

= Yellowhammer =

The yellowhammer ( *Emberiza citrinella* ) is a passerine bird in the bunting family that is native to Eurasia and introduced to New Zealand , Australia , Uruguay , Brazil , Argentina , Chile , the Falkland Islands , South Africa , United States and Canada . Most European birds remain in the breeding range year @-@ round , but the eastern subspecies is partially migratory , with much of the population wintering further south . The male yellowhammer has a bright yellow head , streaked brown back , chestnut rump and yellow underparts . Other plumages are duller versions of the same pattern . The yellowhammer is common in open areas with some scrubs or trees , and forms small flocks in winter . It has a characteristic song with an " A little bit of bread and no cheese " rhythm . The song is very similar to that of its closest relative , the pine bunting , with which it interbreeds .

Breeding commences mainly in April and May , with the female building a lined cup nest in a concealed location on or near the ground . The 3 ? 5 eggs are patterned with a mesh of fine dark lines , giving rise to the old name for the bird of " scribble lark " . The female incubates the eggs for 12 ? 14 days to hatching , and broods the altricial downy chicks until they fledge 11 ? 13 days later . Both adults feed the chick in the nest and raise two or three broods each year . The nest may be raided by rodents or corvids , and the adults are hunted by birds of prey . Yellowhammers feed on the ground , usually in flocks outside the breeding season . The diet is mainly seeds , supplemented by invertebrates in the breeding season . Changes to agricultural practices have led to population declines in western Europe , but its large numbers and huge range mean that the yellowhammer is classed as being of least concern by the International Union for Conservation of Nature ( IUCN ) .

This conspicuous yellow bird has inspired poems by Robbie Burns and John Clare , and its characteristic song has influenced works by Beethoven and Messiaen . The children 's writer Enid Blyton helped to popularise the standard English representation of the song .

= = Taxonomy = =

The bird family Emberizidae contains around 300 seed @-@ eating species , the majority of which are found in the Americas , although the genus *Emberiza* , with more than forty members , is confined to the Old World . Within its genus , the yellowhammer is most closely related to the pine bunting , with which it forms a superspecies ; they have at times been considered as one species . The white @-@ capped and cirl buntings are also near relatives of the species pair . Where their ranges meet , the yellowhammer and pine bunting interbreed ; the yellowhammer is dominant , and the hybrid zone is moving further east .

The yellowhammer was described by Linnaeus in his *Systema Naturae* in 1758 under its current scientific name . *Emberiza* is derived from the German *embritz* , a bunting , and *citrinella* is the Italian for a small yellow bird . The English name is thought to have come from *ammer* , another German word for a bunting , and was first recorded in 1553 as *yelambre* .

= = = Subspecies = = =

There are three recognised subspecies . *E. c. citrinella* ( Linnaeus , 1758 ) , the nominate subspecies , occurs in southeast England and most of Europe east to the northwestern corner of Russia and western Ukraine , *E. c. caliginosa* ( Clancey , 1940 ) is the form found in Ireland , the Isle of Man and Great Britain ( except southeast England ) , and *E. c. erythrogenys* ( Brehm , 1855 ) breeds from Russia , central Ukraine and the eastern Balkans eastwards to Siberia and northwest Mongolia , and also has isolated populations to the east of the Black Sea and in the Caucasus .

= = Description = =

The yellowhammer is a large bunting , 16 ? 16 @.@ 5 cm ( 6 @.@ 3 ? 6 @.@ 5 in ) long , with a 23 ? 29 @.@ 5 cm ( 9 @.@ 1 ? 11 @.@ 6 in ) wingspan ; it weighs 20 ? 36 @.@ 5 g ( 0 @.@ 71 ? 1 @.@ 29 oz ) . The male of the nominate subspecies *E. c. citrinella* has a bright yellow head ,

heavily streaked brown back , rufous rump , yellow underparts , and white outer tail feathers . The female is less brightly coloured , and more streaked on the crown , breast and flanks . Both sexes are less strongly marked outside the breeding season , when the dark fringes on new feathers obscure the yellow plumage . The juvenile is much duller and less yellow than the adults , and often has a paler rump .

After breeding , adults have a complete moult which takes at least eight weeks ; males acquire more yellow in the plumage each time they moult . Juveniles have a partial moult not long after fledging , replacing the head , body and some covert feathers .

Differences between the subspecies are small and geographically gradual . On average , the male of *E. c. caliginosa* is slightly smaller and darker than the same sex of the nominate subspecies , and also has more streaking on its back , a greenish tint to the yellow of the head and more chestnut on the flanks . The male of the eastern form , *E. c. erythrogenys* , is paler and less streaked than *E. c. citrinella* . Its flanks , undertail and wing bars are usually whiter , and its crown and throat are brighter yellow . It is not usually possible to distinguish females of the three subspecies using plumage features .

Females and juveniles , especially of the pale eastern subspecies , *E. c. erythrogenys* , may be confused with pine buntings , but they always have a yellow tint to their plumage , a paler rufous rump and more uniform upperparts than that species . Young and female yellowhammers can be distinguished from circl buntings by the grey @-@ brown rump of the latter species . Male hybrids with pine bunting are typically white @-@ faced and have some yellow on the head , underparts or flight feathers , but females are usually indistinguishable from yellowhammers .

= = = Voice = = =

The song of the cock yellowhammer is a series of short notes , gradually increasing in volume and followed by one or two more protracted notes . It is often represented as " A little bit of bread and no cheese " , and the full version can be confused with the almost identical song of the pine bunting . If the final notes are omitted , confusion with the circl bunting is possible . Other vocalisations include a zit contact call , a see alarm , and a trilled tirrr given in flight .

Yellowhammer males learn their songs from their fathers , and over the course of time regional dialects have developed , with minor differences to the conclusion of the basic song ; all are mutually recognised by birds from different areas . Each male has an individual repertoire of song variants within its regional dialect ; females tend to mate with males that share their dialect , and prefer those with the largest repertoires .

The pine bunting and yellowhammer are so closely related that each responds to the other 's song . The male yellowhammer 's song is more attractive to females , and is one reason for the dominance of that species where the ranges overlap .

= = Distribution and habitat = =

The yellowhammer breeds across Eurasia between the 16 ? 20 ° C ( 61 ? 68 ° F ) July isotherms . It is the commonest and most widespread European bunting , although it is absent from high mountains , Arctic regions , the western Netherlands , most of Iberia and Greece , and low @-@ lying regions of other countries adjoining the Mediterranean Sea . It breeds in Russia east to Irkutsk , and in most of Ukraine . The Asian range extends into northwest Turkey , the Caucasus and northern Kazakhstan .

Most European yellowhammers winter within their breeding range , only the far north being vacated , although some birds move south of their breeding range in Spain , Italy and other Mediterranean countries . Distances travelled can be up to 500 km ( 310 mi ) for northern birds . Asian birds are more strongly migratory , deserting much of the north to winter in Iraq , Iran and southern Central Asia . The yellowhammer has occurred as a vagrant in the United Arab Emirates , Egypt , Kuwait , Morocco , Malta , the Himalayas ( winter vagrant from northern Afghanistan to central Nepal ) , the Balearic Islands , Iceland and the Faroes .

Yellowhammers of the British and Irish race , *E. c. caliginosa* were introduced to New Zealand by local acclimatisation societies in 1862 , and soon spread over the main islands . They sometimes visit New Zealand 's subantarctic islands , although rarely staying to breed , and have reached Australia 's Lord Howe Island on a number of occasions . At the beginning of the 20th century , this bunting was seen as a serious agricultural pest in its adopted country .

The yellowhammer is a bird of dry open country , preferably with a range of vegetation types and some trees from which to sing . It is absent from urban areas , forests and wetlands . Probably originally found at forest edges and large clearing , it has benefited from traditional agriculture , which created extensive open areas with hedges and clumps of trees .

#### = = Behaviour = =

#### = = = Breeding = = =

Breeding normally starts in early May , but often in April in the south of the range . Yellowhammers are monogamous and breed when aged one year . The males establish territories along hedges or woodland fringes and sing from a tree or bush , often continuing well into July or August . The male displays to the female by raising his wings and running towards her . The nest is built by the female on or near the ground , and is typically well hidden in tussocks , against a bank or low in a bush . It is constructed from nearby plant material , such as leaves , dry grass and stalks , and lined with fine grasses and sometimes animal hair . It is 11 @. @ 5 ? 13 cm ( 4 @. @ 5 ? 5 @. @ 1 in ) across with a cup 4 ? 4 @. @ 5 cm ( 1 @. @ 6 ? 1 @. @ 8 in ) deep .

The clutch is usually three to five whitish eggs , typically patterned with a network of fine dark lines . The eggs average 21 mm x 16 mm ( 0 @. @ 83 in x 0 @. @ 63 in ) in size and weigh 2 @. @ 9 g ( 0 @. @ 10 oz ) , of which 6 % is shell . The female incubates the eggs for 12 ? 14 days to hatching , and broods the altricial downy chicks until they fledge 11 ? 13 days later . Both adults feed the chick in the nest and two or three broods are raised each year .

The adult annual survival rate in the UK is around 54 % , and that for juveniles in their first year is 53 % . The typical lifespan is three years , although there are records from Great Britain and Germany of birds surviving for more than 13 years .

#### = = = Feeding = = =

Foraging is mainly on the ground , and the bird 's diet consists mainly of seeds . Oily seeds , such as those of brassicas , are ignored in favour of more starchy items . Typical food plants include common nettle , docks , common knotgrass , fat hen , common chickweed and yarrow . Grasses are also important , particularly cereals , and grain makes up a significant part of the food consumed in autumn and winter , wheat and oats being preferred to barley . When not breeding , yellowhammers forage in flocks which can occasionally number hundreds of birds , and often contain other buntings and finches .

The yellowhammer adds invertebrates to its diet in the breeding season , particularly as food for its growing chicks . A wide range of species is taken , including springtails , grasshoppers , flies , beetles , caterpillars , earthworms , spiders and snails .

#### = = Predators and parasites = =

Predators of the yellowhammer include the sparrowhawk , northern goshawk , lesser spotted eagle and hobby . It is not a significant host of the common cuckoo , a brood parasite , although as a ground @-@ nesting bird its eggs and chicks are vulnerable to predation from small mammals such as mice and other rodents . Nests are also raided by crows , Eurasian jays and Eurasian magpies . Predation accounted for more than 60 % of nest failures in a 2012 survey in Germany .

Thirteen species of fleas in the genera *Ceratophyllus* and *Dasysyllus* have been found on this

bunting , and internal parasites include *Ascaridia galli* . The yellowhammer may carry haematozoan blood parasites such as *Haemoproteus coatneyi* . Males with high parasite levels produced fewer offspring ( there is no such effect for females ) , and tend to be less brightly coloured . The striking plumage of the male may therefore have arisen as a signal of fitness to breed . Yellowhammers infected with *Haemoproteus* may have lower winter survival rates due to a tendency to having shorter wings .

= = Status = =

The International Union for Conservation of Nature ( IUCN ) estimates the European population of the yellowhammer to be from 54 ? 93 million individuals , suggesting a Eurasian total of 73 ? 186 million birds . Although the population appears to be in a decline , the decrease is not rapid enough to trigger the IUCN vulnerability criteria . The large numbers and huge breeding range of about 12 @. @ 9 million km<sup>2</sup> ( 5 million sq mi ) , mean that this bunting is classified by the IUCN as being of least concern .

Populations have declined in recent decades in western Europe , including the British Isles , Belgium , the Netherlands , Austria and Italy . The yellowhammer is a red @-@ list ( severely declining ) species in Ireland and the UK . In eastern Europe , numbers appear to be stable , although the trend in Russia is unknown . Changes to agricultural practices are thought to be responsible for reduced breeding densities . The introduced population in New Zealand has been very successful , with breeding densities much higher than in the UK .

= = In culture = =

The yellowhammer is a conspicuous , vocal and formerly common country bird , and has attracted human interest . Yellowham Wood and Yellowham Hill , near Dorchester , both derive their names from the bird . Robbie Burns ' poem " The Yellow , Yellow Yorlin " gets its title from a Scottish name for the yellowhammer , which is given an obvious sexual connotation : I met a pretty maid , an ' unto her I said , / " I wad fain fin ' your yellow , yellow yorlin " . More factual descriptions of the bird and its behaviour can be found in John Clare 's " The Yellowhammer 's Nest " and " The Yellowhammer " , whose final lines read :

Enid Blyton helped to popularise the bird 's song as " little bit of bread and no cheese " in books such as *The Ship of Adventure* and *Five Go Off in a Caravan* , and wrote a poem called " The Yellow @-@ hammer " .

Beethoven 's student , Carl Czerny , and biographer Anton Schindler , both suggested that the composer got the idea for the first four notes of his 5th symphony from the yellowhammer 's call , although it is more likely that the opening of the 4th Piano Concerto was actually the work in question . Beethoven also used the yellowhammer theme in two piano sonatas , no . 21 in C major ( the " Waldstein " , Op.53 ) and No. 23 in F minor ( the " Appassionata " , Op.57 ) .

Olivier Messiaen often used birdsong as an inspiration for his music , and the yellowhammer features in *Chronochromie* , *Catalogue d 'oiseaux* , *La fauvette des jardins* and *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité* , appearing in four movements of the last piece .

An old legend links the yellowhammer to the Devil . Its tongue was supposed to bear a drop of his blood , and the intricate pattern on the eggs was said to carry a concealed , possibly evil , message ; these satanic associations sometimes led to the persecution of the bird . The unusual appearance of the eggs also led to " scribble lark " , an old name for the bird .