

Smith's Longspur in Ohio and the Midwest

Bill Whan

223 East Tulane Road, Columbus, OH 43202
danielel@iwaynet.net

*In many ways a bird of mystery, it is nowhere plentiful,
and its elusiveness makes it hard to find in the field, even
where it is known to be present.*

—Emerson Kemsies (1968)

Elusive, ephemeral, enigmatic—to no other bird on the Ohio list are these words better applied. Smith's longspurs *Calcarius pictus* are hard to find, hard to see well, even hard to count accurately. The history of reliable Ohio records of the species, though involving over 1800 individuals, spans a mere 42 years, and we have no verified report since 1991. Not for over 30 years has this longspur, so gregarious in migration, been seen here in numbers higher than three. Strangely enough, all but a few of our recorded birds were found in three areas: a small Butler County airport in the southwest, a few fields not far from Columbus, and a couple of Cuyahoga County sites in the northeast.

Smith's longspur's history in Ohio is curious in other ways as well. It goes unmentioned by our early ornithologists. The first published record¹ came from 1888, near Garrettsville in northeastern Portage County on the odd date of 29 January, when two birds were collected from a large flock feeding on ragweed. The specimens' whereabouts are unknown, and Peterjohn (2001) considers the record questionable, citing ragweed as a very unlikely food source for the species.² One was collected from a flock of 12 at the fish hatchery near Lake St. Marys on 23 October 1944 as part of the state's first recorded fall occurrence, but it too has not been preserved, in this case because it was too mutilated (Clark 1964); Peterjohn regards this as Ohio's first confirmed Smith's longspur.

In the spring of 1949, perhaps as many as 15 were discovered in a flock of about 25 longspur spp. at the Miami University airport just west of Oxford in Butler County, marking the first in an extraordinary series of observations at the site. On 18 April of that year, Emerson Kemsies, Ronald Austing, and Worth Randle collected four males from the flock, three going to the University of Cincinnati's Department of Zoology, and one to the Ohio State Museum in Columbus; these are the species' earliest extant specimens from Ohio. The airport regularly produced Smith's longspur records for the next 13 years, with high counts of 100 on 27 Mar 1954, ~300 in the spring of 1957, and 150 during the spring of 1962. A concerted effort in the spring of 1959 banded 42 of 65 birds found; 66 birds were banded there over the

¹ Dates, numbers, and literature citations for published records appear in Table 1.

² Ragweed seed has been identified in the stomachs of Smith's longspurs from Illinois (Martin et al. 1951).

years, but none was recovered in subsequent seasons (J. Sheppard, pers. comm.), although banding did establish that individuals stayed as long as 19 days at the airport in spring (Kemsies and Randle 1964). After 1963, the longspurs were never reported again from the site, even though Peterjohn reports that habitats near the airport later seemed visibly unaltered.³

During this period, two significant occurrences were recorded elsewhere in the state, both in the spring of 1956. On 15 April, 250 were found in a Pickaway County field, with two individuals remaining on 1 May, and 25-30 birds, all presumably Smith's, at the Cuyahoga County airport on 29 April, dwindling to one from 6-16 May. Later a single bird was found at this airport during March 1957, then two in April 1959.



A male Smith's longspur in breeding plumage is an unforgettable sight. This one was photographed at Churchill, Manitoba in June 2002 by Bob Royse.

³ Other local finds included *vide* Sheppard yellow rails *Coturnicops noveboracensis*, seen just east of the site during the 1950s; found most often in October, the birds flushed from cornfields being harvested, where one specimen was obtained after it hit a fence wire while fleeing. The airport was also the site of the first Ohio record of Sprague's pipit *Anthus spragueii*, collected by Sheppard on 15 Nov 1958, where a number of observers found three more 12 days later (Sheppard 1959). D. Osborne (pers. comm.) remembers the airport area as a haven for hundreds of American pipits, thousands of American golden-plovers, and 10-15 pairs of upland sandpipers during spring seasons during the late 1960s.

Having heard of the continual findings near Oxford, Milton Trautman visited the site in April 1963, at which time Sheppard (pers. comm.) showed him 15 or more Smith's longspurs and the local habitats they preferred during migration. While no more reports were to come from Oxford thereafter, a sixteen-year period ensued during which all known Ohio records emanated from central Ohio. Here during this period, Trautman reported flocks as large as 200 in 1965, 50 in 1967, and 100 in 1971. Others in his circle in Columbus's Wheaton Club, having learned how to recognize the appropriate habitat, found others during the 1960s in Franklin, Madison, and Pickaway Counties. Even though habitats in some of the sites involved in these repeated sightings—mostly weedy corn stubble—did not appear to have changed substantially fifteen years after the last significant record in 1971 (T. Thomson, pers. comm.), only a single bird has been recorded for central Ohio since that time, at Charley's Pond in Pickaway County in 1985.

Beyond one from Perry County in December 1977, judged by Audubon's Christmas Bird Count editor as furnishing "good details," subsequent Smith's longspur reports have arisen from near Lake Erie: first a bird at Cedar Point National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in October 1980, then three at Ottawa NWR in March 1981, followed by records at Cleveland's Gordon Park of three on 6 April 1986 and a single bird on the same date in 1991. None has been recorded in Ohio since. Omitting a few reports either lacking in acceptable details, or examined and not accepted by the OBRC, Ohio's published sight records are shown in Table 1.

Many central Ohio reports from the 60s remain fragmentary and anecdotal,⁴ and the Oxford airport record is likely incomplete as well, but the numbers of Ohio Smith's longspurs (Tables 1, 2) nevertheless amount to a minimum of 1803 birds, geographically distributed thus across the state:

Southwestern (all near Oxford in Butler County): 975

Central (Franklin, Madison, Perry, Pickaway Counties): 775

Northeastern (Cuyahoga and Portage Counties): 36

Northwestern (Auglaize and Lucas Counties): 17

Over time, the records are distributed thus:

1888-1948: 15 individuals

1949-1971: 1777 individuals

1972-2002: 11 individuals

⁴ For example, valuable but undated is this report of Smith's longspur from Edward S. Thomas's *Columbus Dispatch* column of 9 May 1965: "...we organized a drive to locate the birds. We were lucky in finding a few within a few yards of the road. They were not at all shy, but they were exceedingly difficult to see, as they crept, mouse-like, through the stubble. If one of them crouched motionless against the ground, their coloring and markings matched their surroundings so closely that they were well-nigh invisible... It was frustrating to have a half-dozen birds fly up at your feet from the very spot which you had been looking at without seeing a thing! We soon found it paid off to stop short upon flushing some birds, and to search the ground in front of us intensively. After a long and painful search, we would often locate from one to a half-dozen birds creeping over the ground. Sometimes the birds would fly a hundred feet and drop again to the ground. On other occasions, a flock would circle higher and higher and then strike out until they were lost from sight. All together we may have seen a total of as many as 150 birds... We are beginning to wonder if we may not be able to find this western species as far east as Columbus every April if we diligently search the stubble fields in prairie-like country."

Table 1. All published sight records of Smith's longspur in Ohio.

Date	Location	Number	Reference(s)
29 Jan 1888	Portage Co.	large flock, 2 collected	<i>Wilson Bull.</i> 16(3):85
8 & 24 May 1924	Cuyahoga Co.	1	<i>Cleve. Bird Cal.</i> 20(3):2
23 Oct 1944	Auglaize Co. (fish hatchery)	12	Clark 1964
9-30 Apr 1949	Oxford Airport	15	Kemsies and Austing 1949 <i>Aud. Field Notes</i> 3(4):211
Through 21 Apr 1950	Oxford Airport	35	Kemsies 1968
Through 21 Apr 1951	Oxford Airport	20	Kemsies 1968
12 Apr 1952	Oxford Airport	20	Kemsies 1968
23 Mar 1953	Oxford Airport	unspecified	Kemsies 1961
27 Mar 1954	Oxford Airport	100	<i>Aud. Field Notes</i> 8(4):316
3 Apr 1954	Auglaize Co. (fish hatchery)	1	Clark 1964
19 Mar 1955	Oxford Airport	55	<i>Aud. Field Notes</i> 9(4):335
15 Apr 1956	Walnut Twp., Pickaway Co.	250	Kemsies and Randle 1964
16 Apr 1956	Walnut Twp., Pickaway Co.	3	Kemsies and Randle 1964
19 Apr 1956	Walnut Twp., Pickaway Co.	150	Kemsies and Randle 1964
22 Apr 1956	Walnut Twp., Pickaway Co.	50	Kemsies and Randle 1964
23 Apr 1956	Walnut Twp., Pickaway Co.	30	Kemsies and Randle 1964
1 May 1956	Walnut Twp., Pickaway Co.	2	Kemsies and Randle 1964
29 Apr - 16 May 1956	Cuyahoga Co. Airport	25-30 at peak	<i>Cleve. Bird Cal.</i> 52(2):13
16 Mar 1957	Cuyahoga Co. Airport	1	<i>Cleve. Bird Cal.</i> 53(2):13
24 Mar 1957	Oxford Airport	100+	<i>Cincinnati Enquirer</i> 4/7/57
30 Mar 1957	Oxford Airport	unspecified	Kemsies 1961
30 Apr 1957	Oxford Airport	unspecified	Kemsies 1961
Apr 1957	Oxford Airport	~300	Sheppard 2002
14 Apr 1958	Oxford Airport	3	Kemsies and Randle 1964
20 Apr 1958	Oxford Airport	unspecified	Kemsies 1961
15 Nov 1958	Oxford Airport	13	Sheppard 1959
28 Mar - 23 Apr 1959	Oxford Airport	65 at peak, 42 banded	<i>Aud. Field Notes</i> 13(4):376
11 Apr 1959	Cuyahoga Co. Airport	2	<i>Cleve. Bird Cal.</i> 55(2):12
Spring 1960	Oxford Airport	70-80	Kemsies and Randle 1964 Kemsies 1968
6 Apr 1961	Oxford Airport	1, first arrival	<i>Aud. Field Notes</i> 15(4):416
31 Mar - 22 Apr 1962	Oxford Airport	150 at peak	<i>Aud. Field Notes</i> 16(3):336
Apr 1963	Oxford Airport	15+	This article
20 Apr 1965	Madison Co.	200	<i>Aud. Field Notes</i> 19(4):482
late Apr 1965	Pickaway Co.	2+	E.S. Thomas, <i>Columbus Dispatch</i> 4/25/65
late Apr 1965	Pickaway Co.	~150	E.S. Thomas, <i>Columbus Dispatch</i> 5/9/65
7 Apr 1967	Franklin/Pickaway Cos.	7-12	<i>Wheaton Club Bull.</i> 13:60
Apr 1967 (probably)	Paint Twp., Madison Co.	50	<i>Wheaton Club Bull.</i> 13:61
7 Jan 1968	Madison Co.	1-2	<i>Wheaton Club Bull.</i> 14:30 <i>Columbus Dispatch</i> 1/21/68
30 Nov 1968	Madison Co.	2	<i>Wheaton Club Bull.</i> 14:33
6 Mar 1971	Franklin Co.	100	<i>Wheaton Club Bull.</i> 16:39
31 Dec 1977	Perry Co.	1	<i>Am. Birds</i> 32(4):638
12 Oct 1980	Lucas Co.	1	<i>The Ohio Cardinal</i> 3(3):34, 43
8 or 9 Mar 1981	Lucas Co.	3	<i>Am. Birds</i> 35(5):831 <i>The Ohio Cardinal</i> 4(1):39
5-6 May 1984	Cuyahoga Co.	1	<i>Am. Birds</i> 38(5):919
24 Mar 1985	Pickaway Co.	1	<i>The Ohio Cardinal</i> 8(1):32
6 Apr 1986	Cuyahoga Co.	3	<i>Am. Birds</i> 40(3):481
6 Apr 1991	Cuyahoga Co.	1	<i>The Ohio Cardinal</i> 14(3):25

Table 2. Ohio specimens of Smith's longspur. Two reported in the literature have not been located. EC=Earlham College Biology collections; CMNH=Cincinnati Museum of Natural History; MUMZ=Miami University Museum of Zoology; OSUM=Ohio State University Museum of Biological Diversity; UMMZ=University of Michigan Museum of Zoology.

Date	Location	Specimen Number
18 Apr 1949	Oxford Airport	CMNH 21456
18 Apr 1949	Oxford Airport	CMNH 21457
18 Apr 1949	Oxford Airport	OSUM 6089
18 Apr 1949	Oxford Airport	UMMZ 134709
20 Apr 1950	Oxford Airport	CMNH 21458
20 Apr 1950	Oxford Airport	CMNH 21459
2 Apr 1951	Oxford Airport	CMNH 21460
5 Apr 1952	Oxford Airport	CMNH 21467
12 Apr 1952	Oxford Airport	Unlocated (Kemsies 1968)
23 Mar 1953	Oxford Airport	CMNH 21468
3 Apr 1954	Auglaize Co.	CMNH 21464
3 Apr 1954	Oxford Airport	Unlocated (Kemsies 1961)
17 Apr 1954	Oxford Airport	CMNH 21472
20 Apr 1954	Oxford Airport	CMNH 21473
20 Apr 1954	Oxford Airport	CMNH 21474
24 Apr 1954	Oxford Airport	CMNH 21475
19 Mar 1955	Oxford Airport	CMNH 21471
19 Mar 1955	Oxford Airport	CMNH 21476
7 Apr 1956	Oxford Airport	OSUM 9419
14 Apr 1956	Oxford Airport	CMNH 21469
23 Apr 1956	Pickaway Co.	OSUM 9421
30 Mar 1957	Oxford Airport	CMNH 21465
30 Mar 1957	Oxford Airport	CMNH 21466
20 Apr 1958	Oxford Airport	CMNH 21470
15 Nov 1958	Oxford Airport	CMNH 21462
15 Nov 1958	Oxford Airport	CMNH 21463
1959	Oxford Airport	CMNH 21461
3 Apr 1962	Oxford Airport	MUMZ 0921
17 Apr 1962	Oxford Airport	EC A-801
17 Apr 1962	Oxford Airport	EC A-865
17 Apr 1962	Oxford Airport	EC A-925
17 Apr 1962	Oxford Airport	EC A-2158
23 Apr 1962	Oxford Airport	OSUM 12793
11 Apr 1965	Pickaway Co.	OSUM 10550
19 Apr 1965	Pickaway Co.	OSUM 10644
3 Apr 1966	Pickaway Co.	OSUM 12999
8 Apr 1967	Madison Co.	OSUM 13377
14 Apr 1968	Madison Co.	OSUM 13787
14 Apr 1968	Madison Co.	OSUM 13788
14 Apr 1968	Madison Co.	OSUM 13789

These are perplexing numbers. Why do all our records from westernmost Ohio emerge from a single site? Was this our only longspur spot, or were they being overlooked elsewhere? Why is it that between 1949 and 1971 our neighboring state Indiana possesses records of only 80 birds, a tiny fraction of the 3045 in published reports (K. Brock, pers. comm.), while over 98% of Ohio's recorded Smith's were found within this 23-year span? Why has Smith's seemingly disappeared from western Ohio for 40 years? And why have we seen none anywhere in Ohio over the past decade or more?

Apparently, detailed lore about the species' habitat preferences and techniques for finding it, won after the discovery of a migratory staging area at a little sod airport in Butler County, came to be passed on to others, who later discovered new haunts of migrant longspurs in central Ohio. Perhaps a similar and more or less contemporaneous discovery at an isolated scrap of appropriate habitat far to the north and east in a Cuyahoga County airport led to increased awareness there, which in turn resulted in further local records for this scarce migrant. Cleveland has relatively few acres of potential habitat, but many dedicated birders. By contrast, agricultural lands to the west feature enormous stretches of appropriate habitat, but correspondingly few seekers of birds. Relatively few observers, working in a handful of areas, have recorded a huge share of Ohio's Smith's longspurs; this should alert us that luck and/or observer familiarity with the species' habits has probably influenced the record more than the longspur's true numbers. Smith's are not numerous, and often migrate in flocks faithful to certain locations, making for very uneven distribution. Additionally, the Ohio habitats most inviting to migrant longspurs tend to be on remoter parts of privately-owned farmland and hence more difficult of access. Agricultural fields lack much in the way of diversity of birdlife that would make exploring them otherwise productive or enjoyable for the casual field observer. Now, after the heyday of our longspur observations has passed, a new cohort of birders—undoubtedly more numerous, but perhaps collectively less well-acquainted with the habitat preferences and bird-finding techniques associated with Smith's longspur—has ensued. We must also consider the possibility that habitats in specific sites once attractive to this species have changed in crucial ways. Perhaps all these factors play roles in Smith's longspur's strange local history.

II

Smith's longspurs nest just where the tree-line meets the tundra in a narrow strip across the remote Nearctic, and winter in a fairly small range in the south-central Great Plains centered in northeastern Texas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas and contiguous parts of several adjacent states.⁵ Recorded in more than 40 states and provinces, Smith's is an infrequent but wide-ranging vagrant, its records ranging from Arizona and northern California to South Carolina and Nova Scotia. As migrants in the Midwest they are most often reported during the spring, when regionally the largest numbers are detected in Illinois. To Ohio's south and east, the species is accidental

⁵ Ranges illustrated in Briskie (1993) and Peterson (1980) are too extensive, at least for the present day; there are, for example, only two accepted modern winter records in Iowa (Kent and Dinsmore 1996), and five in Missouri (Robbins 1992). Sibley's (2000) map more accurately represents the present winter range.

in Kentucky (one record), and West Virginia (one record); Tennessee had 27 records through 1996, nearly all in fall and winter in the western part of the state. There is no accepted record for Pennsylvania. To the west, it is a fairly common migrant in Indiana and common in Illinois, uncommon in Missouri (rare in the eastern part of the state), and rare in Iowa. To the north it is casual at best, with 10 verified records (involving 12 birds) in Michigan, 11 in Wisconsin (with as many as 40+ birds, 20-30 of them in a single flock in 1921), and in Ontario, where the species breeds, only four records south of 47°N, including one found in the winter of 2001-2002. In Minnesota, the species is very rare in spring and very uncommon in the fall, with larger numbers in the western part of the state.

Comparing its range map with accepted records suggests some questions. Why are there so few records just north of the wintering grounds (in western Kentucky and Tennessee, or eastern Missouri), and so many from Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio? Why are they so seldom found farther north in Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, eastern Minnesota, and southern Ontario, areas that must also lie along Smith's longspur's route? Its records on migration seem discontinuous from north to south. Staging areas between 39°N and 44°N latitude, where the birds may spend several weeks, constitute their only known regular stops on their northward passage. They arrive in Churchill, Manitoba during the first week of June (Briskie 1993), while in northern Minnesota the average spring departure date is 15 May (A. Hertz, pers. comm.). Where are they in the meantime? Bob Royle (pers. comm.) has observed that extensive and remote boglands in the taiga resemble the species' breeding grounds far more than do the cornfields of the Midwest, and might provide acceptable stopover conditions.

Since numbers of Smith's rapidly diminish toward the east in our region, one would expect their reported numbers in eastern Indiana to equal or exceed those from western Ohio. Ohio has records of 975 birds from our westernmost tier of counties, however, and Indiana only 80 from their contiguous easternmost ones, even though a traveler passing over the border would notice no apparent change in the landscape. There are no published records of Smith's longspur (though Sheppard in pers. comm. reports having seen some at a wet depression in a corn field there during two springs during the early 1960s) from Franklin Co., Indiana, whose eastern border is less than 3 km from the fabulously productive Oxford airport site. So there seem to be anomalies in its range from east to west, as well as from north to south. For example, records show a patchy, almost stripey, distribution across the 40th parallel: the longspur is said to be more common in the west than in the east in each of four contiguous Midwestern states: Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri! Unless wild birds are scrupulously observing state boundaries, we must conclude it is our coverage, not the longspur's distribution, that is patchy.

These birds' numbers in Ohio may be influenced by the weather, particularly by spring storms with strong southwest winds. These winds can bring remarkable numbers of American golden-plovers *Pluvialis dominica* to Ohio, along with other birds that winter in the grasslands and breed in the tundra. The single Smith's record in West Virginia followed a 3 April storm that also brought 14 inches of snow and 1000+ American pipits *Anthus rubescens* to the site (Argabrite 1988, pers. comm.). We must not overestimate this influence, however, as the Oxford airport hosted the longspur for 14 consecutive springs regardless of the prevailing winds.

Smith's longspur is not an abundant species. Briskie (1993) estimates its world population at 75,000 or fewer. Additionally, the narrow swath of Arctic territory they occupy during the breeding season stretches 2500 miles, suggesting a broad dispersal of birds in migration. Its easternmost nesting population is located on Cape Henrietta Maria at the northwest corner of James Bay in Ontario. A direct route there from the wintering grounds, however, includes Michigan, a state with only four spring records of Smith's longspur. A direct path through Indiana and Illinois to breeding grounds farther west passes through Wisconsin, but Wisconsin has only six spring records of Smith's longspur. Authorities in both states admit to puzzlement about these anomalies. Robbins (1991) has this to say in *Wisconsin Birdlife*:

In recent years various observers, believing that this species should be found more frequently than the records indicate, have made occasional special efforts to find it in southwestern Wisconsin during April. Investigators have reasoned that: (1) the regular migratory ranges lies only slightly to the west of Wisconsin; (2) in some years the eastward movement of fall birds has carried them to Chicago, to Indiana, and even to western Ohio; (3) if Smith's are present, they may so conceal themselves in short grass that they are easily passed over, unless seen at close range. Sorties to locate birds have produced only negative results to date. But they should be continued.

For his part, Granlund (1994) says of migrant Smith's longspurs in *The Birds of Michigan*:

The eastern edge of their migration route appears to bring them up the west side of Lake Michigan, since birds are annually found in good numbers in northern Illinois and Indiana. However, the species is rare to casual in Wisconsin and only accidental in Michigan. This situation has perplexed birders in both states. Some hypothesize that if observers could find the preferred stop-over habitat and gain knowledge of the migration chronology, the Smith's longspur could be found regularly in Wisconsin and Michigan. So far such efforts in both states have met with failure. An equally likely explanation is that birds fly directly from staging areas in Illinois and Indiana to their breeding grounds without stopping for significant periods of time.

Granlund's hypothesis sounds reasonable. After all, we have only four accepted records of Smith's longspur from southern Ontario. But Michigan's latest spring record comes from the Upper Peninsula on 20 May, two weeks before Smith's average arrival dates near Hudson Bay. Though northern Ontario's 750 km from Lake Superior to Hudson Bay presents an expanse of boreal forest up to the edge of the breeding grounds, few observers get to the open spruce/tamarack bogs within the taiga at that time of year, where longspurs may stage while awaiting the fickle arrival of the northern spring.

III

There is some evidence that the wintering range of Smith's longspur has shifted or at least contracted somewhat over the past hundred or more years, perhaps in response to changes in food resources. Ryff (1987) offers some intriguing speculations on the species' fall migrations, among which he suggests that the virtual obliteration of tall-grass bluestem prairies and mixed oak-hickory and bluestem

associations in the Midwest during the 19th century forced Smith's longspurs to extend their movements south just far enough to reach areas relatively free of snow (tall bluestem had provided a food source in deep snow), where they were able to adopt pastureland and grassy areas such as airports as wintering habitat. Kemsies and Randle (1964) chronicle numerous new discoveries of this species at airports in at the southern edge of the wintering range in Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana during the mid-20th century. While its winter range may have changed slightly, there is no evidence that Smith's migratory routes have done so, even though the disappearance of some suitable stopover habitat may have reduced its reported numbers in certain states and provinces along the way. Robbins (1991), for example, cites Wisconsin's early ornithologists as finding Smith's on the state's former prairies during the 19th century oftener than have much more numerous modern observers in the 20th, and Kent (1981) tells us "early Iowa ornithologists suggest that Smith's Longspur was a common, but erratic migrant...prior to 1900...After 1900 the records are sparse."

While its diet on the breeding grounds includes many insects, Smith's longspur subsists almost entirely on grass seeds at other seasons. In its wintering areas, even at the margins in Tennessee, Mississippi, and Louisiana, it is said to be closely tied to three-awned grasses of the genus *Aristida* (Kemsies 1968). This native, more western genus is not a major component of Ohio plant communities however, and Kemsies (1968) states that analysis of the crops of two Smith's taken at the Oxford airport showed no *Aristida* seeds, even though some plants of that genus were growing in the field where they were collected; instead, 99%+ of the seeds found were of the genus *Sporobolus*. The latter genus, with a common name of dropseed grass, is another native plant group of the west, and even though the Oxford airport furnished it in the 1950s it, like *Aristida*, is seldom found in stands extensive enough to support flocks of migrant longspurs in Ohio (J. McCormac, pers. comm.).

Judging by reports, the grass with which migrant Smith's longspurs are most often associated in their strongholds in Illinois and Indiana is the abundant *Setaria*, an introduced European genus comprising those known as foxtails. Prostrate, matted plants of giant foxtail *S. faberi* remaining from the previous growing season scattered throughout corn-stubble fields featured prominently in central Ohio longspur reports, and this is prime habitat for Smith's in Indiana and Illinois. All the same, this longspur has been known to frequent tomato plants in large numbers on migration in Ohio, so we should not be too doctrinaire in describing its preferences.

All in all, we know relatively little about this obscure species, and we may even have collectively forgotten some of what we once knew. Without the work of a few Oxford-area ornithologists during the mid-20th century, and those they influenced, state records of Smith's longspur might amount to a few dozen birds, mostly from the usual migrant traps along Lake Erie. Indeed, a large proportion of the scientific literature about this species on migration derives from their work in Butler County. It seems unlikely there was anything unique about the Oxford airport—except for the lucky presence of a handful of observant bird enthusiasts—to account for the huge proportion of our records that come from the site. Later, perhaps the most important factor in the central Ohio records was the number of local birders accustomed to look for these birds at the right time in the right places, based on what they had learned from the Oxford observers.

Further confirmation of this explanation comes in comparing Ohio records with those of neighboring areas of Indiana, where the known migratory path of the species suggests it should be seen more often. In Ohio, over 1750 Smith's longspurs have been reported in the western half of the state, and fewer than fifty in the eastern half. Strangely enough, in Indiana similar trends prevail: nearly 90% of 3045 Smith's longspurs records in Indiana come from the first one or two counties east of the Illinois line, whereas reports from the eastern half of Indiana involve only four counties and total 423 birds (just 81 of them since 1938), with only 80 over recorded history in the easternmost tier of counties. It seems only uneven observer coverage can explain the dearth of eastern Indiana records. In practice, Indiana birders looking for Smith's longspur—even during the period when so many were being seen less than 3 km from the border in Oxford, Ohio—seem to have satisfied themselves by following traditional advice to look in the western part of the state.

How can we explain Ohio's shifting pattern of records over time? Why have the large numbers of the 1950s and 1960s since fallen so low? Perhaps the population of *C. pictus* has declined significantly, and its numbers in Ohio, at the eastern extreme of its known migratory path, have declined as well, with remaining birds sticking to the center of the route. But Smith's remote breeding grounds have been relatively immune to deterioration at human hands, and the variety of habitats it uses on the wintering grounds and during migration argue for some adaptability. Finally, there is no firm evidence from elsewhere to suggest an overall population decline.

Have Smith's longspurs, while remaining relatively unchanged in overall numbers, shifted their migratory path westward for some other reason? After all, fully 87% of Indiana's records have occurred since Ohio's reported numbers fell off steeply after 1971, as might be expected if birds had moved their route westward. Judging by reports, occurrences of Smith's in Illinois seem to have involved larger numbers since the 70s as well (Bohlen 1989). But authorities in those states seem to feel that increased reports in recent decades are most likely attributable to growing numbers of observers familiar with the species' habitat preferences in spring, rather than to increased local numbers of birds. Birds tend to be highly conservative as well, and permanent shifts in migration patterns usually take place only in the face of wholesale habitat destruction. While appropriate habitats in the Midwest have undoubtedly changed, they have nevertheless changed relatively uniformly east to west.

Perhaps patterns of human land use have caused migrants to depart Ohio. No doubt current agricultural practices produce lower stubble, fewer and different weeds in fields, much narrower fencerows, different crop types and schedules, etc. than those of the mid-20th century. Sod airports in remoter areas are no longer the rule, and native grasslands and even pastures are harder to find. Smith's longspurs, however, have been found on migration in a variety of habitats—wheat, alfalfa, clover, corn stubble, grasslands, sparsely vegetated mudflats, mowed turf, even tomato fields—and modern agriculture is practiced across the Midwest, not just in Ohio.

Finally, perhaps the birds are still here, and in similar numbers, but we are simply no longer detecting them. Smith's longspurs are secretive, cryptic birds, easily eluding discovery. Their favored habitats, however widespread in glaciated

areas of the state, are also those least often and most superficially investigated by birders. Perhaps it has not been the birds' numbers or range, but rather birders' efforts, and their knowledge about how to find them, that has diminished.

Iowa, on the other edge of Smith's migratory pathway, may furnish a lesson. After regular 19th century records, Iowa had only nine reports of the species from 1900-1930, than only three from 1930-1981 (Kent 1981). Thinking they might be overlooked, Tom Kent organized an Iowa survey for Smith's longspurs in 1982. Nine sightings were reported just that spring, and heightened awareness has resulted in many more, spring and fall alike: recently, in 1999 there were 14 published reports of 347 birds, in 2000 10 reports of 244, and in 2001 six of 112.

Some of the anomalies in status in other states and provinces along this species' migratory path may be explained by disparities in observers' knowledge and effort. Is it coincidence that nearly all Ohio's records arise from areas close to major universities where curious observers cooperated to find and study these birds in the field? Perhaps Ohioans have grown too comfortable with the prevailing notion that Smith's longspurs have abandoned us. Out in the vast treeless plains of agriculture-dominated Ohio, the winds of April are chilly and unwelcoming. Unwelcome too may be the very short list of species one will have after a day spent there. But here the mysterious Smith's longspur is to be found, and perhaps the accompanying advice from experts will help us see them more often.

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