

THE MONTCLAIR BIRD CLUB

YOUR WEEKLY BIRD 31

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By Rick Wright

Corn Bunting, *Emberiza calandra*



Photo by Rick Wright

The corn bunting, a chunky, thick-billed, slightly sparrow-like bird of Europe and southwest Asia, is at present assigned to the same genus, *Emberiza*, as all of the other 43 species of Old World buntings. Historically, though, the corn bunting has at times occupied the genus *Miliaria*, from a Latin word meaning “having to do with millet.”

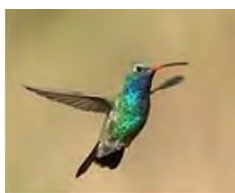
Corn buntings, like most seed-eating birds, happily dine on millet in the wild. The name “miliaria,” however, refers not to that habit but to the Roman custom of capturing wild buntings and keeping them in aviaries, where they were fattened on millet and other grains and then sold for table use “at high prices,” according to the agricultural economist Varro.

There is no indication that this ancient commerce had any effect on the populations of corn buntings, which appear to have been abundant throughout their range well into the twentieth century. Beginning no later than the 1970s, though, corn buntings began to decline dramatically in most of Europe, the result of the shift to extensive agricultural practices. Today, the hissing jumble of the corn bunting's song is a rare sound in northern European landscapes, where many local populations have been entirely extinguished by changes in land use. Only in the Mediterranean countries and around the Black Sea can you still count on meeting with this fine bird, fast becoming a predominantly Asian species.



Photo by Rick Wright

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Southwest Wings

