

McCown's Longspurs at Fish Springs NWR

On Friday, November 16, 1990, I was searching for lapland longspurs among a flock of horned larks, on the northwest corner of Pintail Unit, which was dry and thus offered exposed salt/mud flats. This area was intensely utilized by 500 or more horned larks and I had observed 1 to 2 lapland longspurs on several occasions, since late October, among the larks. These laplands were usually observed foraging on or near the gravel road or along the edge of grassy islands. While searching the flocks, I observed a longspur that was noticeably different from any of the previously observed lapland longspurs. The time was approximately 4:15 pm, the skies were generally cloudy with intermittent periods of sunshine. Viewing was primarily due south to southeast (from the north dike) thus lighting was good. Viewing ranged from 40' to 200' or more as the flock moved about. All observations were made with 10 X 40 binoculars and a 15-60X scope, with 25X being the approximate maximum used, for clarity.

A flock of horned larks was searched and found to contain 3 lapland longspurs and a "different" longspur. This allowed good comparisons of the laplands and the unknown. The laplands utilized the edges of grassy islands, while the other bird was observed only in the open saltflats. It also tended to remain on the outskirts of the flock of horned larks, though did intermingle at times. This was also true of the lapland longspurs. The flock spooked several times, but stayed in the same general location near the dike.

The longspur was noticeably lighter than the laplands, generally light brownish to buff overall but appeared slightly darker overall than the horned larks. It was smaller and plumper than the horned larks. I proceeded to take notes on the characteristics that I observed:

- crown was medium brown with slightly darker edges along the sides of the crown; crown appeared lightly (not distinctly) streaked.
- wide buff supercilium with buff extending down the sides of the neck to the throat/upper breast. Light brown ear coverts with a darker border in the upper distal corner and a thin darker lower border (moustachial stripe). The remainder of the border was nearly the same color as the ear coverts. Also present was an indistinct, thin dark malar stripe.
- throat whitish, offset by a muted breast band which appeared to be streaked along the sides of the upper breast. There were no obvious streaks comprising rest of the band, but the band was distinguishable by its lighter brown color. The malar stripes connected with the band, thus giving a bibbed appearance to the breast. The lower breast was whitish and included whitish undertail coverts. A faint buff wash was present on the flanks.

- The uppertail coverts and rump appeared lighter and plainer (little streaking) than the lower and upper back, though this was not seen well. The back was brown with dark streaks.

- there was no distinct rufous color in the wings (unlike the laplands nearby). Two light buff wingbars were present. Secondaries and greater coverts appeared the same brownish color with the primaries being slightly darker. The lesser and median coverts and scapulars were also brownish in color but were bordered in buff. This gave a slightly scaled appearance and suggested that the bird was an immature. The bird had a distinctive dark spot at the bend of the wing (alulu?), but this was only on the right hand side. The wingtips extended past the uppertail coverts.

- While foraging, the bird appeared to have shorter legs than the laplands, but this could have been due to their foraging mannerisms. The bird also tended to droop its wings along its sides much of the time with a corresponding slightly cocked tail. It did not show the drooped wings/cocked tail all the time. This mannerism was not noted in any field guides. However, the bird foraged for extended periods in this way.

- the tail pattern could not be seen on the foraging bird, though it appeared to have alot of white in it. While flying amid about 150 horned larks, the longspur was picked out of the crowd, by the extensive amount of white on the tail. Once while landing, the tail showed what appeared to be the characteristic inverted "T" of the McCown's longspur, though this was a very quick look as the bird spread its tail to land.

At this point it was getting to dark to see (about 5 pm), so I left the area. The bird lacked any rufous in the wings and was noticeably lighter than the lapland longspurs. This plus the apparent extensive white in the tail appeared to rule out the bird as a lapland. Its habitat preference (saltflat), the lighter (than a lapland longspur) but distinct ear patch (coverts) and length of tail (wing tips past upper coverts) seemed to rule out a chestnut-collared longspur. This left McCown's longspur as the mostly likely species. The buff bordered feather edges, lack of rufous on the median coverts, and indistinct breast band (with some streaking on upper sides) suggested that the bird was an immature. My field guides do not show immature longspurs but owing to typical molting patterns, an immature would be expected to be somewhere between an adult female and a juvenile in plumage, as the post juvenal molt is typically incomplete in the longspurs. This bird exhibited both juvenile and adult female characteristics, per the National Geographic field guide. Despite all, I was not satisfied with the identification.

I returned to the area on Sunday morning about 10 am, but all birds were near the grass or far from the road. I returned about 3:30 pm and found horned larks in the same area as Friday. I was quickly

able to find the longspur, as well as 2 laplands. Again the bird was close, though skies were overcast. Armed with a knowledge of a few other i.d. keys, I studied the bird again. Observed characteristics were similar to those mentioned above, plus:

- large conical bill, relatively large at the base. Color was pinkish, with gray along the top edge and tip.
- There was no discernable streaking on the sides or flanks, just the buffy wash on the flanks. Legs were dark.

Most notable was the lack of the dark spot on this bird's right alulu, as was observed Friday. Again the bird showed the drooped wing/slightly cocked tail mannerism. Its foraging was also confined to the saltflats. The flock spooked several times but continued to return to the same specific area. Finding the bird amid the larks was quite easy, as it again tended to stay toward the periphery of the flock, and stood out quite noticeably. After one flight, I quickly found the longspur, focused, and was unexpectantly surprised to see the bird with the dark alulu. Next to it in the same field of view was another identical bird, but lacking the dark spot. These birds foraged together for awhile and were observed to be essentially identical. Both exhibited the drooped wing syndrome from time to time. The flock spooked and broke up, with one of the birds leaving. The bird(s) were "caught" flying on several occasions and an extensive amount of white was observed, though the tail pattern was not clearly seen. There was no distinguishable calls heard while the birds flushed. Armed with my sheet of notes, several field guides and about 2.5 hours of observations, I was convinced that the birds were McCown's longspurs, most probably immatures.

The "dark spot" bird was again observed on Monday morning about 11 a.m. from a distance. Again, I returned about 4 p.m. to find the birds in their "favorite" afternoon location in NW Pintail. I was able to find one bird quickly and watched it for awhile, seeing the same characteristics. Heavy overcast made for poor viewing, however. Gambling on the flock's affinity to this area, I approached the birds on foot, hoping to get the clinching view of the tail pattern. As hoped, the flushed birds would not leave the area, so I was treated to no less than 6 excellent sightings of the McCown's longspur in flight. It was easily picked out of the swirling flock of horned larks by its smaller size and white on the tail. The shorter tail was quite obvious as the bird flew past. The tail pattern was fairly discernible in flight, and the inverted "T" was readily apparent on several occasions as the bird landed with fanned tail. This left no doubt whatsoever to the birds identity.

The "dark spot" longspur was again observed on Tuesday afternoon (20th). Almost all horned lark flocks were over 200 feet from the road (following an all day snowstorm) and concentrated near the bare shoreline. This made viewing extremely difficult with only the one longspur observed.