

McCown's Longspur: New to Ontario

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On 21 June 2005, Josh Shook and I flew in to remote Weagamow Lake, Kenora District, Ontario to undertake a week of bird observation for the Boreal Initiative and the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas. After meeting with the First Nation Band Council and settling into our accommodations, and despite being tired after the long flight from Sioux Lookout, we decided to check out the community's sewage lagoon. Separately, we walked the gravel berms which surrounded the two lagoon ponds. The berms were sparsely covered with short, drought-resistant wild grasses. Josh flushed a small bird which drifted high over his head and landed behind him. It was sparrow-like, had white in the outer tail feathers, and he did not know what it was.

We met up at the far end of the lagoons and decided to go back to look for the mystery bird. Luckily, we were able to find it again but it quickly flushed. With binoculars, I thought I noted white "wedges" in the tail, which seemed unlike most of the species that I had been considering as possibilities, such as Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris*) and Vesper Sparrow (*Pooecetes gramineus*). The bird's flight was somewhat undulating as it rose higher in the sky with its head slightly elevated, wheeled

back over us and then swooped down to the ground to skim along and then run through the short grass into the longer grass near the edge of the lagoon. I was convinced by its actions that it was not a sparrow. Fifteen minutes had now passed since we had first located the bird at 1700h, and rather than chase it further, I decided to return later with CD recordings to see if we could coax it into the open by playing songs and call notes of likely species.

We returned at 1900h and located the bird again. We tried playing vocalizations of several candidate species, and got no response. As the bird was a bit nervous, it kept to the taller grass on the inside bank of the berm. That made viewing impossible, so I walked along the thicker grass while Josh watched for the bird. I tried to move slowly enough that it would not fly off again, hoping that it might move into the shorter grass on top of the berm where we could get a good look. Finally, this happened and I had the bird in full view from less than 5 m distance. Although superficially the bird looked like some of our guesses, as soon as I saw the bill I knew it was entirely wrong for all of them. I got out my small digital camera and snapped a couple of pictures

(Figures 1 and 2), though I knew I could not get good shots. I made a rough sketch in my notebook also.

I left the bird and moved back to Josh, who was checking the sparrows in the Sibley (2000) guide. We dismissed all but the longspurs, which I confess I had not considered among the possibilities up to then. McCown's Longspur (*Calcarius mccownii*) in non-breeding plumage, and probably a female given the date, was the best fit for the field marks we had noted and sketched. Not believing my eyes or notes, I crept back to within 5 m of the bird, and called out its features to Josh again. The field marks continued to support female McCown's. Neither of us had ever seen the species before, but I had observed the other longspurs previously, unlike Josh. We knew McCown's Longspur was rare, but did not realize that there were no accepted records for Ontario.

We had been observing the bird for about half an hour by then, and decided not to bother it further that day in the hope that it would remain in the area. Back at our lodgings, I called south to find out about the bird's Ontario status. Given its extreme rarity, we decided we would post the sighting on ONTBIRDS (the bird sightings listserv operated by OFO), if the Band Council gave permission for birders to visit the reserve. They agreed the next morning that if people contacted me first and stayed in our accommodations, then it was alright for them to fly in to see the bird. We

posted the report, but cautioned that we had to check to see if it was still present. I quickly raced back to the lagoons, but was not able to relocate the bird after a considerable search. I looked along the edge of the airport runway as well, where the habitat appeared much more suitable, but to no avail. On several subsequent days I searched for the longspur, but could not find it again. The oasis of dry grassland in a sea of boreal bog and water habitats must have been a beacon for the McCown's Longspur, but it may have stayed for only a short time.

Description

The bird was pale, sparrow-like and seemed similar in size to a Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*). The head showed a wide pale supercilium stretching back to the nape; a pale throat; a whitish malar stripe extending back and up to almost join the supercilium; a darker cheek patch and crown; and a plain gray, unstreaked nape. The large bill had a darker upper mandible and fleshy pink lower mandible. A whitish ring around the beady eye joined the supercilium. The breast and belly were unstreaked, pale beige-gray; and the flanks and chest were light tan and unstreaked. The back was darker beige-gray, with darker streaks; and there were fewer streaks near the rump. The wings were long, extending down to the middle of the tail, with darker primaries. There were no obvious wing



Figure 1: Female McCown's Longspur at Weagamow Lake, Kenora District, Ontario on 21 June 2005. Photo by *Peter A. Read*.



Figure 2: Female McCown's Longspur (enlarged image) at Weagamow Lake, Kenora District, Ontario on 21 June 2005. Photo by *Peter A. Read*.

bars, but there was a row of tiny bead-like reddish-brown “spots” on the median coverts in the shoulder area. When the bird was on the ground, the tail appeared very dark gray, with white wedges that were barely visible. However, when it flew, we could see that the centre of the tail exhibited an inverted dark gray-black T-shape pattern, surrounded by the white wedges. The legs were flesh-coloured. The call given in flight was a high pitched “chip-it” or “see-chip”.

Discussion

The breeding range of McCown’s Longspur is restricted to short grass prairie of the northern Great Plains from southeastern Alberta and southwestern Saskatchewan south to Montana, east Wyoming, north-east Colorado and northwestern Nebraska, with a few in extreme southwestern North Dakota and possibly in northwestern South Dakota (AOU 1998, Dunn and

Beadle 1998). Vagrant McCown’s Longspurs have been reported from southwestern Manitoba and the north shore of Lake Superior in Minnesota, and there was a well documented male at Whitefish Point, Michigan from 27 to 29 May 1981 (Dunn and Beadle 1998). Winter and early spring records exist for Missouri, Louisiana, and Mississippi (Dunn and Beadle 1998), and a female was at Bridgewater, Massachusetts from 9 to 26 January 1977 (Veit and Petersen 1993).

This occurrence of a female McCown’s Longspur at Weagamow Lake on 21 June 2005 was accepted by the Ontario Bird Records Committee (OBRC), and constitutes the first record for Ontario (Crins 2006).

Acknowledgements

I thank Ron Tozer for assistance with the literature, and suggestions for revision of an earlier draft.

Literature Cited

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