

THE PRAIRIE HORNED LARK.

Otocoris Alpestris Praticola.

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There can no longer remain any doubt that Prairie Horned Lark (*O. a. praticola*) does occur pretty generally east of the Rocky Mts., most commonly in the Mississippi valley, north of Arkansas. Too many specimens have been taken near and on the Atlantic coast for one to say that it is a straggler so far east. Its close resemblance to the eastern form—smaller and a “leetle paler,” makes it somewhat confusing, occurring as it does in company of *alpestris*. While you of the east are searching among *alpestris* for *praticola*, we of the Miss. valley are searching among *praticola* for *alpestris*; you for the eastern gradation, we for the western.

As the result of a somewhat extended search, I have about 40 skins before me, besides the careful record of many taken which were not skinned. After a close study of “Coue’s Key,” “Ridgway’s Manual” and Mr. W. Henshaw’s excellent article in the “Auk,” (Vol. 1, p. 264) I concluded that *alpestris* would be most likely to be found among the brighter colored birds. Accordingly I have selected five very bright skins, (none of the others being at all bright) and find their measurements to be as follows (measurements are of the wing only): 4.10, 4.09, 4.08, 4.04, 4.03 inches; dwarfs if they are *alpestris*! The wings of five very pale skins are, 4.18, 4.15, 4.13, 4.12, 4.12. All are in breeding plumage. I give also the wing measurement of five females: 4.00, 3.88, 3.88, 3.78, 3.76. Thus it is seen that while the bright colored males average 4.07, the pale ones average 4.14, and the females 3.86. Even my largest male (which, unfortunately, is the palest of all) does not come within 2-100 of an inch of the smallest *alpestris*, according to Ridgway, and the largest bright colored one falls a whole .10 below! No *alpestris* here! Mr. Ridgway makes the average *praticola* 4.13; mine are 4.12, lacking the larger eastern individuals. Mr. Henshaw makes the male and female average even larger than Mr. Ridgway.

Central Iowa birds are colored as follows: Nape, occiput, sides of neck and breast, lesser wing coverts, upper tail-coverts, light vinaceous or pinkish cinnamon; back, scapulars, rump, grayish-brown, the feathers with darker centers, especially on the rump; middle wing-coverts light vinaceous or pinkish, terminally, dusky; wings otherwise grayish-brown, the feathers paler edged, and outer web of outer primary mostly white. Middle pair of tail feathers light-brown, with paler edges and darker central portions; remaining tail feathers dark brown or black, outer web of outer pair edged with white, like outer primary. Forehead, superciliary stripe, chin and throat pale straw-yellow; often no trace of yellow on forehead and above eyes; the yellow of the throat very variable, from deep primrose-yellow to pale straw-yellow, or scarcely a trace of color. Fore-part and sides of crown, continuing laterally back and above eyes, including the ear-tufts, lores, sub-orbital region, broad patch on cheeks, and jugular crescent extending to lower part of throat, deep black, more or less overlaid with grayish-brown. Anterior portion of ear-coverts, white; posterior portion, grayish-drab. Other lower parts, grayish-white, the sides indistinctly streaked with dusky; belly sometimes distinctly washed with black. Upper mandible, dark plumbeous, lower, bluish-plumbeous; iris, deep brown; feet and legs, brownish-black. Females are paler and browner throughout. Young are speckled all over with more or less brownish.

For a month previous to the first hard frosts, and indeed until winter sets in in earnest, the Larks are seclusive and hard to find; but the cold north winds and snow drive them together in flocks often numbering 20 individuals. Within a radius of three miles there are 15 or 20 such flocks, each having its particular feeding and nesting grounds. Week after week, and month after month I find the same flocks and same individuals at their old stands, and I can tell when a newcomer is there in the place of a fallen comrade. Ten and often twelve times a week I pass them and note their ways and actions, often approaching within ten feet of them. There is a difference in birds of the same species.

After a heavy fall of snow, the Larks burrow in the drifts at night and then allow the drifting snow to cover the opening, leaving no trace of the birds. In early morning you may rouse

them up from this sort of couch before the sun has touched the snow-capped hills and awakened the resting birds. As they rise with a little volcano of snow and a startled cry, in swift and irregular flight, you, yourself, are startled and hardly recover before they have dropped to a convenient cover to rub their eyes open. When there is little or no snow, the Larks pass the night in the long, dry grass in the bottom-lands or sloughs.

During the day they fly hither and thither in flocks, or perch upon a post or clod of dirt, ever and anon uttering their long-drawn sa-w-e-e-e or s-w-e-e-e, ending in a rising inflection; it is the only winter song on our prairies; others sing in the woods, but the Larks alone in the fields. One cold winter I found them in the barn-yard in the midst of a grove; it is a rare occurrence.

While the country is snowbound they prefer the road, because, no doubt, grain is more plentiful there. Yet they never wander very far from their accustomed grounds unless the weather is very inclement for a long period. If there are any bare spots on the hills, there the Larks gather and feed.

When the warm south winds bring balmy days in late winter and early spring, and winter's mantle begins to get ragged at the elbows and knees, all nature seems to rejoice. Then it is that the Larks begin to sing. Flitting and soaring directly upward until but a speck, a dot in the azure sky, one sends his notes dropping, rattling all around, soaring all the while. Unless you have closely watched him, you will look for him first here and there along the ground, whence the song seems to issue forth. Then, when you have abandoned the search, like a meteor straight down he dives, gracefully spreads his wings and rests on a convenient clod near by, once more uttering his rattling ti-s-r-i-l-i-e-e-e, that sounds like a distant rattling chain. During the pleasant days, as early as January, this song comes from everywhere, mingled with the other notes.

Otocoris' courtship is interesting indeed; but this paper is already too long, so this and his nesting habits must be left for another time.