

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lectures February 9th and 16th, 2011.
Joe Morlan is not responsible for these notes, any errors or omissions in them are mine.

Both our species of lark are also found throughout Eurasia. The Sky Lark is quite widespread there over a wide variety of open habitats while the Horned Lark is confined to the Tundra and shores and sand dunes. Eurasia has lots of species of larks. The Horned Lark, which is the most hardy of the lark species breeding in the arctic tundra, has spread into the tundra of NA.

Sky Lark

OCCURRENCE

There are Alaska records of long distance migrant Asian subspecies such as *pekinensis*. It is a little more heavily pigmented than the European nominate birds.

On the CBC 1978 a Sky Lark was found at the Hall Ranch at Pt Reyes (at the time the species was called the Northern Sky Lark).

It was a good year for Horned Larks and it was an exceptional year for longspurs in the lark field. Experienced birders pick through flocks of Horned Larks to find longspurs. Like larks, longspurs like bare dirt and walk on the ground instead of hopping. They are smaller than larks and usually more cryptically marked. Four species of longspurs are found in NA. In the fall of 1978 the Lapland, the Chestnut-collared and also the Mc Cowen's Longspur had been found at the Hall Ranch.

When the Sky Lark was found it was first thought to maybe be a dull Lapland Longspur. Lapland Longspurs usually have more rust in the wing coverts, but there wasn't anything else that came to mind. Then it was considered to be the first CA record of Smith's Longspur.

Binford looked at specimens and came to the conclusion that the bird was not any kind of longspur but that it was some kind of lark. Eventually it was concluded from specimen that the bird probably was a Sky Lark.

The question arose if it came from Asia or from the introduced population in Vancouver which was founded by birds imported from Britain, the nominate race *arvensis*. There was a controversial opinion that the only solution to identify the bird was to collect it as a specimen. But no permits to collect or band were ever issued by the National Park Service.

Albert Ghiorso (a brilliant nuclear scientist and a keen bird photographer) took lots of very good photographs of the bird which became crucial for the identification.

(Albert Ghiorso died last December. Joe has a short memoir of his experiences with Albert on his website: <http://fog.ccsf.edu/~jmorlan/ghiorso.htm>)

Joe did a lot of research on this particular bird and on the taxonomy and identification of the Sky Lark and of similar species. He submitted it to the California Bird Records Committee which accepted the record as a Sky Lark. Eventually he published a paper together with Dick Erickson in *Western Birds*: <http://elibrary.unm.edu/sora/wb/v14n03/p0113-p0126.pdf>

The bird returned to the same patch of dirt for seven consecutive winters. This is called philopatry. Birds are creatures of habit. They go where they can survive, and once they have survived they are very likely not to try something new.

Sky Larks are also introduced to Hawaii. Those are either *arvensis* or *arvensis*-like. Nobody is exactly sure which subspecies occupies the Hawaiian Islands.

FIELD MARKS

Streaked underneath.

Dark, heavily streaked crown.

Ear patch.

The pale supercilium wraps around the ear patch and also around the back of the head, forming a pale band on the back of the neck that separates the dark cap from the dark upper back. This is sometimes called the coronal band, a descriptive term Joe has never seen applied to anything other than a Sky Lark.

Relatively heavy, finch-like bill. People think of larks as having long, thin bills.

Sparrows (which longspurs really are) are supposed to have a short, conical bill.

Central tail feathers pale brown, outer tail feathers white. (Longspurs do not have pale central tail feathers.)

White along the trailing edge of the primaries and secondaries. (Oriental Sky Larks do not have any white along the trailing edges of the primaries.)

A very pointed wing, it is a long distance migrant. (The Oriental Sky Lark has a rounded wing, it is not a long distance migrant.)

White undertail coverts.

The Sky Lark at Pt Reyes would often sit up so that you could see the undertail coverts.

(There are now CA records of **Smith's Longspur**. There has never been another Sky Lark.

Smith's Longspur differences:

Wing bars.

Pale line down the middle of the crown.

Different face pattern.

Quite a lot of white on the tips of the median coverts.

Buffy undertail coverts. Longspurs tend to skulk, creeping along the ground, hard to ever see the undertail coverts. The buff is mostly in the center of the undertail coverts, laterally it can be tricky to see.)

VOCALIZATIONS

Sings in the air. Famous for their elaborate beautiful song. Fly up and down in the air while singing. That behavior is called skylarking. Other species, such as the American Goldfinch and the Cassin's Sparrow may occasionally exhibit what is called skylarking behavior. It simply means they sing from mid-air while flying about.

Horned Lark

OCCURRENCE

A relatively recent immigrant to NA.

Tends to prefer fairly barren country.

Widespread and fairly abundant in the correct habitat throughout much of NA. Yet many beginning birders have never seen one. Beginning birders do not know how to crawl through a barb wire fence out into a field that has mean cattle in it, which is the main habitat of the Horned Lark.

All Horned Larks tend to prefer bare dirt and gravel, places that are essentially unvegetated or only lightly vegetated. They don't get into thick grass or thick weeds or any kind of thick vegetation. You are most likely to find them in desert areas, ploughed fields, overgrazed pastures. They nest in Briones Regional Park. The only place Joe found them is along the gravel roadsides of the trails. They nest on Mt Diablo in very rocky areas. They nest in cattle pastures at Pt Reyes. They nest elsewhere around the Bay Area but have apparently been declining.

You can find them at Del Puerto Canyon Road in Stanislaus County in spring. Frequently you will find Horned Larks along the fencelines in the arid foothills there. They will be singing from the low fencelines. They also will skylark occasionally.

To avoid predation these birds try to blend in with the dirt. Instead of flying away they flatten themselves against the dirt and try to rely on their cryptic coloration.

Another population of Horned Larks is found in Europe and Asia where it occurs on tundra and in dune areas. A closely related bird is found in the Middle East and in much of North Africa, Temminck's Lark or Temminck's Horned Lark.

WALKING BEHAVIOR

They walk on the ground rather than hop like most of the sparrows do. That walking behavior is quite typical of pipits and longspurs as well. All three of these have a similar adaptation to foraging on the ground, especially in bare areas. They all have an exceptionally long and relatively straight rear claw which helps them balance.

The head appears to bob back and forth as they walk along. The head is in fact staying put while the body is moving forward. The head lags behind the progression of the body. Then the head comes forward by itself abruptly. The hypothesis is that the birds are trying to keep their heads still because it is much more difficult to detect motion if your eyes are moving. Motion is detected relative to other things and is really easy to detect if your eyes are still. If you are keeping watch for predator attacks from above it may be to your advantage to minimize the time that your head is moving.

FIELD MARKS

Females and males generally identical. Males have slightly longer black tufts and stronger face patterns.

Usually some yellow around the face. A black mask that extends down into long whisker marks.

Black bib across the upper chest.

Bill shape a little bit finch-like or sparrow-like. They eat both seeds and insects.

Tail dark with white outer feathers.

The brown central tail feathers are a characteristic of larks and are not found in any longspurs or pipits.

In flocks of Horned Larks there is a small percentage of birds with streaks on the underparts. None of the books show that. It may be that some individuals just retain some of the juvenal streaking.

Considerable geographic variation, over 20 recognized subspecies in NA.

In the east there are three subspecies, a little easier to try to identify, here in the west it is more a mosaic of variation, unwise to try to identify to subspecies. Variation within each race, a lot of overlap. The coloration can vary depending on the color of the ground where they live, those that blend in are more likely to survive.

In the Mono Basin area they are generally very pale.

Sibley p. 363: There are some very ruddy forms that are found in the west, including those that breed in the Central Valley (ssp. *rubea*, also in Nat Geo which does not show it nearly as orange as Sibley does). Sibley's plates in general, at least in the first printings, tended to have the colors too saturated.

The birds that we get in places like Pt Reyes are highly variable. They are a mixture of breeding birds from the area, birds that may have migrated from short distances such as the Central Valley, and a lot of birds that probably come from the high Arctic.

Juvenal

Blank face which may recall Sprague's Pipit.

Sprague's Pipits do not normally occur in CA. They are very rare winter visitors to stubble fields in the Imperial Valley with occasional records elsewhere. They do winter regularly in Arizona. Summer claims of Sprague's Pipit will cause people to raise their eye brows. When the juvenal Horned Larks are out there, that is most likely what people are seeing. Sprague's Pipits do not pump their tails up and down the way American Pipits do and neither do Horned Larks. Sprague's Pipits do not have a supercilium and their bill is decidedly thinner.

Band around the back of the neck almost like a baby Killdeer.

Scaly look to the back. Can have white spotting on the back.

Streaks on the breast.

VOCALIZATIONS

Will sing either in the air or from a perch.

Song more brittle than that of the Sky Lark, not nearly as melodious.