Sep 1983-40 on reclaimed mine spoil; West Bench (Penticton) 12 Oct 1970-100; Princeton 6 Sep 1890-1 (MCZ 44382); Cranbrook 1 Oct 1940-20 (Johnstone 1949); Newgate 16 Oct 1930-1 (NMC 24639); Duck Lake (Creston) 15 Sep 1980-13; Manning Park 27 Sep 1972-2. Coastal – 37 km n Hazelton 8 Sep 1921-1 (MVZ 42269); Terrace 30 Nov 1968-1; Green Island (Dundas Island) 7 Oct 1977-23 at lightstation; Masset 7 Oct 1939-2 (RBCM 10352 to 10353), 4 Nov 1971-2; Sandspit 6 Oct 1991-35 (Siddle 1992a), 8 Nov 1986-1 at airport; Cape St. James 27 Sep 1981-85, 12 Nov 1978-8; Cape Scott 16 Sep 1935-1; Grant Bay 14 Oct 1968-5; Angus Creek (Sechelt) 15 Oct 1992-1; Mission Point (Sechelt) 15 Sep 1992-1; Stubbs Island (Tofino) 17 Oct 1982-14 feeding on grassy beach dune, 9 Nov 1982-1; Chesterman Beach (Tofino) 2 Sep 1983-1; Pitt Meadows 11 Oct 1981-25; Skagit River 29 Sep 1974-2; Iona Island 3 Oct 1981-100; Duncan 8 Sep 1972-10; Pachena Point 23 Sep 1974-4 on gravelly, weedy areas; Oak Bay 17 Sep 1977-17 on golf course.

Winter: Interior – Hemp Creek (Wells Gray Park) 3 Feb 1953-1 in field, collected (Edwards and Ritcey 1967); Knutsford (Kamloops) 2 Dec 1984-2; Vernon 11 Jan 1992-1 with Horned Larks (Siddle 1992b); Okanagan Landing 3 Feb 1922-unknown number with Snow Buntings and Horned Larks; Cranbrook 5 Jan 1937-1 (RBCM 10911). Coastal – Terrace 1 Dec 1968-1 (Crowell and Nehls 1969b); Rose Spit 18 Dec 1986-3; Delkatla Inlet 11 Feb 1973-2; Pitt Meadows 28 Jan 1973-8; Iona Island 15 Dec 1992-20 (Siddle 1992b); Lulu Island 1 Feb 1949-30 feeding in field; Westham Island 25 Feb 1985-30; Delta 8 Feb 1975-130 in 2 flocks, with Western Meadowlarks; Chain Islets 23 Dec 1976-22; Victoria 10 Jan 1971-3 (Crowell and Nehls 1971b).

Christmas Bird Counts: Interior – Recorded from 4 of 27 localities and on 2% of all counts. Maxima: North Pine 27 Dec 1986-6; Fort St. James 2 Jan 1994-1 (BC Photo 1713); Vernon 22 Dec 1985-1; Nakusp 3 Jan 1986-1. Coastal – Recorded from 6 of 33 localities and on 3% of all counts. Maxima: Ladner 21 Dec 1963-102; Victoria 18 Dec 1976-22; Vancouver 15 Dec 1991-20.