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A EURASIAN SKYLARK AT POINT REYES, CALIFORNIA, WITH NOTES ON SKYLARK IDENTIFICATION AND SYSTEMATICS

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> ". . . perhaps the most controversial bird in California's birding history . . . the bird in question was identified for several days by a legion of birders as a Smith's Longspur. Eventually, it proved to be a species of lark!"
>
> —Shuford and DeSante 1979

We report here on a Eurasian Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) wintering at Point Reyes, Marin County, California, from 1978 to 1983, which showed characteristics of northeast Asiatic/Alaskan populations. It represents the first record of a naturally occurring Eurasian Skylark in North America outside of Alaska and the first North American mainland record. Morlan (1979) and McCaskie (1979) discussed the bird's initial visit, and the record has been reviewed briefly by Roberson (1980).

From the beginning this bird posed an identification problem which seemed insurmountable. Intense controversy developed over whether the bird should be collected, some of which appeared in print (Duncan 1979, Bourne 1980, Garrett 1980, Gibson 1981b). Ultimately this record was reviewed and accepted by the California Bird Records Committee (Luther 1980). We present here details of how the identification problem was finally resolved in the hope that it may serve as a guide for such difficult cases in the future.

THE RECORD

Hall Ranch, above Drake's Beach Visitors' Center at Point Reyes National Seashore, is recognized as the most productive site for vagrant "grassland passerines" in central mainland California. At about 1300 on 16 December 1978, while covering this area for the Point Reyes Christmas Bird Count,

Erickson first observed the Eurasian Skylark. Other birds present at this time included about 250 Horned Larks (*Eremophila alpestris*), 40 Water Pipits (*Anthus spinoletta*), 35 Savannah Sparrows (*Passerculus sandwichensis*), 12 to 20 Lapland Longspurs (*Calcarius lapponicus*) and 2 or 3 Chestnut-collared Longspurs (*Calcarius ornatus*).

The skylark was somehow passed off as an aberrant Lapland Longspur until later that evening when the possibility of Smith's Longspur (*Calcarius pictus*) presented itself. Assuming the bird was a longspur, it clearly fit Smith's best and Erickson soon became rather convinced he had seen that species. Over the next 3½ days most of California's active birders saw the skylark and virtually all of them were content with it as the first California record of Smith's Longspur!

On 20 December, following an examination of specimens at the California Academy of Sciences and the University of California Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, Laurence C. Binford suggested the bird was a skylark, either Eurasian Skylark or Oriental Skylark (*A. gulgula*), or possibly a Lesser Short-toed Lark (*Calandrella rufescens*). With this information, Jon Dunn and others studied specimens at the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology and tentatively identified the bird as a Eurasian Skylark from one of the northeast Asiatic populations.

The lark was seen on a regular basis through 19 February 1979 but not thereafter. Hall Ranch is checked consistently through the fall, and the skylark was rediscovered there 27 October-1 November 1979 (Laymon and Shuford 1980), but we suspect it may have wintered in other fields on Pt. Reyes. The bird returned to Hall Ranch for the following winters: 25 October 1980-21 February 1981 (Evens and LeValley 1981, LeValley and Evens 1981), 3 November 1981-3 January 1982 (Evens et al. 1982, LeValley and Evens 1982), and 31 October 1982-29 January 1983 (LeValley and Roberson 1983, Evens and LeValley 1983). Each winter photographs were obtained by Albert Ghiorso and compared with those of other years; and each year the bird appeared unchanged, indicating the same individual was involved as skylarks exhibit a great deal of individual variation (Vaurie 1951).

DESCRIPTION

The following description is based primarily upon photographs taken by Albert Ghiorso and on the authors' field notes (all on file with the California Bird Records Committee).

Size and shape: Basically very similar to Horned Lark but with broader wings (greater wing area) and perhaps slightly smaller, shorter-tailed and chunkier.

Head: Crown tawny and heavily marked with parallel long dark-brown (nearly blackish) streaks; crown set off by cream-colored eye-rings and superciliaries (more narrow in front of eye but extending to bill) joining narrowly across nape to form a distinct "coronal band" (long crest feathers helped set off crown from nape); crest clearly evident when crown feathers raised slightly; auricular patch ochraceous-buff faintly streaked with medium brown and bordered by a band of rusty-brown, this band being narrow along the fore edge, irregular along the rear edge and curving around below the eye, avoiding the pale eye-ring; a separate rusty-brown spot present in the lores; nape (paler than back and crown, giving a definite collared effect) cream-

colored, moderately streaked with medium brown merging gradually into upper back; chin and throat pale ochraceous-buff with two adjacent narrow malar stripes (dark brown) on either side; a row of very fine, short streaks extending across lower throat; sides of neck cream-colored, gradually merging with color of throat.

Upperparts: Central upper back-feathers deep brown with extensive blackish centers, a ring of paler back-feathers (cream-colored with dark-brown centers) along the sides and behind accentuating the more richly colored feathers; scapulars extensively dark brown with buff fringes, forming a double row of darker feathers between wing and back; lesser wing coverts, uppertail coverts, rump and lower back-feathers buff-edged with faily extensive dark-brown centers; uppersides of secondaries medium brown, uppersides of primaries dark brown, all with rather narrow cream borders (more rusty borders on some primaries, especially inner ones); tips of secondaries and innermost primaries whitish, clearly evident in flight; greater wing coverts marked as adjacent flight-feathers but lacking white tips; middle wing coverts extensively dark brown centrally forming an obvious band of darker feathers across wings; tertiaries blackish with some suggestion of hazel, outermost tertiary edged rufous; central rectrices medium brown fringed with buff; outermost rectrices largely white; intermediate rectrices primarily blackish, outer ones with largely white outer webs and inner ones with buff and rusty fringes.

Underparts: Breast ochraceous-buff (brightest on upper sides) heavily streaked with very dark brown (blackish), these streaks becoming heavier and rustier toward sides of upper breast, often forming distinct dark collar marks on either side when head turned; breast streaking stopping abruptly at throat, giving a necklaced effect; sides and flanks buff and inconspicuously streaked with brown, but normally obscured by wings; belly and undertail coverts whitish, contrasting sharply with buff on breast, and with a faint wash of buff across vent; leg feathers pale buff and extending to ankle; underside of wings pale gray with brownish underwing coverts.

Soft parts: Eye very dark; bill rather broad-based and shallow (not unlike Horned Lark), pale horn-colored with blackish culmen and tip; legs and feet pinkish (duskier along upper surface of tarsi) with extremely long claws evident on hind toes.

Voice: Most common call a short note, low pitched end rough, reminiscent of the call of Northern Rough-winged Swallow (*Stelgidopteryx serripennis*); also a series of rich, low, musical "chirrup" calls. Some observers reported brief segments of flight song.

Behavior: Associated with a large flock of Horned Larks, invariably one of the last birds to flush; crouched low while feeding, often taking a concealment posture with wings slightly spread; walked deliberately without bobbing or hopping; occasionally walked about standing quite tall and revealing its legs, unlike the longspurs present; flight very bouyant, especially upon landing.

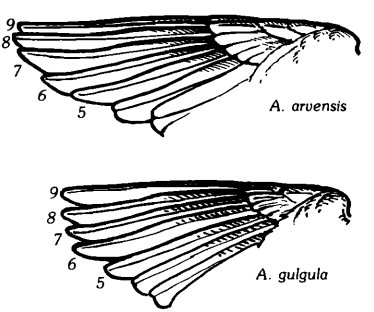

Figure 1. Outer wing shape of Eurasian (*Alauda arvensis*) and Oriental (*A. gulgula*) skylarks showing differences in relative length of five outermost visible primaries, numbered 5-9 (after Portenko 1954).

IDENTIFICATION (ELIMINATION OF SIMILAR SPECIES)

Smith's Longspur

It is obvious from the photographs that the bird is not a Smith's Longspur. The bill shape evident in Figures 2 through 4 is too slender for a longspur. Note particularly the color of the central rectrices in Figure 2; these brown central rectrices are not present in longspurs. Additionally, winter plumaged Smith's Longspurs usually have bright buff coloration extending over the entire underparts.

Other Larks

Most other lark genera bear no real resemblance to *Alauda*. Harrison (1966) proposed merging *Lullula* and *Galerida* into *Alauda* but his suggestion was not followed by Hall and Moreau (1970), Voous (1977) or Devillers (1980). *Galerida* includes three species of African sun larks (*G. modesta*, *G. fremantilii*, and *G. magnirostris*) which are somewhat similar to skylarks but lack white outer rectrices. *Galerida* also includes three sibling species of crested larks (*G. cristata*, *G. malabarica*, and *G. deva*) which also lack white outer rectrices and can further be told by their abrupt crests, which are much more prominent and pointed than on skylarks. Woodlark (*Lullula arborea*)

Figure 2. Eurasian Skylark at Point Reyes, California, 11 February 1979 with wing and tail spread. Note white tips to inner primaries, and pure white, not rufescent white, outer rectrices. *Photo by Albert Ghiorso*

can be distinguished by its much shorter tail, with white corners, and its very prominent "coronal band" (the merging of the pale superciliary stripe with the short pale feathers of the nape).

Lesser Short-toed Lark is much smaller than any skylark or Horned Lark. The bill of Lesser Short-toed Lark is very small and much more conical in shape than in *Alauda*. *Alauda* has a very long hind claw and a short crest, whereas Lesser Short-toed Lark does not.

Razo Island Lark

Although the genus *Alauda* is usually confined to two species, *arvensis* and *gulgula*, another species has recently been added to this genus. "*Spizocorys*" *razae* was placed in *Alauda* by Hall (1963), and most recent authors (Bannerman and Bannerman 1968, Burton 1971, Voous 1977, Devillers 1980) agree. This lark breeds on a section of Razo Island in the Cape Verde group off West Africa, where it is endemic. It has a very small population and is entirely nonmigratory. Compared to the skylarks, *razae* has a longer, more curved bill, a much less distinct face pattern, and a much shorter hind claw (Harrison 1966).

Figure 3. Eurasian Skylark at Point Reyes, California, 21 December 1978. Note rich russet color on upper back and crown. Dark auricular patch is exaggerated by shadow and feather angle. Contrast between pale nape and heavy back markings is characteristic of birds from northeast Asia. Also note crest feathers overlying feathers of upper nape forming a "coronal band." *Photo by Albert Ghiorso*

Oriental Skylark

Most similar to Eurasian Skylark is the Oriental Skylark, which is resident in Kazakhstan, India, China and Southeast Asia. The two are sibling species and, in many instances, field separation of the two may be impossible. The most reliable differences are structural.

Wing Formula.—The wing tip of Eurasian Skylark is more pointed than that of Oriental Skylark (see Figure 1). Skylarks have ten primaries, but the outermost (tenth) is minute and not visible in Figure 5. In Eurasian Skylark the sixth primary is clearly shorter than the wing tip, while in Oriental Skylark the sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth primaries are almost equal in length (Portenko 1954, Vaurie 1955). The sixth primary in Figure 5 is clearly shorter than the wing tip. This difference can also be seen in Figure 4 where the sixth and seventh primaries are visible beyond the tertiaries. In Oriental Skylark the seventh primary does not extend nearly as far beyond the sixth (pers. obs. of specimens).

Bill Shape.—The bill of Oriental Skylark is relatively longer, less deep and more curved than that of Eurasian Skylark (Vaurie 1951, 1955; Kuroda 1953; Harrison 1966 *contra* Voous 1960; Heinzel et al. 1972). We compared the bill shape of our bird by projecting a slide on a screen and placing an actual speciment of Eurasian Skylark in front so that its shadow fell on the screen. The bill shape of the specimen exactly matched that of the bird in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Eurasian Skylark at Point Reyes, California, 28 December 1978. Note short stubby bill and shortened sixth primary. *Photo by Albert Ghiorso*

Although the structural differences discussed above are sufficient for identification, there are other differences mentioned in the literature. We are uncertain that these differences apply to all populations, but based on our initial examination of specimens they appear to be valid.

Face Pattern.—Oriental Skylark has a pale superciliary stripe but only posterior to the eye (Harrison 1966). Figure 6 clearly shows the pale stripe both anterior and posterior to the eye. Harrison (1966) also pointed out that the "coronal band" is more distinct in Eurasian Skylark. It is clearly visible in Figure 3. Four enlarged prints were sent to David Snow at the British Museum (Natural History) at Tring. Snow (*in litt.*) stated, "There is no doubt, I think, that it is a Skylark *A. arvensis*, not *gulgula* which (on the basis of our skins) has a rather less distinct head pattern."

Color of Inner Primaries.—While both species have a white trailing edge to the inner wing, Dolgushin (1970) pointed out that the inner primaries are not white-tipped in Oriental Skylark, whereas they are on Eurasian Skylark. Figure 2 clearly shows white tips on the inner primaries.

Color of Underwing Coverts.—According to Sharpe (1890), Oriental Skylark has paler underwing coverts.

Color of Outer Rectrices.—The outer rectrices of Oriental Skylark are rufescent-white (Ali and Ripley 1972) or buff (Heinzel et al. 1972) and pure white in Eurasian Skylark. This distinction probably applies best to Indian populations, but note these feathers are pure white in Figure 2.

Figure 5. Eurasian Skylark at Point Reyes, California, 12 February 1981. Spread wing shows pointed wing tip and prominent flank streaking of this species.

Photo by Albert Ghiorso

Extent of Ventral Streaking.—According to Ali and Ripley (1972) breast streaking is usually much finer and less extensive on Oriental Skylark. Sharpe (1890) noted an almost entire absence of flank-stripes on Oriental Skylark (cf. Figure 5).

Behavior.—Dolgushin (1970) and Eck (1973) state that Oriental Skylark is never found in flocks, even during migration. The Pt. Reyes bird always associated closely with flocks of Horned Larks.

Voice.—La Touche (1930), Misonne (1953), Erard and Etchecopar (1970) and Desfayes and Praz (1978) report that Oriental Skylark has a different call-note. Thorpe (1961) states that flight-notes form a component of the Eurasian Skylark's song. The call-notes we heard at Pt. Reyes can be detected interspersed in the Eurasian Skylark song on the recording by Kellogg et al. (1962). The Pt. Reyes bird was attracted to a play-back of this recording on one occasion (Arnold Small pers. comm.). Vaurie (1951) suggested that the songs of the two species may be different.

Another possible difference claimed by Dement'ev and Gladkov (1954) and Heinzel et al. (1972) is the proportionally shorter tail of Oriental Skylark. This distinction appears to be invalid (Eck 1973). Characters separating the two given by Fleming et al. (1976) are best disregarded. The alleged Eurasian Skylark specimen (Fleming 1968) upon which the distinctions were based was actually a misidentified Oriental Skylark (Melvin Traylor *in litt.*).

Figure 6. Eurasian Skylark at Point Reyes, California, 28 December 1978. The dark neckband showed only when the bird turned its head or crouched. Note the pale lores. *Photo by Albert Ghiorso*

DISTRIBUTIONAL EVIDENCE

The Eurasian Skylark is one of the most familiar and widespread birds of the Palearctic Region. Except for an introduced population on Vancouver Island and attempted introductions elsewhere, the first New World record came from the Pribilof Islands, Alaska, in 1967 (Thompson and DeLong 1969). It is now recognized as a regular migrant and casual summer visitor on the islands of western Alaska with possible breeding on the Pribilofs (Byrd et al. 1978, Kessel and Gibson 1978, Gibson 1981a).

It is significant that a bird identified as *A. a. pekinensis* was collected on Green Island, Kure Atoll (Hawaiian Islands), 7 October 1963 (Clapp and Woodward 1968). Two small birds with white outer rectrices were seen there for over a week before a specimen was secured. Commenting on the specimen, George Watson (in Clapp and Woodward 1968) wrote that it ". . . has the black central portions of the back-feathers far more extensive than in any European specimens [cf. Figure 3] and in this character resembles specimens from western [sic] China. . . . [It agrees] with the population *pekinensis* which breeds in northeast Siberia, Kamchatka, and the Kuriles." We believe the "skylark" sightings of Fisher (1965) at Midway Atoll are unconvincing.

We are aware of only one other published reference to a possible naturally occurring Eurasian Skylark in North America south of Alaska (Ramsey 1978): one seen 26 May 1968 briefly in flight over a ship about 15 miles west of Depoe Bay, Oregon (Fred Ramsey *in litt.*). The circumstances of the sighting leave the identification uncertain.

We feel that the pattern of appearances during five consecutive winters at Point Reyes indicates regular migrations were being undertaken. We will not speculate on where the bird spent its summers, but we do note that Point Reyes is at the same latitude that *A. a. pekinensis* normally winters in Asia. In fact, only two races of skylark are considered to be highly migratory, *A. a. dulcivox* and *A. a. pekinensis* (Vaurie 1951). All Alaskan specimens have been identified as *A. a. pekinensis* (Kessel and Gibson 1978, Gibson 1981a). The occurrence of *A. a. pekinensis* at Point Reyes would not be overly surprising considering its prior occurrence at Kure Atoll and the multiple records in California of similarly ranging species such as Northern Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*), Black-backed Wagtail (*Motacilla lugens*—see Morlan 1981) and Red-throated Pipit (*Anthus cervinus*).

The introduced population of nominate *arvensis* on southern Vancouver Island is essentially sedentary (Stirling and Edwards 1962). The recent spread to the San Juan Islands, Washington, involved an overwater flight of only 18 km (Weisbrod and Stevens 1974). The Victoria population is now believed to be declining (Harrington-Tweit et al. 1980) and none were found on the Christmas Bird Count in the area in December 1980 for the first time since 1958 (Shepard 1981, and *in litt.*).

Phillips (1928) reported that 75 pairs of Eurasian Skylarks (race unknown but probably *arvensis*) were released in San Jose, California, around 1896 and about 200 were liberated in Santa Cruz, California, in 1908. All eventually perished (Grinnell and Miller 1944). In California it is a violation of the California Administrative Code to import skylarks. No exceptions have been

granted and it is the opinion of the Wildlife Protection Branch, California Department of Fish and Game (James Zobel pers. comm.), that the bird at Point Reyes was wild.

The Oriental Skylark is essentially sedentary with only a few races undertaking any true migratory movement. *Alauda gulgula inopinata* is the only race considered by Vaurie (1951) to be migratory. It moves at most from Kansu Province, China, to northern Burma. The chance of such a bird occurring in California is extremely remote.

SKYLARK SYSTEMATICS

Species Level

Since some recent authors have questioned the validity of the specific status of the two skylarks (e.g. Desfayes and Praz 1978), and since various past authors have treated them as subspecies groups instead of full species (Hartert 1922, Meinertzhagen 1951), we include a brief summary of some of the literature which pertains to the systematics of the two taxa. Some recent Russian publications are reviewed here in English for the first time.

The two groups were originally classified as separate species by Sharpe (1890) and this view was upheld by Vaurie (1951) based on apparent breeding range overlap in Kazakhstan. This sympatry has since been well described and mapped by Dolgushin (1970). Where the breeding ranges of the two forms overlap, the Oriental Skylark nests in moist river valleys and the Eurasian Skylark breeds in alpine meadows. However, the two forms do nest side by side in two localities in the foothills of Borolday and Karzhantau in Kazakhstan. No hybridization has been reported.

The population of skylark breeding in Japan is usually considered a subspecies of Eurasian Skylark (Vaurie 1959, Peters 1960). We have treated it here as a subspecies of Oriental Skylark, since it has recently been found that it does not interbreed with Eurasian Skylark where the two nest on Kunashir Island (Nechaev 1969, Stepanian 1980). It is also probable that the breeding range of Eurasian Skylark overlaps that of *japonica* in southern Sakhalin (Kuroda 1953, Gizenko 1955, Yamashina 1961), and possibly on Yagishiri Island (Udagawa 1953, but cf. Kuroda and Morioka 1974).

Alauda gulgula japonica has plumage characters closer to Eurasian Skylark than to Oriental Skylark, but it has wing-formula and bill shape much closer to the latter (Vaurie 1951, Kuroda 1953, Eck 1973). It is possible that it is an entirely independent species as suggested by Stepanian (1978, 1980). We prefer to follow a suggestion of Vaurie (1954) and unite it with the Oriental Skylark. Jurgen Haffer (*in litt.*) has accepted this view and will include it in a forthcoming volume of the *Handbuch der Vogel Mitteleuropas* (U. Glutz, ed.).

Subspecies Level

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all the geographic variation in skylarks, or the subspecies which have been recognized by various authors. The number of recognized subspecies of Eurasian Skylark ranges from seven

(Meinertzhagen 1951) to sixteen (Dement'ev and Gladkov 1954). Vaurie (1959) recognized ten. The number of subspecies of Oriental Skylark is also controversial (Ali and Ripley 1972). Most variation is actually clinal (Meinertzhagen 1951), and the number of subspecies recognizable in a cline is highly subjective (Mayr 1969).

Johansen (1944) proposed that *A. arvensis* be divided into three subspecies groups. We have modified his idea somewhat to reflect the three isolated regions in which Eurasian Skylarks winter, as their breeding range is essentially a continuum.

Arvensis group — Those races breeding in Europe and wintering from southern Europe and North Africa to the Middle East.

Dulcivox group — Consisting of *A. a. dulcivox* breeding in central Asia and wintering in the northern part of the Indian subcontinent. Larger and paler than the *arvensis* groups but closely allied to it.

Pekinensis group — Populations breeding in northeast Asia and wintering in China, consisting of *A. a. pekinensis, A. a. lonnbergi, A. a. intermedia,* and *A. a. kiborti.* Highly pigmented birds, clearly related to each other.

David Snow (in litt.), comparing our photographs with specimens at the British Museum, wrote: "It fits the race *pekinensis* very well indeed, especially the distribution and colour of the markings on the side of the head. When I first looked at *pekinensis* the match seemed so good that I thought that your bird must be *pekinensis*; but when I looked at [other northeastern races] I came to the conclusion that one cannot exclude them. Peter Colston of this department, who is very interested in problems of identification, has looked at the photos and specimens and he comes to essentially the same conclusion. . . . There is no doubt that the bird is from one of the eastern races of *arvensis*."

We compared our photographs with specimens and found that the large dark areas clearly visible on the upper back in Figure 3 and the finely-streaked nape, distinct face pattern and rich color of the breast matched rather closely specimens of birds in the *pekinensis* group. In these characters it differs from examples of the other two groups. The rich russet color on the upper back and crown (Figure 3) and orange-buff ground color of the breast (Figure 6) is most frequent on birds from coastal populations in northeast Asia, sometimes given subspecific status, *A. a. blackistoni* (Meinertzhagen 1951, Kuroda 1953).

SUMMARY

Documentation (including photographs) is presented of the first natural North American record of Eurasian Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) outside of Alaska. The bird shows characteristics of the *pekinensis* group of subspecies, and diagnostic features which separate it from the very similar Oriental Skylark (*Alauda gulgula*) are set forth. The specific status of the two taxa and the taxonomic position of the Japanese skylark population are reviewed.

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