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THE LARK BUNTING IN OKLAHOMA

BY JACK D. TYLER

One of the most characteristic birds of the southern High Plains is a chunky, gregarious sparrow known as the Lark Bunting *(Calamospiza melanocorys)*. The distinctive color pattern of the breeding male, jet black except for a white shoulder patch, has conferred on it the name "prairie bobolink". The duller females are brownish, streaked below, and display far less noticeable wing patches (Fig. 1). Prior to southward migration, adults are joined by young-of-the-year to compose the huge roadside flocks often seen in late summer.

The Lark Bunting's breeding range stretches from the prairie provinces of Canada southward east of the Rockies to the plains of eastern New Mexico, western Oklahoma, and the Texas Panhandle (AOU Check-list, 1983). Local and sporadic extralimital nesting occurs.

LARK BUNTINGS

Photographed 17 April 1983 by John S. Shackford 10 miles west and 2 miles north of Okarche, Kingfisher County, central Oklahoma. Female-like bird, left, and male, right. Male is in partial breeding plumage.

It is in Cimarron County, at the western end of the Oklahoma Panhandle, that the largest concentrations of buntings in the state normally spend the summer, sometimes nesting in great numbers. Breeding records, however, exist only for the years 1913, 1926, 1937 (Sutton Summary of Bird Records, Stovall Mus., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman), and 1981 (Tyler field notes). During most favorable years, Lark Buntings probably breed somewhere in Cimarron County and eastward, for they have also nested in Grant (1961, 1964), Garfield (1972), and Harper counties (Sutton Summary). In Kansas, the Lark Bunting is a "common transient and summer resident in west, rare transient and summer resident in east" (Johnston, 1965).

Southward Migration — Dates of fall migration are difficult to determine, particularly in areas where the buntings have spent the summer. Flocks often begin to build during August in west-central Kansas, and have sometimes moved south by the first of September. Occasionally, small groups linger until late September or early October, but are inevitably gone by late October (S. Seltman letter of 5 November 1985 to Tyler). Max C. Thompson states that the last fall date for Kansas is 18 October and that most Lark Buntings are gone by 27 September (letter of 20 November 1985 to Tyler).

In Cimarron County, southward movement peaks sometime between late August and mid-September according to 23 records spanning the period 6 August to 7 October.* Immediately eastward, there are four records for Texas County, Oklahoma, that extend from 23 August to 3 September. One or two autumn records exist for a few northwestern counties (Woodward, Grant, and Rogers Mills) between 6 August and 27 October. Outside Cimarron County, the greatest number of sightings have been in five southwestern counties (Jackson, Tillman, Comanche, Cotton and Greer) and span the period 10 August to 26 November. In central counties (McClain, Cleveland, Oklahoma), dates of occurrence range from 6 September to 15 November, but only one of these observations involved more than one or two birds: on 27 October 1979, a flock of 12 was seen near Durham, Rogers Mills County, by Rena Ross (Sutton Summary). However, this late date may well represent birds already on the wintering grounds. It seems reasonable to assume that Lark Buntings encountered in western Oklahoma after mid-October are wintering. Possibly some birds are later pushed even farther southward by the onset of harsh and prolonged midwinter weather. There are no fall records known east of the 97th meridian in Oklahoma.

Based on many years of field observations, K. D. Seyffert, of Amarillo, Texas, believes that most birds migrate through the Texas Panhandle "from mid-August, or earlier, to late October." A case in point: he saw flocks totalling more than 1,000 birds in Sherman County, Texas (far northern Panhandle), the last week of July 1985, and about a week later, a few Lark Buntings had begun to move through the Amarillo area, a distance of some 80 miles south (Seyffert letter of 5 November 1985 to Tyler).

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*Records were compiled from a variety of sources, primarily the George M. Sutton Summary of Bird Records at the University of Oklahoma's Stovall Museum, field notes of the author, correspondence with qualified observers, Oklahoma Biological Survey records and literature references.

Winter Records — In Morton County, southwest Kansas, the number of Lark Buntings counted during Christmas Bird Counts from 1976 to 1984 averaged 89 (Am. Birds Christmas Count issues). Whether or not these birds remained all winter is unknown.

The species has been recorded during winter in Oklahoma from 1 December to 3 March. Of 40 records available, 27 (68%) are from seven southwestern counties, and extend from 1 December to 22 February. The remaining 12 are of isolated individuals or small groups distributed as follows: west-central (13-29 December); northwestern (23 December, 7 February); Panhandle (4 December, 9 February); central (1 December-31 March [same individual], 26, 27 December); and northeastern (16 December, 3 March).

The AOU Check-list (1983) does not include southwestern Oklahoma as a part of the wintering range of this species, but it has been observed there every year between 1969 and 1984 except 1970, 1971 and 1972. There are seven records each for Kiowa (1 December-3 January) and Jackson (21 December-22 February) counties, five from Cotton County (24 December-11 January), four for Beckham County (30 December-1 March), three each for Custer (31 December-14 February), Tillman (13 December-9 February) and Comanche (19-31 December) counties, and one each for Caddo (7 February) and Beckham (29 January) counties. The only January records for the state are from one west-central (Custer) and five southwestern counties.

Several of the foregoing records involved large numbers of birds. As examples, during the winter of 1975-76, John W. Ault III repeatedly observed flocks of 300-400 birds in the Eldorado area of Jackson County (Tyler field notes), and reported 642 in that vicinity during the Audubon Christmas Bird Count of 21 December 1977 (Am. Birds 32:756, 1978); Tyler and Michael Smith saw 275 birds in three flocks in Comanche County on 31 December 1979; Tyler and students counted 350 in four Jackson County flocks on 22 February 1980; and three flocks observed by Tyler in Cotton County on 24 December 1981 totalled 210 buntings (Tyler field notes).

Oberholser (1974) states that the species is abundant to fairly common in most of the western two-thirds of Texas from mid-October to early April, except for the northern Panhandle, where it is scarce. It is also considered rare during winter in Parmer, Castro, and Swisher counties in the southern Panhandle (Fischer, D. H., *et al.*, 1982). From 1977 to 1984, an average of 109 Lark Buntings was counted on the Buffalo Lake National Wildlife Refuge Christmas Bird Count in the the southwestern Panhandle (see Am. Birds Christmas Bird Count issues). Compared to the rest of the Panhandle, the species "winters most consistently and in greatest numbers" there (Seyffert letter). South of the Panhandle, wintering populations in the Midland vicinity of the south plains have crested by late October, and from then until April, 2500-3500 birds can usually be found in the proper habitat within four hour's time. Their numbers apparently fluctuate in proportion to the availability of feed grains (F. C. Williams letter of 10 November 1985 to Tyler).

In New Mexico, *Calamospiza* winters principally across the southern edge of the state (Hubbard, 1978). The buntings are sometimes so numerous in southeastern sections that they damage crops of maize or hegari (Ligon, 1961).

Northward Migration — Seyffert's Texas Panhandle records indicate that the buntings usually begin northward migration in mid or late March. Most have passed through by mid-May (Seyffert letter).

Spring migrants move northward through Oklahoma from as early as mid-March to the first part of June. According to 158 records covering the period 15 March to 5 June, the height of migration is probably from late April to mid-May. One exceptionally late spring — or early summer — record exists outside those counties where nests have been found: on 18 June, 1966, Ina S. Brown saw the species near Leedy in Dewey County, west-central Oklahoma (Brown letter of 13 November 1985 to Tyler). Of 29 counties that have recorded *Calamospiza* in spring, 25 (86%) are in the western half of the state. All dates for the four eastern Oklahoma counties (Osage, Washington, Tulsa, and Sequoyah) fall between 30 April and 15 May, and most observations were of single male birds. The greatest number of records (35) are for Cimarron County, and extend from 25 March to 5 June. Elsewhere in the Panhandle, there are 20 observations between 28 March and 1 June. In the northwest part of the main body of the state, 21 records for five counties span the period 27 April to 3 June. For two west-central counties, there are six sightings from 20 March to 20 May. In central Oklahoma, 26 records between 28 March and 19 May are known from nine counties. The earliest date for six southwestern counties is 15 March, the latest 5 June.

The average date of spring arrival for four counties in west-central Kansas from 1976 to 1984 was 5 May, and dates ranged from 27 April to 10 May (Seltman letter). The earliest date for Kansas is 2 April, but most birds arrive the latter part of April (Thompson letter).

Summary: In Oklahoma, Lark Buntings nest principally in Cimarron County, occasionally in other northwestern counties. They begin to migrate southward as early as mid or late August, but stragglers may linger in the state into mid-September. By latter October, most birds have probably arrived in their wintering areas, including the southwestern counties. Northward migration may commence in mid-March, peaks from about late April to mid-May, and infrequently persists into early June. From west to east, the species is increasingly less common in Oklahoma until it becomes rare east of the 97th meridian.

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JACK D. TYLER, DEPARTMENT OF BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES, CAMERON UNIVERSITY, LAWTON, OKLAHOMA 73505, 20 NOVEMBER, 1985.

A SNOWY OWL IN COMANCHE COUNTY, OKLAHOMA

BY J. MICHAEL MORGAN

Public Service Company's Comanche Station cooling lake 7 miles southeast of Lawton in Comanche County, southwestern Oklahoma, is a natural oasis for a variety of migrating waterbirds. As we drove past the south end of this 200-acre lake at 1000 on 28 February 1977, three of my driver's education students and I were startled to see a huge white bird standing on the earthen dam only 60 feet away. When we stopped for a better look, the bird flew southward across the road behind us for about 200 yards, landing near some concrete rubble in an overgrazed pasture. We could tell that it was an owl, but were not certain of the species. Approximately an hour later, three other students and I returned and watched the owl for several moments through 20× binoculars. Because of its great size, striking white color, the absence of "horns" (as in the Great Horned Owl, *Bubo virginianus*), and the fact that the bird persistently kept to the ground, we concluded that it was a Snowy Owl *(Nyctea scandiaca)*, a Far Northern species that rarely visits Oklahoma in winter (see Shackford, J.S., 1975, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc. 8:31).

Jack D. Tyler, Daniel L. Stephenson, and Janet M. and Louis E. McGee found the owl in the same spot between 1750 and 1900. Several photos of the bird taken by Stephenson and Louis McGee that day are on file in the Cameron University Museum of Zoology (CUMZ 896). When the photographers flushed the owl, it flew northeastward to the top of a roadside telephone pole just south of the lake, where it remained for perhaps 15 minutes. At dusk (1900), it suddenly pitched downward from this lofty perch, flapped a few times, glided directly across to the far side of the lake, and presently landed on a partially submerged fencepost. Scores of ducks and American Coots *(Fulica americana)* in its path were incited to pandemonium.

Except for its noticeably white throat and head, the owl showed heavy dark ventral barring. This is characteristic of young birds in first winter feather and of adult females; adult males are much whiter (Bent, A. C., 1937, Life histories of North American birds, Bull. U.S. Natl. Mus. 167, pp. 363-4).

Whitewashings were plenteous at the rubble pile, where we found six regurgitated pellets and the wing and scattered remains of a Mallard *(Anas platyrhynchos)*. The pellets ranged from 1.3 to 12.2 grams in weight, and the largest three contained remains of a large bird, probably a Mallard. From two of the other pellets we recovered the remains of cotton rats *(Sigmodon hispidus)*.

On 1 March, at about 0900, several persons got good looks at the owl at a place several hundred yards southeast of the rubble pile. These included Janet M. McGee, F. Elise Smith, Carroll and Velma Ridgway, and me. Later that same day, the Snowy Owl was observed for the final time by Danny J. McClung and Mike K. Clemons.

The winter of 1976-1977 was unusually severe. On 31 January 1977, there was, for the first time on record, snow in every one of the contiguous 48 United States (Canby, T. Y., 1977, Natl. Geogr. Mag. 152(6):809). Late on the evening of 25 February, a cold front swept through Lawton, causing the temperature to plummet from 73° to 47°F (Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge records). When I visited the lake approximately a week prior to 28 February, I did not

see the owl. It seems probable, therefore, that the great bird was ushered in by the cold front.

This first Comanche County record is also the southernmost for the state. Only one other Snowy Owl was seen so late in winter: on 11 March 1967, R. H. Stratton discovered one at the Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge in Alfalfa County, northwestern Oklahoma (Shackford, 1975, *op. cit.)*.

1005 NW 75TH STREET, LAWTON, OKLAHOMA 73505, 19 JANUARY 1978.

Laughing Gull in Tulsa, Oklahoma.—On 15 October 1984, between 0920 and 0945, we observed a bird that we believed to be a Laughing Gull *(Larus atricilla)* at Lake Yahola in Mohawk Park, located in northeast Tulsa, Oklahoma. The sky was mostly cloudy, temperature 56°F, and wind northwest at approximately 25 to 30 miles per hour. As we casually watched several Ring-billed Gulls *(Larus delawarensis)* circling above a gravel bar on the east side of the lake, we became aware of one dark-backed gull with long narrow wings, the black wingtips showing no white. Its manner of flight was almost tern-like and several times it swooped down, picked up a small fish, and ate it in flight. After bathing and preening for most of 10 minutes, the gull walked to a drier area on the bar near five or six Ring-billed Gulls and one Franklin's Gull *(Larus pipixcan)*. From approximately 75 feet away we studied the strange gull through our 25× telescopes, comparing it with the others. The Franklin's Gull was in winter plumage, and its black half-hood extended from eye to eye across the back of its head.

The following notes we made at the time: "Narrow-winged gull, dark grayish mantle and inner wings. Long black triangles on wingtips with no white "windows" and no white bar across wing at base of primaries. No black or gray half-hood as on the Franklin's Gull, the neck obviously longer and the body of more slender proportions. Ring-bills larger and heavier bodied. The bill black and sturdy, turning downward at tip and somewhat longer than the Franklin's Gull's stubby bill. Legs blackish and longer than Franklin's. Head and neck white, sprinkled with flecks of grayish brown. White eye-crescents not as prominent as Franklin's, the eye bordered by smudgy gray area that faded to white behind the eye. In flight white trailing edges of wings, white tail with 3 or 4 remnants of black tail band . . ." We felt certain that we had correctly identified this bird, but having no field guides with us to check intermediate gull plumages, and finding no one at the nature center to share our observations or to loan us a book, we drove home for our own. When we returned, a fisherman had waded out to the spot where the three gull species had been, and all were dispersed. Only a few Ring-bills remained to fly over the far reaches of the lake.

We judged the gull to have been in its second winter plumage, fairly well pictured in the National Geographic Society's field guide to the birds of North America (1983, Wash., D.C., pp. 145, 160). Of several publications consulted, the most complete treatments of the intermediate plumages of *Larus atricilla* and *L. pipixcan* were found in Volume 3 of The birds of the Western Palearctic (Cramp, S., and K. E. L. Simmons, 1983, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, U. K.).—Kenneth and Elizabeth Hayes, *5307 East 27th Place, Tulsa, Oklahoma 74114, 16 December 1984.*

A xanthochroistic male Purple Finch.—On 13 February 1978, Mrs. Jimmy E. (Gunter) Anderson called to tell me of an unusual bird at her feeder in Cushing, Payne County, Oklahoma. She described the bird as resembling an adult male Purple Finch *(Carpodacus purpureus)* except that its plumage was bright yellow in those places where the normal color should have been rosy.

The next morning, Berniece Frichot, Anderson and I observed the oddly colored bird in a hackberry (*Celtis* sp.) not far from the feeder. All of us noticed that its head, nape, and throat were "orange-yellow," its rump "buffy yellow" (color names from Chromatic Hexagon in Palmer, R. S., ed., 1962, Handbook of North American birds, Vol. 1, Yale Univ. Press, New Haven, Connecticut, insert following p. 4). Otherwise, the coloration was normal — back brown, flanks with light streaking, and wings brownish. Several times we had the opportunity to compare it with typical males as they fed nearby.

Desmond Isted, Charlaine Anderson, James Brooks, and Robert Farris also studied this unusual finch at the Anderson feeder on 16 February and several photographs were taken that day. On 19 February, as Elizabeth and Kenneth Hayes, Eleanor Sieg, and Robert Farris viewed the bird in bright sunlight, they detected a slight wash of rust on its dull golden throat.

Color aberrations are most commonly seen in the form of albinism or melanism. In birds, these abnormalities may be the result of atypical feather structure, anomalous pigment expression, or some combination of both. When yellow color appears, the term applied is xanthochroism. A detailed discussion of this complex but intriguing subject was given by J. P. Hailman in a recent issue of the Florida Field Naturalist (Vol. 12, pp. 36-38, 1984). J. K. Terres described it as follows: "Xanthochroism (xan-THOK-row-ism) is an abnormal yellow of the plumage, very rare in the wild, but more common among captive parrots. It is thought to result from the loss of dark pigment (melanin) in the feathers which allows the yellow carotenoid pigment to dominate over the light-produced and reflected blue" (1980, Audubon Society encyclopedia of North American birds, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, p. 98). Even though xanthochroism among Purple Finches is mentioned infrequently in the literature (see Blake, C. H., 1955, Notes on the eastern Purple Finch, Bird-Banding 26:102-103), banders occasionally encounter "female plumaged" individuals (i.e., females of any age or first winter males) with yellow rumps and/or scattered yellow crown feathers among populations of Purple Finches wintering in Oklahoma (W. A. Carter, pers. comm.). Most published accounts refer to birds exhibiting patches of yellow feathers rather than cases where the male's "rosy" coloration is wholly supplanted with yellow, as described above. The plumage variation reported in this note thus appears to be not only a first for the state, but also a very rare occurrence.—Deloris Isted, *2950 Woodward Boulevard, Tulsa, Oklahoma 74114, 14 April 1978.*

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BY LOUIS E. McGEE AND JANET M. McGEE

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