Smith's Longspur: First Record for Ontario in Winter, and for the Hamilton Area

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Discovery: Notes by Miles

On Saturday, 2 February 2002, I met a group from the South Peel Field Naturalists at the Tim Horton's in Hagersville for their annual hawks and owls trip around *Haldimand* County. The first stop was on the 2nd Line of Oneida Township, just east of Highway 6, where I had seen some Horned Larks (*Eremophila alpestris*) and Snow Buntings (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) the day before. This site is approximately 4.5 km northeast of the town of Hagersville.

In view were a couple of Rough-legged Hawks (*Buteo lagopus*) and a Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*) which made repeated passes over the large grassy field, keeping a flock of Snow Buntings near the back of the field agitated. Behind the group and back towards the highway, a flock of Horned Larks landed on the road. With them were two Lapland Longspurs (*Calcarius lapponicus*) and an American Pipit (*Anthus rubescens*), which was doing its head-pumping strut; a good winter sighting and only the second I have ever seen in February. We were off to a good start at our first stop, with both Lapland Longspurs and an American Pipit.

We climbed back into the cars and started to proceed east. After a couple of hundred metres, I noticed the Snow Buntings were in the air again and were coming towards us, so I stopped as they had been quite distant before. We had fairly decent looks as the Snow Buntings circled around. Then we noticed, about 50 m out in the field, a flock of Horned Larks. I put my "bins" up and had a buffy bird with light streaks on the chest and sides that I initially thought was the American Pipit, in closer.

However, Maris Apse put his scope on the bird and said it had the head markings of a longspur. I looked through the scope and here was a bird with a longspur head pattern, yellow-buff underparts and side streakings. At this point, we realized that it was certainly not a Lapland Longspur. My immediate thought was a Smith's Longspur (*C. pictus*)! While Maris kept the bird in his scope, I went to my van and flipped open my National Geographic guide to the longspur pages. There on page 423 was what we had in the scope, a winter-plumaged immature male Smith's, although our bird did not seem to have as much rufous in the wing as was illustrated.

I returned to the group and had another look to be sure and then passed the open book to Maris. Group members were stunned when

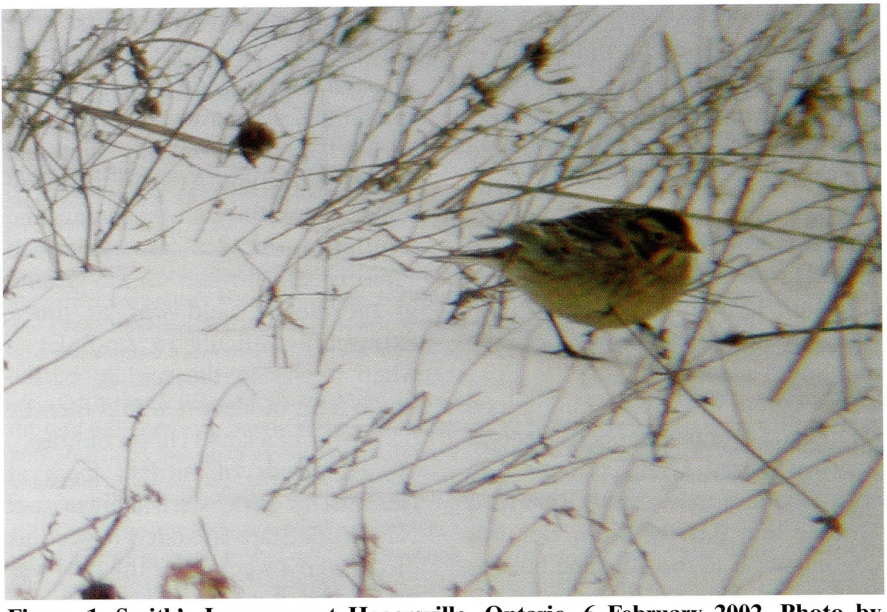

Figure 1: Smith's Longspur at Hagersville, Ontario, 6 February 2002. Photo by *Harold Stiver.*

Figure 2: Smith's Longspur at Hagersville, Ontario, 6 February 2002. Photo by *Harold Stiver.*

we realized we were all looking at a lifer. While those who did not have scopes lined up to have a good look through Maris's telescope, others kept their scopes on the bird and were able to see the mainly white 5th and 6th rectrices whenever the bird fluttered. This is another field mark to distinguish Smith's from Lapland. Everyone present was in full agreement that we were looking at a Smith's Longspur.

I asked if anyone had a cell phone and Donna Shepherd stepped forward. Jerry Guild phoned the coordinator of the Toronto Rare Bird Hotline and put the word out. We continued on to the 4th Line but the Red-tailed Hawk (*B. jamaicensis*) concentration had lost its appeal. We headed to Tim Horton's in Caledonia to bask in the satisfaction of our find. During the rest of the day, we had several more good birds in *Haldimand* but after the Smith's everything was anticlimactic. The word was out and by early afternoon, Glenn Coady, Bill Lindley, Craig McLauchlan, John Olmsted and others studied the bird out in the field.

I have always thought that Smith's Longspur could easily be overlooked. Perhaps they do go through southern Ontario regularly since they nest almost due north of us near the Hudson Bay shoreline along the tree line. At a distance, with a quick look through binoculars, the Smith's resembles an American Pipit. This bird when on the ground in the weedy field was, at times, extremely difficult to find. Even when it was in the middle of the scope field of view, it would literally disappear in a small clump of grass.

Hundreds of birders from at least as far away as Michigan and New York State travelled to see this bird. Even a week after the bird was first found, it was not unusual to see 30 to 50 cars lined up along the road and 50 to 100 people out in the field, standing in a group looking through spotting scopes. Most, with patience, did see the bird but at times it would disappear and it would take the "army" an hour or two to relocate it. But, some birders spent many hours and did not find the bird. Nevertheless, even several weeks later, a careful search revealed that the bird was still present.

Description: Notes by Curry

Although quite a number of birders subsequently saw the bird on Saturday afternoon, a large group was there on Sunday morning. There appeared to be no crop in the field, but rather there were weeds scattered throughout. These were thicker in swales especially 50 m on either side of a mostly frozen creek which flowed diagonally across the field. There were five to eight centimetres of hard snow on the ground; plants extended above the snow surface for eight to 25 centimetres. It was on these plant seeds that all the birds were feeding.

On 3 February, we and a group of Hamilton birders were there at first light. There were groups of Horned Larks and Snow Buntings feeding and flying over the field. Among these birds were two Lapland Longspurs, one with considerable black on the breast and another with restricted black.

At this time, we were watching from the road, some in our cars and some out. After about 20 minutes, at about 0740h, I heard the rattle of a longspur flying near the road, except that the

notes were more widely spaced and therefore more discrete than with Lapland. Each individual call (set of notes) only lasted about one second but I said, "get on this bird". Fortunately, it landed on the shoulder and pecked at grit. Over the next five minutes or so we had quite nice studies through binoculars and scopes and confirmed to our satisfaction and elation that this was indeed the Smith's Longspur. The bird was entirely by itself.

Either because it had ingested sufficient grit or because of the arrival of more cars, it flew north into the field and disappeared. Cars continued to arrive; we counted about 40 with almost 80 birders before we left that morning.

After an hour of waiting by the roadside, we decided that the whole group should proceed slowly into the field in a phalanx. By so doing, we managed to find the bird in areas adjacent to the creek. Of course, the buntings arose and settled nervously as they do. Most times when this happened, the Smith's would take flight but would settle off to the outside of the Horned Larks and Snow Buntings. Sometimes it flew into taller weeds and fed on its own. We watched the bird and chatted with other birders for almost an hour. On this day, it was windy and overcast but the light was fairly good.

On Friday, 8 February, we returned to the field. Arriving at about 0930h, we learned that the bird had been seen briefly at the roadside about an hour earlier, but not since. There were only 10 birders, but again we walked out towards the creek. Eventually, Glenda Slessor found the Smith's feeding diligently in thick patches of weeds. For the next 40 minutes, we all studied the bird at 10–15 metres through scopes at powers up to 50x. There was little or no wind and fairly bright sunshine shone over our shoulders. Upon returning to the car, I dictated a description which Glenda wrote into my field notebook. The following description is based upon this second observation, except as noted below.

Size, shape and proportions: It was somewhat smaller than nearby Horned Larks and Snow Buntings. Indeed, it was a moderately large "sparrow", not much different in shape and proportions than a Vesper Sparrow (*Pooecetes gramineus*). It could appear relatively slender and attenuated as when it reached up to procure a higher seed or craned its neck to look about. However, most of the time it crouched down and had a very distinctive flattened oval shape when seen from directly in front or directly behind. This effect was exaggerated by the crouching behaviour when feeding, with the legs barely noticeable, and by its habit of fluffing out feathers on the flanks and on the scapulars. The shape (and indeed some aspects of the plumage) reminded me of the shape of a Baird's Sandpiper (*Calidris bairdii*).

Head: The crown was essentially dark. It was densely and finely streaked black. On the forehead, there was a white median stripe but towards the rear of the crown this disappeared amidst the fine black streaks. There was a dusky auricular patch defined as follows. There was a broad off-white superciliary stripe whose anterior half was clear but a few fine black streaks marked the posterior half. A broad white sub-moustachial stripe bordered the auriculars from below, and this light colour extended up on the posterior side of the ear patch. The auriculars were even more delineated by being bordered in black. The black border was especially thick along the bottom (the moustachial stripe) and the lower rear edge. Within the dusky patch, there was a light oval patch that was joined to the light area to the rear of the auriculars as the black border was slightly broken. There was a neat, fine white eye ring which was very slightly tear-shaped posteriorly.

Upperparts: The black streaking continued from the crown onto the nape and back and right down onto the rump. On either side of the back were two white "suspender straps" created by the edges of scapulars. These were slightly warmer or buff anteriorly.

Underparts: Below the sub-moustachial stripe were two fine black malar stripes on either side of a whitish throat. The breast was a warm rich buff colour (it appeared orange-buff on the first

day under duller conditions but not so rich on the day of sunshine and snow reflection). Across the breast was a necklace of fine black streaks which then extended as a chestnut brown streak down each flank. The lower breast and belly to vent was a slightly lighter buff or clay colour.

Wings: The primaries were dark brown with fine white tips. The tertiaries were dark brown with lighter brown inner webs. The upper greater secondary coverts were warm brown and tipped white, creating a narrow white wingbar. The median coverts had jet-black centres and pure white fringes, thus creating a distinct bold bar. I only saw the lesser coverts once—just as the bird took off from the roadside on 3 February. At least the lower row of these was pure white so I saw a flash of white as it took off. Having read the literature before the second study, I particularly looked at the primary extension, i.e., the number of primary tips visible beyond the tips of the tertiaries. There were four—two extended a short distance beyond, and with a relatively short distance between these tips. Then there was a longer gap (twice as much primary showing) before the penultimate tip, and then a short gap before the final tip.

Tail: Dark brown fairly long and slightly forked. On the ground, I could see white on the outer edges of the dark brown tail. I could not determine the extent of this white. However, as the bird left the road on 3 February, I got the impression of a lot more white than is seen on the tail of Lapland Longspur.

Soft parts: The eye was black. The legs were dull flesh-coloured except that the "shins" (front of the tarsi) were brown, as were the tops of the feet and toes. The bill was fairly typical of a sparrow, being thick at the base and tapering to a fairly fine point. It was a flesh-horn colour except that the culmen and tip of the mandibles were dark brown.

Description: Notes by Marantz

At about 0740h on 3 February, a single bird flew in giving a loud rattle whose notes were spaced clearly enough to differentiate. Though I commented to Cheryl Edgecombe at the time that we should check out birds with rattles like that, it was Bob Curry who really keyed in on the rattle, and I believe it was Gerard McNaughton who first spotted the bird on the ground. The bird landed by itself along the open margin of the road only 15–20 metres from us and remained there for maybe three to five minutes, providing us with exceptional views at close range. This bird then flew when the Snow Buntings and Horned Larks took flight upon the approach of another carload of birders. It was over an hour later, and only after people began walking out into the field, that the bird was again relocated in loose association with the larks and buntings.

Despite its clearly being associated with the other birds, the Smith's Longspur often remained at the edge of the flock, and more than most of the other birds, it remained both alone and in closer proximity to the denser clusters of short weeds. Although we never again obtained views of the bird as good as our initial ones (with the bird generally 50-75 m away from the now large group that was observing it), we were able to study the bird over an extended period of time. I clearly heard the bird rattle only when it first flew in, and again when it took off from the edge of the road. Though it may have called when out in the field, the longspur was both at a greater distance from us and more closely associated with the other birds, these together probably precluding us from hearing its call (with the noise of the crowd probably adding to the difficulty). Whereas the bird was foraging almost motionless along the side of the road (possibly for grit) when we first saw it, it was later quite active as it hopped around on the ice, seemingly in search of something associated with the small clusters of dried vegetation. I saw the bird several times in flight, but generally not well, because with so many jackets on, I was a little slow at switching from my scope to my binoculars when the bird took flight. I therefore used almost exclusively my 20–60x spotting scope to observe this bird, which, amazingly, was often in unobstructed view as it moved about on the ice, often obscured by only scattered stalks of dried vegetation. The light cast by the early and mid-morning sun blocked by a full

overcast was excellent for observation, with our observations complicated primarily by the wind, which at least was at our backs.

This bird was a typical longspur with respect to its size and shape. It seemed comparable in both size and shape to the two Lapland Longspurs in the flock, and about the same shape as the Snow Buntings, though maybe a little bit smaller. Relative to the Horned Larks, this bird was distinctly smaller, plumper-bodied, and proportionately shorter-tailed. The longspur had a sharp-tipped, conical bill that seemed relatively small to me. Behind this, the forehead was relatively steep and the head rounded, though with a weak peak in the crown that seemed to be just behind the eyes. The longspur both stood and hopped around on the ice with a relatively upright stance, and not by shuffling along with the belly nearly touching the ground that is typical of many longspurs. I estimated that the tail was about half as long as the body without it; it was generally kept pointed downward at an angle towards the ground. In short, this bird looked about the same size and shape as the Lapland Longspurs in the flock, but with both a rather buffy and also a rather evenly coloured appearance.

Despite its appearing largely rich buff from a distance, close inspection of the bird revealed the complex and intricate patterns that are typical of most sparrows. The forehead and crown generally looked dark-brown to nearly blackish, but with fine streaking of rich buff. Although I never really detected a median crown-stripe, there did appear to be a narrow region of pale coloration extending back a short way from the forehead. The buffy streaking, which was quite limited on the forehead and central crown, appeared to become more conspicuous towards the rear part of the crown, especially in the centre (possibly representing the rear end of a weak median stripe). The nape was a rich-buff in colour, though possibly with some dark streaking. The scaly pattern of the back appeared to result from buffy fringes on blackish-centred feathers. Although the buffy fringes seemed to extend all the way around the tips of most of these feathers, they may have been broader as edges than as tips, so the back often appeared more streaked than scaled. I also noted, though I could never be sure precisely where, what appeared to be some whitish fringes in the back that at times almost looked like whitish braces on the mantle.

Because several key characters for separating Lapland and Smith's Longspurs lie in the wing pattern, I did my best to note the wings carefully. I was never convinced that I ever saw either the lesser coverts or the primary coverts, so the pattern apparent on the wings resulted from the median and greater coverts combined with the remiges. The median coverts had crisp, white fringes that contrasted sharply with jet-black centres to produce a scaly, upper wingbar. The greater coverts also had black centres, but their fringes combined cinnamon-buff edges with white tips. Although both the edges and tips appeared to be of comparable width, and both were equally sharp in their contrast with the centres of the feathers, the white tips stood out more conspicuously than the buffy edges to produce a relatively obvious lower wingbar. The remiges likewise appeared to have jet-black centres that contrasted with what appeared to be cinnamon-buff edges on most, if not all, of the feathers. I further believe that the innermost secondaries (the "tertials") had some white distally, but I was less certain of its placement because my best views of the bird were from the side. Despite my noting both what appeared to be three or four primaries extending beyond the longest secondary, and a medium-length primary projection, I never noted the precise length of the primary extension relative to the longest secondaries. As far as I could determine, the wingtips reached to about the tips of the undertail coverts, which may have been as much as a third of the way out the tail. The distal primaries were black with whitish to pale-buff edges that seemed to extend all the way to the tips of the feathers. One thing that I all but failed to see was the tail pattern. When the bird was on the ground, I noted only that the tail was largely dark, and when I saw the bird relatively well once in flight, I noted only that the white on the sides of the tail was both relatively extensive (I would estimate more than a single pair of rectrices were largely white), and that the demarcation ran parallel to the sides of the tail. Although the tail seemed slightly notched when the bird was on the ground, I never really noted its shape on the flying bird.

I also did my best to look at the bird's face pattern, but even still, I missed some of the fine details. As far as I could determine, the dark forehead extended all the way to the base of the upper mandible. Just below this was a bold superciliary that was a rich buff in colour. Complementing the superciliary was a bold, buffy eye ring, but I never noted the pattern in the lores. Given that the eye ring always seemed complete, I imagine that the dark surround to the auriculars never reached the back of the eye (though I did not note this specifically). The auriculars were boldly surrounded on all sides by a dusky to blackish border that extended back from the eye to the upper, rear corner of the auriculars (with the above proviso). From here, it extended downward to the lower corner, and then curved back forward towards the bill. Although the border reached at least nearly to the eyes, I was never certain whether it continued under the eyes to the base of the bill. As far as I could determine, the pale superciliary extended all the way back to the rich, buffy nape, and I was quite certain that the sides of the neck were this same, rich-buff in colour, these separating the dark auricular-border from the dark back. Finally, the bold sub-moustachial stripes represented the lower margin of the dark border of the auriculars. Unlike those of the Lapland Longspurs, the centre of this bird's auriculars formed a conspicuous, pale spot that appeared to be bordered on all sides. Relative to the buffy regions of the rest of the face, the sub-moustachial stripes were obviously more whitish. In fact, these stripes were quite conspicuous when the bird was seen from the front, appearing much like a pale moustache. Whereas the sub-moustachial stripes obviously reached to the base of the bill, and at times, they appeared to connect under the chin, the dusky malar stripes were both narrow and quite short (seemingly extending from the rear corners of the throat not quite to the bill). Though the chin appeared slightly paler (as implied above), the throat itself was quite buffy, and as such, it did not really appear to contrast with the breast. In fact, apart from the chin and the undertail coverts, the bird appeared both quite evenly and quite richly coloured below. Several times, however, it appeared that the undertail coverts were paler than the rest of the underparts. Though they may possibly have been whitish in colour, they were more likely just a paler shade of buff. Complementing the dusky malar stripes was a band of short and narrow streaks that extended across the breast and then continued more extensively as narrow, dusky streaks running along the sides and down the flanks. Although I doubt that there were more than two or three of these streaks on the flanks, the bird sometimes looked moderately streaked when seen from the side. As far as I could determine, the lower breast and the centre of the belly were unmarked, but about the same rich-buff colour as the throat and breast. This bird certainly lacked the contrast between the breast and belly that is typical of even the dullest Lapland Longspurs.

I noted the colour of the eyes, legs, and feet only as dark, and in the case of the legs and feet, I am not even completely certain of this (though they were not conspicuously pale). The bill generally looked dark, but I thought that I may have seen a pinkish base to the lower mandible when the bird was close to us (it looked entirely dark during our later observations). The bill seemed smallish for a Longspur, but again, I doubt that I could have said much about it beyond the fact that it did not appear large and swollen like that of a McCown's Longspur (*C. mccownii*). Unfortunately, I never saw this bird in direct comparison with the Lapland Longspurs, so fine comparisons of size, shape, and plumage patterns were never really possible.

Discussion

There is no doubt that this was a Smith's Longspur. The primary extension is diagnostic, as are the entirely buff underparts. Also diagnostic of a male Smith's Longspur are the pattern on the lesser and median upper wing coverts. No other longspur has this combination of characteristics.

Smith's Longspur nests in Ontario along the Hudson Bay coast tundra (Hussell 1987) and

winters in the south central United States (Kemsies and Randle 1964; Rising 1996). It is, therefore, surprising that so few records exist for southern Ontario. There are only three accepted records in the annual reports of the Ontario Bird Records Committee (Wormington 1985, 1986; Dobos 1998). We know of only two more published records (Devitt 1950), which may or may not be correct. Perhaps it is not so surprising. Kemsies (1968) called it a bird of mystery, nowhere plentiful and so elusive that it is hard to find in the field even when it is known to be present. How prescient are these remarks when pertaining to the Hagersville bird! Several authors indicated that this is probably the hardest longspur to see on the ground and described the careful approach and patience required (Dunn and Beadle 1998, Bailey 2002, Sheppard 2002). Ryff (1987) entitled his account of this bird and the paucity of migration records as "A Case of Neglect".

Moreover, there has never been a winter season report in Ontario, leading to the question as to what conditions resulted in this bird being at this location. The answer is pure speculation. It is possible that strong southwesterly winds a few days before the first sighting brought the bird here. Or it could have accompanied the "Northern" Horned Larks (*E.a. alpestris*) which arrived in numbers about a week earlier. Or it could have arrived in the fall and spent the entire winter in this field.

Smith's Longspur migrates northward through the Midwest in March and April (Dunn and Beadle 1998). In Illinois, which lies almost entirely to the south of Ontario, 20 March–15 April is peak time (Bailey 2002, Whan 2002). Therefore, it is unlikely that it would be moving in late January or early February and thus potentially be diverted by strong winds. In addition, the bird did not associate with the larks and buntings, so why would it migrate with them? In fact, Dunn and Beadle (1998) pointed out that Smith's Longspur seldom associates with other species.

Ryff (1987) suggested that the migration route of Smith's Longspur is elliptical, being south through the central part of the continent in the fall but drifting somewhat eastward on southwesterly winds in spring. There are, however, fall records from the east. A bird was collected on Long Island, New York, on 22 September 1974 (Davis 1976) and a flock of 13 was at the Oxford Airport in southwestern Ohio on 15 November 1958 (Sheppard 1959). Victor W. Fazio observed a bird at Long Point Tip, *Haldimand-Norfolk*, from 31 October–2 November 1984 (Wormington 1986).

In spring, there is a specimen taken in Connecticut on 24 March 1969 (Bulmer 1969). Moreover, at least formerly, spring flocks were seen at an airport in southwestern Ohio (Kemsies and Randle 1964, Kemsies 1968, Tucker 2002, Whan

2002). Peterjohn (2001) indicated that Smith's Longspur was, but seems no longer to be, a regular migrant in parts of western Ohio, generally in spring but more rarely in fall. He doubted the validity of a single undocumented winter report from Ohio. In summary, Smith's Longspur has been found in about 15 states and provinces from Michigan eastward but in most cases, not including Ohio, there are only one or two records per state or province (Dunn and Beadle 1998).

The two other OBRC records are a female seen by Ron Scovell et al. on 20 April 1980 at Long Point Provincial Park (Wormington 1985), and another female found by Doug McRae on 18 May 1997 and photographed by J. David Andrews at the Two Rivers Airfield in Algonquin Provincial Park (Dobos 1998). The bird identified by Ott Devitt and his wife on 22 May 1949 near Elmvale, Simcoe, certainly fits the pattern (Devitt 1950).

So, in all likelihood, the Hagersville bird arrived in fall and wintered in this 2nd Line field. There was plenty of food available for a seedeater. The owner of this field, Gerry Vanderzanden, described to me the recent planting activity in this 75-acre field. It was planted in oats in spring 2001, then twice chopped at one foot in height; then it was sown in hay with the mixture ratio as follows: alfalfa 5; timothy 3; trefoil 3 and red clover 1. This was not cut. Thus, a field heavily laden with seeds was left all winter. There was no episode of heavy snow all winter and food was easily obtainable.

The bird was last reported on 10 March (Dobos 2002). It may well have been present in this field or somewhere nearby until considerably later. Smith's Longspurs do not arrive on their breeding grounds at Churchill, Manitoba, until late May (Jehl 1968). There is no reason for the bird to leave until late April or May and the Ontario spring records bear this out.

This record is all the more unusual on account of its winter occurrence. It is doubtful that Smith's Longspur occurs regularly in southern Ontario in winter, as they do not occur in winter in Midwest states that lie to the south of Ontario. Ontario birders interested in finding this species would do better to check large corn stubble fields in open treeless areas in April. Particularly good cornfields are those that also have large amounts of Foxtail (*Setaria viridis*), a yellowish grass (Frankton 1955, McCoy 2002).

Whatever its origin, this is an exciting new addition to the birds of the Hamilton Study Area. The record has been accepted by the Ontario Bird Records Committee (Bill Crins, pers. comm.). We estimate that at least 500 birders journeyed to Hagersville and most saw the Smith's Longspur. At least several long-time birders and World travellers got this as a life bird!

Acknowledgements

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