

Mystery Bird Causes a Stir

A handful of so-called 'mystery birds' have not been seen since John James Audubon painted and described them nearly 200 years ago. One of these was the Townsend's Bunting, described by Audubon in 1834 and long presumed extinct.

Bird Studies Canada's Senior Scientist Dr. Denis Lepage was the first to note that an odd-looking bird photographed by Kyle Blaney at Prince Edward Point, ON on May 14, 2014 shows intriguing similarities to the Townsend's Bunting.

The unusual colouration of both Audubon's and Blaney's birds baffled experts. Both were likely Dickcissels with abnormal plumage (e.g., a lack of yellow carotenoid pigments). There are minor differences between Audubon's illustration and the Ontario bird, such as the presence of a white wing bar in the latter. However, if both birds are aberrant variations of the same species, one could hardly expect them to be identical. Remarkably, the Ontario sighting may be only the second recorded example of this particular 'species,' and an incredibly rare sighting of one of Audubon's legendary mystery birds.

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Hand-coloured lithograph depicting Townsend's Bunting (*Spiza townsendii*) by J.T. Bowen, after J.J. Audubon. c. 1839.

Photo: Kyle Blaney



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