

VERIFICATION OF UNUSUAL SIGHT RECORD FOR UTAH

Common Name: Mc COWN'S LONGSPUR

Scientific Name: *Calcarius macownii*

Date: 10/5 To 10/8 Time: ALL DAY

Length of time observed: TOTAL: about 4 Hours

Number: 1

Age: IMMATURE

Sex: UNK

Location: DRY impoundment (SALT FLAT) AT FISH SPRINGS NWR

Latilong: FISH SPRINGS #9

Elevation (if known): 4285'

Distance to bird: 20 YARDS To 75 YARDS Light conditions: POOR To EXCELLENT

Optical equipment: 10 X 50 BUSHNELL BINOCULARS, 15-60 DISCOVERER (B16) SCOPE

Weather: FAIR

Description: (Write a detailed description of the bird's appearance, including size, shape, plumage pattern, color, and any unique features.)

SEE ATTACHED

Voice or call notes and method of delivery:

FLIGHT CALL GIVEN (AS DESCRIBED IN NOTES)

Behavior:

FEEDING, FLIGHT WITH HORNED LARKS. NOT AS SKITTISH AS LARKS

Habitat: PRIMARILY ON DRY IMPOUNDMENT (SALT FLAT) AND IN AREA W/ SOME LOW SCATTERED FORBS

What similar species might it have been and how were these eliminated:

OTHER LONGSPUR SPECIES ELIMINATED BY PLUMAGE COLORATION, TAIL PATTERN, FLIGHT CALL

What experience have you had with this and similar species:

HAVE SEEN BREEDING CHESTNUT-COLLARED IN NORTH DAKOTA & BREEDING LAPLAND IN ALASKA.

Books, illustrations, and advice consulted, and how did these influence this description:
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC FIELD GUIDE WAS MY PRINCIPLE KEY

Significance of record in this area or the state: ONE OF A FEW STATE RECORDS

Additional material: (attach drawing, photograph, tape recording if available)

Description from notes taken at time of sighting X notes made later X from memory

Observer: JOSEPH ENGLER

Signature: *Joseph Engler*

Address: FISH SPRINGS NWR
P.O. BOX 568
DUGWAY, UT 84022

Other observers who independently identified this bird:

NONE, ALTHOUGH I DID SHOW THE BIRD TO THE BIOLOGICAL TECHNICIAN

Date prepared: 10/30/88

Return this form to: Ella Sorensen
3868 Marsha Drive
West Valley City, Utah 84120

On October 5, 1988 I was conducting the weekly waterfowl/bird census at Fish Springs. At approximately 11:30 a.m. I stopped to observe about 12 horned larks feeding on the dry salt flats on Pintail Unit. The birds were 30-40 yards away and were observed from the elevated dike/road with 10X50 binoculars and 15-60X spotting scope (primarily on 20-30 power). One bird immediately stood out because of its 2 light buffy wing bars. Overall color was seen to be buffy with a slightly darker streaked head. In direct comparison with the horned larks, the body was noticeably lighter, slightly smaller and chunkier. The head was sparrow-like and had a brownish ear patch, a wide buffy eye brow, and a buffy jaw stripe underneath the ear patch. The throat was white and the breast showed dark blackish streaks that were heaviest on the front of the breast. This band extended up toward the neck/front of wings. The tail was notched and had a black terminal band, and the rest of the tail appeared whitish. I did not have a good view of the tail at this time. The bird walked and fed similar to the horned larks and did not hop. For the most part, the bird kept to the outer edges or a few feet apart from the flock. The sky was clear and light good at this time.

I suspected I was looking at a longspur but being unfamiliar with winter plumage longspurs I was not sure of the field marks to look for, so consulted the National Geographic field guide. Its feeding mannerisms and reluctance to leave the jumpy flock seemed to rule out any sparrow species. The lack of rusty coloration anywhere ruled out the Lapland Longspur, which was my original guess. Smith's longspur was ruled out because of the dark breast streaking and lack of white shoulder patch. I double checked for any shoulder patch but could see none, neither white nor rusty. This seemed to rule out male Chestnut-collared, as well as the adult McCown's. The breast was also streaked, not scaled as in the adult males. According to the field guide descriptions, the buffy wing bars are found on the juvenile McCown's and possibly the juvenile Chestnut-collared (description in guide is vague).

I then tried to make the bird into a juvenile horned lark but direct comparison of plumage color and again the buffy wing bars and streaking ruled this out. At this point I decided to start detailing the longspur's field marks, assuming I was dealing with either a juvenile McCown's or a juvenile/female Chestnut-collared. Unfortunately 4 of the birds spooked, one of them being the longspur.

This all occurred in about 15 minutes, leaving me assured I saw a longspur but not the species. I then went to eat lunch and checked 2 other field guides, neither of which were helpful for winter longspur identification. I continued my census after lunch but was unable to re-locate the longspur. Most horned larks were resting in the thicker vegetation at this time.

I searched again about 3:30, studying the small flocks of larks as they had started feeding again. In a widespread flock of about 20 larks, I again picked out the now familiar buffy wing bars as the birds fed in some heavy low vegetation. The birds were 50-75 yards away, so other than a look at the streaked breast I could see few details. I left the truck and approached

the birds but was unable to find the bird again. This observation lasted only a minute or so and occurred roughly 1 mile from the previous sighting. This area also has extensive salt flats at this time (Shoveler Unit). The wind had picked up at this time, as a few rainstorms were passing over the nearby area.

Not quite ready to accept defeat, I searched for the bird again after work. The number of larks seemed to quadruple by this time and the appearance of 30 water pipits were surprising as they had not been seen earlier. About 5:00 I found a flock of about 24 horned larks in the same spot as the first sighting. With them was the longspur. They were actively feeding and were not as skittish as they had been earlier. This gave me about 1.5 hours of viewing the longspur at many angles and lighting conditions from distances of 20-75 yards. At this point I jotted down notes as I saw various markings. It would be difficult to describe all the light conditions for each field mark, but most all were seen in all conditions (backlit, frontlit, fading light). Most observations were within 50 yards.

My notes taken during that time, though not in order are:

1. bill-stout, pink with grayish color along top and on tip
2. dark streaked head becoming lighter and less streaked on the nape-this coloration and pattern different from that of the back(mantle)
3. whitish throat , legs dark
4. light brown (not buff) ear patch; upper edge which seemed slightly darker in some views, and giving the appearance of a short hair-like eyeline. The eyebrow - fairly wide, buffy -buff jaw stripe between ear patch and white throat with a slightly darker whisker (just enough to give a contrast) -coloration was buff immediately around the eye itself, where once, at very high magnification, seemed to show a very fine eye ring, although this is undetectable at normal viewing.

This was probably the actual skin around the eye, not feathers.

5. The overall body color was buff, but lighter below the breast streaking. a) In fading light, a slightly darker wash could be seen along the sides. The bird was broadside, the sun low (about 6:30), the bird was backlit. Distance was 25 yards at 25-30X magnification.
6. Black streaks on breast, darkest toward center with lighter streaking extending on both sides up toward the back. This gave a fairly complete, streaked breast band, although the lighter streaks could not be seen easily at all times.
7. Back had scaled appearance; feathers brownish with buffy edges, much different from streaking on head and nape.
8. Wings were darker, primaries looked almost black at times; most feathers were edged in buff.
-2 light buffy wing bars
-at one angle, either the median or greater wing coverts seemed black and edged in buff. This did not seem as noticeable before and may have been due to the sun's angle.
-at different angles and times, many of the feathers along the upper body line (back) showed this blackish color, set

off by buff edges. It seems that the sun's angle can greatly enhance this scaling effect.

9. At a distance, the wingtips extended past the uppertail coverts in all views, but the extent seemed to vary. While feeding, the tips looked to be near or touching the black terminal tail band. But in some views, they did not seem to extend much past the coverts. In one instance, the bird was facing away from me, resting and at close range, I could clearly see the terminal band but no black central tail feathers. This threw me for a loop at first, then a closer look seemed to show that the wingtips extended to the band; effectively covering the central tail feathers. At no time while the bird was on the ground, could the dark central tail feathers be seen. The black terminal band was always visible and I do not recall seeing any white on the outer edges of the band (outer tail feathers). This was probably due to the fact that the tail was folded.

Only once while flying was I able to see the tail. The black tip and central tail feathers were seen, but I could not distinguish either a black inverted tee or a triangle pattern. I purposely flushed the birds to see the tail pattern, only to fail and have the birds leave the area. Leaving the truck, I attempted to find the birds that I had spooked. I did not get 10 yards from the truck, when 1 lone bird descended to the ground. Unbelievably, it was the longspur and at about 20 yards distance, I was treated to some of my best views (as described above). With the sun about to disappear behind the mountains, I flushed it one last time hoping to see the tail. Unfortunately it came toward me, then went almost straight up. Its flight was undulating.

It left giving a flight call until it was out of eye and ear shot. My hearing is very good, but my musical prowess is decidedly lacking. In my notes I described the call as "poink de-de, and/or poink de-de-de, etc. The first note being high, the next two/three being lower and rapid. I went immediately home (about 3 miles) and listened to the National Geographic bird song album. The only longspur call that came close to what I heard and was almost identical as far as my ears could tell was a short call for the McCown's. It follows the breeding song which has some low background static, then the background noise increases for a few seconds, then lowers again. The call begins after this lowering and is pretty faint. It starts with a high flute-like note, followed by a low quick de-de. My musical description is poor, but that call is virtually identical to what I heard. Whether or not that is a flight call on the tape is beyond me.

The bird was seen in the same area again on the next 3 days. I attempted pictures on Thursday and Friday, but light was poor and the birds uncooperative. The same field marks were seen again as described earlier. I spent about an hour flushing the birds from spot to spot and was treated to good views of the tail. The pattern always seemed to show an inverted tee, and an inverted triangle could not be discerned no matter how hard I

tried. On Friday, I showed the bird to the Biological Technician, pointing out the field marks as to why I thought it was a juvenile McCown's Longspur. He agreed with me, but then again he is not a birder per se, although he has assisted on some of the refuge censuses.

The bird was last seen on Saturday, October 8 about 4:30 p.m. This was the first day of the waterfowl hunting season, and the bird was not seen again, nor were any horned larks seen using this area for a couple of weeks.

In my opinion, this bird was a juvenile McCown's Longspur. It did not have any distinct shoulder patch as an adult should. It's buffy wing bars made it literally stand out in a crowd and it could readily be found in any flock due to this feature. The inverted tee on its tail is diagnostic for this species and all attempts to make it into some other species failed.