

FIRST BREEDING RECORD OF LAZULI BUNTING ON VANCOUVER ISLAND, BRITISH COLUMBIA

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The Lazuli Bunting (*Passerina amoena*) is a summer visitant to British Columbia, breeding from the southwest mainland coast of the province north through the interior to the Cariboo-Chilcotin region where it is currently expanding its range (Campbell et al. 2001; A. Roberts pers. comm.). Although the species has been reported from widespread locations on Vancouver Island from early May through late August, it has only been found with some regularity in the vicinity of Courtenay and Comox (D. Innes pers. obs.) and specific sites in Saanich, Victoria, and Metchosin (W.H. Hesse pers. obs.).

On southern Vancouver Island the earliest records of Lazuli Bunting were of a vagrant collected in Saanich on 2 July 1896 (Munro and Cowan 1947) and another observed on 26 May 1959 on Mount Tolmie (A.R. Davidson pers. obs.). Ten years later, on 29 June 1970, a pair of Lazuli Buntings was observed in the Helmcken Road area of View Royal, which suggested the possibility of nesting (Tatum 1971). Individuals were also present in the area in 1971 and 1972 (Tatum 1972, 1973).

Over the next three and a half decades Lazuli Bunting was reported with regularity and the buntings' status changed from vagrant to rare summer visitor. As expected, most detections were of males which are easily located because they sing constantly from conspicuous perches.

Some of the locations on southern Vancouver Island where Lazuli Buntings have been observed include Central Saanich (two locations), Metchosin (four locations), Mount Douglas, Mount Tolmie, Rithets Bog, Rocky Point, Saanich, and View Royal. All of these sites have open spaces that are characterized by shrubby vegetation of various heights. Some habitats, like Mount Tolmie, consist of open Garry oak (*Quercus garryana*) woodlands

interspersed with grasses and patches of shrubs. Others range from riparian shrubs bordering open marshes (e.g., Rithets Bog) to shrubby agricultural lands (e.g., Martindale Flats, Central Saanich).

Since the mid-2000s, the late Werner H. and Hildegard Hesse have observed Lazuli Buntings annually in the vicinity of Metchosin, British Columbia. Most of the habitats were open with a ground cover of dense and extensive patches of introduced Scotch broom (*Cystisus scoparius*) and Himalayan blackberry (*Rubus discolor*) interspersed with Nootka rose (*Rosa nutkana*). The Hesses suspected birds were nesting because a pair was present most of the summer in 2007.

Following their suggestion I searched the area in 2008 and discovered a nest on 21 July on a shrubby, disturbed hillside. It contained two feathered nestlings about seven days old. The nest was securely saddled and interwoven on crossing stems deep within a tangled Himalayan blackberry shrub. The open cup nest was 1.4 m from the ground and was composed of coarse grasses, plant fibres, and fine rootlets, and lined with fine dry grasses and Columbian Mule Deer (*Odocoileus hemionus columbianus*) hair which had probably been obtained from a nearby carcass.

After discovering the nest, I moved some distance away and for about 45 minutes watched both adult buntings delivering food to the nestlings. Since the nest site was on private property, I did not want to draw the attention of passing walkers, some with dogs, even though I had permission to visit the site.

I checked the nest again on 25 July and it appeared that the young had fledged successfully even though no adults or juveniles were seen in the vicinity.

The following year, on 27 May 2009, a male Lazuli Bunting was singing from a Scotch Broom bush in similar habitat about 250 m from the original

nest site. No female was seen. Unfortunately I left for six weeks of field work and was unable to confirm nesting activities. Shortly after I returned, I visited the area on 11 July and could not find any buntings. The original nest site had been disturbed by machinery.

This discovery is the first confirmed breeding of Lazuli Bunting for Vancouver Island (see Campbell et al. 2001) and extends the species' breeding range westward to coastal islands in northwestern North America (see Greene et al. 1996).

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