

Opportunistic Scavenging by Meadowlarks in Southwestern Oklahoma

Jack D. Tyler and Larry L. Choate

Department of Biology, Cameron University, Lawton, Oklahoma 73505

Between December 24, 1987 and January 13, 1988, meadowlarks (*Sturnella* sp.) scavenged carcasses of several kinds of birds and mammals in southwestern Oklahoma during an exceptionally heavy snow cover. These included 3 species of birds and 5 mammals. The most frequently consumed carcasses were meadowlarks.

A severe ice storm on 24 December, 1987 blanketed southwestern Oklahoma and north-central Texas. On 6 January 1988, 31 cm of snow fell, a record for 24 hr. The snow and ice that persisted for at least 10 days and the subfreezing temperatures during some nights imposed severe hardship on ground-feeding birds.

As snow began to melt between 9 and 14 January, traffic along Interstate 44 between Lawton in Comanche County, Oklahoma, and Wichita Falls, Texas, increased and cleared lanes where birds, particularly meadowlarks, congregated in search of food. Meadowlarks usually consume grass and weed seeds, insects when available, and sometimes forage along the shoulders of highways. Many birds were struck by passing automobiles, most obviously Eastern and Western Meadowlarks (*Sturnella magna* and *S. neglecta*), and an occasional small mammal. On this 96-km trip twice daily, Choate noticed that meadowlarks were feeding on carcasses. Two-thirds of this route is in Oklahoma, mostly Cotton County. In addition to Choate's daily observations, the authors received several similar accounts of meadowlark scavenging.

On 11 January, Choate noticed 15 separate instances of *Sturnella-Sturnella* scavenging along I-44. Once, a meadowlark flew low across in front of his vehicle, carrying in its bill a mouse-sized mammal. That same day, six other instances of meadowlarks devouring road-kills were noted by Sam Orr just south of Lawton, also on I-44. He watched single meadowlarks peck at each of three other *Sturnella* carcasses, a flicker (*Colaptes*), and two other small unidentified birds. Also on 11 January, Toni Hodgkins saw one to four meadowlarks feeding at nine different road kills on rural roads southwest of Lawton, among them another meadowlark and several jackrabbits (*Lepus californicus*).

Choate recorded two meadowlark-meadowlark feedings along I-44 on 12 January and three more the next day. During these two days, Art Brearden encountered three different meadowlarks eating dead hispid cotton rats (*Sigmodon hispidus*) on Fort Sill's East Range. In Caddo County, two meadowlarks fed on a cottontail (*Sylvilagus* sp.) carcass near Apache on 13 January (Kent Smith). In Lawton, up to four *Sturnella* pecked at a dead house cat (*Felis domesticus*) on 13 January (Mike Morgan), and another ate bits of flesh from a small road-kill sparrow (John Wheatley). Next day, Rick Cannon watched as a meadowlark devoured another's remains in the same city.

On 9 January, just west of Mangum in Greer County, Wesley Webb and Victoria Mason observed at least five meadowlark carcasses with three to four meadowlarks pecking each in a 0.4-km stretch of cleared shoulder along U.S. Highway 283. One dead bird was devoid of most of its scapular feathers and muscles, exposing several vertebrae. Next day, Webb found the remains of about 25 meadowlarks just south of Mangum along State Highway 34, but noted only five or six instances of scavenging. From 24 December 1987 to 21 January 1988, he observed that nearly all food normally available to wildlife on or near the ground was under several inches of snow. At various sites in Greer, Tillman, and Jackson counties, Webb counted 454 dead meadowlarks. He also noticed more than twice as many dead Mourning Doves (*Zenaida macroura*), and great numbers of Northern Bobwhite Quail (*Colinus virginianus*), including some covies frozen in their roosting circles. Webb estimates that these numbers surpassed those of a similar storm during the winter of 1983-84.

In Oklahoma, after a three-inch (7.6 cm) snow, Schrick (1) watched meadowlarks kill and devour two tree sparrows (*Spizella*

arborea); these birds also fed on the carcasses of European Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*). One meadowlark carried a sparrow in its beak while flying.

Scavenging behavior by meadowlarks has seldom been reported. In Colorado, Creighton and Porter (2) described nest predation on Lark Buntings (*Calamospiza melanocorys*) and Horned Larks (*Eremophila alpestris*) by Western Meadowlarks. Terres (3) noted an Eastern Meadowlark feeding on a traffic-killed congener in New York in July, 1939. On 17 December 1967, during the third day of "near-blizzard conditions" in southwestern New Mexico, Hubbard and Hubbard (4) observed Western Meadowlarks eating carcasses of Western Meadowlarks, Mourning Doves, and other bird species along a highway. There were 6 to 10 inches (15-25 cm) of snow on the ground at the time.

REFERENCES

1. M.P. Schrick, Bull. Okla. Ornithol. Soc. 12: 33-34 (1979).
2. P.D. Creighton and D.K. Porter, Auk 91:177-178 (1974).
3. J.K. Terres, Auk 73: 289-290 (1956).
4. J.P. Hubbard and C.L. Hubbard, Wilson Bull. 81: 107-108 (1969).