

Lark Buntings in the interior valleys of northern California, 1998-99

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In the winter of 1998-99, birders found a number of Lark Buntings (*Calamospiza melanocorys*) in the Central Valley and surrounding interior counties. What started as a sprinkling of one or a few birds in late fall and winter turned into small flocks by late spring. Observers reported many of these sightings to the Northern California Bird Box and to the Sacramento Area Bird Box. From these telephone reports, their subsequent transcriptions, postings to e-mail listservers, and correspondence with observers in California, the following information on Lark Buntings was gathered. These reports give an interesting picture of the pattern of occurrence of this species in the region.

1998-1999 SEASON

The first Lark Bunting found in the region in this period was one in Stanislaus County on 28 November. By the end of the spring of 1999, the number of birds reported ultimately totalled 52+ birds in 10 counties, as follows: Glenn (1); Madera (1); Monterey (1); Placer (4); Sacramento (1); San Benito (14+); Stanislaus (26); Sutter (1); Colusa (2); and Yolo (1) (see Appendix). Most birds were noted in association with White-crowned Sparrows (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*), Savannah Sparrows (*Passerculus sandwichensis*), and/or Lark Sparrows (*Chondestes grammacus*).

Along Phillip Road in Placer County there were originally four birds, distinguishable by slight plumage differences. Later, only three birds were seen. In the last few weeks of their stay, prior to migration, only two males in high alternate plumage remained. The last sighting was of a single male on the remarkably late date of 18 June (John Luther, pers. comm.). Of interest is the fact that they departed one by one instead of all at once. These birds were seen to range over a linear distance of nearly a half mile along the road, and outlasted the departure of many of the Lark Sparrows and White-crowned Sparrows which formed the core of their mixed-species flock.

In Stanislaus County, what started as reports of 2-3 birds at various sites in the eastern part of the county culminated in a May report of a flock of 17 (see Appendix). This suggests that birds may have move around and perhaps came together as a flock prior to migration. Unfortunately, the Stanislaus County sites were not monitored systematically from early in the winter on through the spring to track the arrival patterns of groups or individuals.

In New Mexico and Colorado, within the normal migratory range of Lark Buntings, they often seem to arrive in spring in large, mixed-sex flocks, typically containing many tens of birds, occasionally up to several hundred birds together. I recall that individuals move quickly through suitable

Table 1. Sightings of Lark Buntings in the Central Valley and inner Coast Range, Autumn 1971-Spring 1998.

Date(s)	# of birds (sex)	Location	Source*
20 Nov 71			
-10 Feb 72	1-2	W. Butte Road, SUT	AB 26 (1): 118
27 Dec 71	1	near Winters, YOL	AB 26 (3): 653
30-31 Oct 73	1	Elverta Road, SAC	AB 28 (1): 105
18 Nov	2	W. Butte Road, SUT	"
-25 Dec 73	1 remaining	"	T. Manolis (pers. comm.)
16 Jun 74	1(m)	Mercy Hot Springs, FRE	AB 28 (5): 946
9 Feb 75	1	W. Butte Road, SUT	AB 29 (3): 739
29 Feb 76	1	W. Butte Road, SUT	AB 30 (3): 764
23 Mar 77	1	Near Porterville, TUL	R. Barnes, AB files
2 Feb-4 Mar 79	~ 4	along Little Panoche Rd. FRE	J. Morlan, AB files
4 Apr 79	1(m)	SW corner of Sutter Buttes, SUT	W Anderson AB files
6 Apr 80	1(f)	nr. Red Bluff, TEH	AB 34 (5): 813
27 Sep 81	1	Pass Rd., Sutter Buttes, SUT	W Anderson, AB files
13 Oct 81	1	Merced NWR, MER	R Bacon, AB files
18 Oct 81	1	Chico Oxidation Ponds, BUT	AB 35 (2): 216
28 Jan 82	1	Creighton Ranch, TUL	AB 36 (3): 329
29 Jan-3 Feb 82	1	Lost Lake Campgrd, FRE	"
20 Apr 82	1(m)	Lake Millerton, MAD side	AB 36 (5): 892
6 May 82	2-3(m)	Lake Millerton, FRE side	"
5 Sep 83	1	Tulare(?), TUL	AB 38 (2): 245
21 Dec 83			
-8 Feb 84	1	W. Butte Road, SUT	AB 38 (3): 365
16-18 Mar 84	1-2	nr Davis, YOL	"
30 Mar			
-21 Apr 84	1(m)	6 mi W Woodland, YOL	"
14 Apr			
-8 May 84	2(m,f)	SE edge Sutter Buttes, SUT	W. Anderson, B. Deuel, AB files
13 Mar			
-2 May 1984	1(m)	E of Sacramento, SAC	C. Harry, SAS files
6 - 12 Apr 85	2(m)	SE edge Sutter Buttes, SUT	W. Anderson, AB files
12 - 15 Feb 86	1	Merced City, MER	E. Caine, AB files
11 Jan - 5 Feb 86	1	Lower Sacramento Road, SJO	D. Yee, SAS files
2 Dec 87	1	W. Butte Rd, SUT	AB 42 (2): 320
10 Jan 88	1	nr Hornitos, MRP	"
14-30 Apr 88	1(f)	2 mi NE of Mallott Rd., SUT	AB 42 (3): 480

Table 1. Sightings of Lark Buntings in the Central Valley and inner Coast Range, Autumn 1971-Spring 1998 (cont.).

Date(s)	# of birds (sex)	Location	Source*
6 Sep 88	1	Merced NWR, MER	G. Zahm, AB files
2-16 Apr 89	2-3	Sutter Buttes, SUT	AB 43 (3): 534
30 Jan 93	1	Gustine, MER	AB 47 (2): 299
14 Oct+ 95	~8	Panoche Valley SBE	FN 50(1): 112
17 Oct 95	1	Kelso Road ALA/CC	"
15 Sep 96	1	Fair Oaks, SAC	R. E. Smith, FN files
16-18 Nov 96	2(1m)	Cooperstown Road, STA	J. Gain (pers. comm.)
17 Nov 96	3	Milton, CLV	T. Fitzer, FN files
6 Apr-18 May 97	3(2m,1f)	Crabtree Road, STA	J. Brown (<i>vide</i> J. Gain)
10 May 98	1	Del Puerto Canyon Road, STA	Clyde Morris, pers comm.

*AB = *American Birds*; FN = *Field Notes*; "AB files" or "FN files" refer to written records kept by the Middle Pacific Coast regional editors of *American Birds/Field Notes*; "SAS" files refer to the Sacramento Audubon Society *Observer* files.

grassland and agricultural habitat, "leap-frogging" each other as they fly low over the ground headed north.

Although observations in the Central Valley this year were too sporadic to support sweeping conclusions, it seems that these birds arrived in scattered locations and then formed loose flocks in suitable grassland habitat. It would have been very interesting to monitor the larger flocks of 17 birds in Stanislaus County and 10 birds in San Benito County. Did the birds arrive together or gradually accumulate? Did they range over a large area?

The timing of molt was interesting and contributed to some early confusion about the sex of some of these birds. For example, when the Placer County birds were first found, in early March, two appeared to have whiter wing coverts than one other bird, which had a creamy tinge to the wing covert panel. The creamy one was thus dubbed a female. One of the birds with whiter wing coverts showed more black in the breast and below the bill. This one was identified as a male. The remaining bird had a white wing covert area but less black on the body, when compared to the aforementioned male, suggesting it might be a female. Later, this bird began to get some black feathers, proving it was also a male. Extensive body molt began by mid-April. The two Placer County males were in nearly complete alternate plumage by mid-May. Similarly, Jim Gain (pers. comm.) noted that the 10 males in the Stanislaus County flock "were all 90 percent or better into alternate plumage" on 7 May. Because of the very real possibility of confusing males and females in basic plumage, I suggest that determining the sex of wintering individuals of this

species is best left until late April or later (when males are largely black and often reported singing).

The birds seem to depart around mid-May. Jim Gain (pers. comm.) was not able to relocate the flock of 17 birds on 19 May. The latest report in the season was a very tardy male along Phillip Road in Placer County in mid-June.

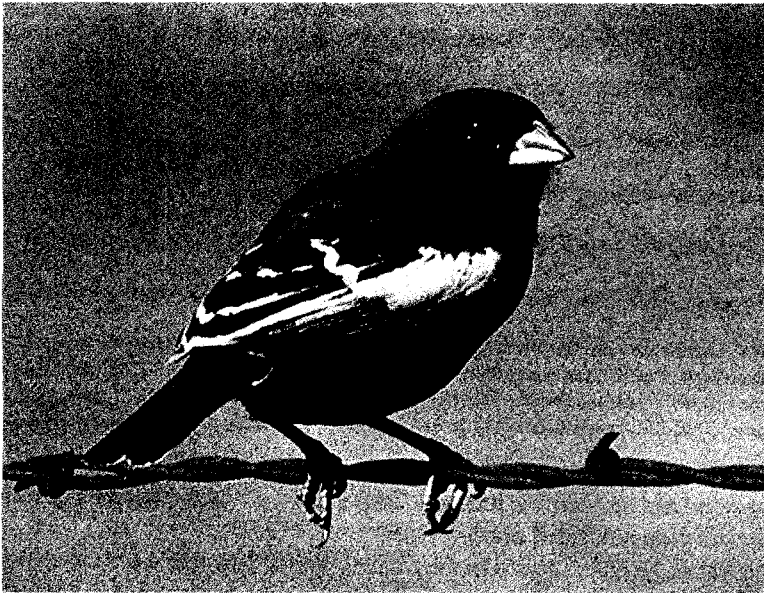


Figure 1. Male Lark Bunting along Crabtree Road in eastern Stanislaus County, 14 May 1999.
Photo by Jim Gain.

HISTORICAL STATUS

Up to 17 birds in one flock in the spring of 1999 seemed outstanding, but flocks of similar size have been found in the Central Valley in the past (Wilbur et al. 1971). There are historical records for even larger flocks in southern California. Wilbur et al. (1971) cited records of 350 Lark Buntings in December 1951 and 450 birds on 26 April 1952, both from San Bernardino County. Such large numbers (in the hundreds rather than tens) have not been reported in California since.

Records of Lark Buntings for the Central Valley and San Benito County prior to the winter of 1998-99, not including those already listed by Wilbur et al. (1971), are summarized in Table 1. A definite pattern of occurrence by Lark Buntings in northern California has been noted in recent decades: fall migrants/vagrants are found primarily at coastal localities, whereas winter/spring records are nearly all from the interior, especially the Central Valley (McCaskie et al. 1979). Of particular interest is the preponderance of records

from the vicinity of the Sutter Buttes. The records from sites around this miniature mountain range in recent decades suggest that 1-2 birds have occasionally wintered in the area for a number of successive years.

The winter seasons of 1981-82, 1983-84, and 1996-97 witnessed multiple reports from a number of sites in the Central Valley (Table 1), and the species "invaded the foothills of the Diablo Range" in the fall of 1995 (Yee et al. 1996). However, the winter of 1998-99 was unprecedented, both in terms of the total number of Lark Buntings reported and the range of counties visited by them in the region.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to the many observers who made many attempts (some successful) to find new birds in new locations. The list of searchers includes: Pierre Delastre, Todd Easterla, Mike Feighner, Jim Gain, Steve Hampton, Joan Humphrey, Tim Manolis, Harold Reeve, Debra Shearwater, Charley Walker, Brian Williams, and many others. Jim Gain, Clyde Morris, and Don Roberson provided information on specific records.

LITERATURE CITED

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APPENDIX

Records of Lark Buntings (known to me from various sources, in parentheses) found during the 1998-1999 winter season in the Central Valley and adjacent interior counties are listed here alphabetically by county. I have not seen documentation for all of these reports, but believe them to be valid.

Colusa: 30 April – Two males along Leesville Road near Freshwater Creek (Clyde Morris and Joelle Buffa; e-mail post to County Listers group and pers. comm.).

Glenn: 9 February (and later?) – An immature male on Maxwell Sites Road, 3.2 miles west of Danley Road (Todd Easterla; Rare Bird Alert: Central Valley Bird Box).

Madera: 21 March – Berenda Reservoir (Mike Feighner, e-mail post to Central Valley listserver).

Monterey: 1 May – An immature male singing along Bitterwater Road 5 miles east of King City (John Sterling et al., *fide* Don Roberson).

Placer: 9 March-7 May – 2 found along on Phillip Road, 3.2 miles east of Brewer Road; at least 3, probably 4, there 10-11 March; 2 remaining to at least 2 May, 1 still there as late as 18 June (see discussion in text; Bruce Webb, many other subsequent observers).

Sacramento: 15 May – 1 alternate plumage male along Latrobe Road between the town of Latrobe and Michigan Bar (Pierre Delastre; Central Valley Bird Box).

San Benito: 29 November-3 January – 3 birds along Panoche Road, near Silver Creek Ranch (Beverly Brock, *fide* Jim Gain); 7 February – one with other sparrows at the large dry wash on the north side of Little Panoche Road (Matthew Dodder, *fide* Jim Gain and N. Calif Bird Box); 29 April – 10 along Panoche Road, 1.5 miles from its intersection with New Idria Road (Debra Shearwater, *fide* Jim Gain); 4- 5 still present to 13 May (Debra Shearwater, *fide* N. Calif Bird Box).

Stanislaus: 28-29 November – 2, a male and female, along Davis Road, 1 mile east of Lake Road (Todd Easterla, *fide* Jim Gain); 23-28 January – 3, 2 males and a female, in a large flock of Savannah and White-crowned Sparrows, along Davis Road 4-5 miles east of Lake Road. (Jim Gain); 27 February-11 April – 2, a male and female, along Warnerville Road, 1 mile east of Tim Bell Road (Harold Reeve, *fide* Jim Gain); 1-14 May – 17 birds, 10 males and 7 females, at the corner of Warnerville and Crabtree Roads (Sherry Lindley, *fide* Jim Gain); 1 May – 2, a male and female, along Cooperstown Road, 1 mile east of Williams Road (Sherry Lindley, *fide* Jim Gain).

Sutter: 16 April – singing male in the Sutter Buttes along Pass Road, .8 mile east of W. Butte Road (Charley Walker; Central Valley listserver).

Yolo: 11 April-4 May – a female along Rd 12A west of I-505, along a fence row about 150 yards west of Oat Creek on the north side of the road, with other sparrows (Brian Williams, many subsequent observers).