

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).

*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 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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