

A SIGHT RECORD OF McCOWN'S LONGSPUR IN MASSACHUSETTS

by Wayne R. Petersen, Whitman

At 10:30 A.M. on 9 January 1977 my wife and I were cruising the snow-covered back roads of Bridgewater, Massachusetts in search of raptors in the large farm fields of the area. The weather was clear and sunny with a very light northwest wind. The temperature was a cold 32° F and there was a 15" snow cover on the ground following a very heavy snow storm on the 7th.

While on Summer Street about 3 miles south of Bridgewater Center, we stopped to view a large flock of Common Crows (Corvus brachyrhynchos) which were feeding in a snow-filled corn field. Closer inspection revealed a number of smaller birds feeding in the same field. These smaller birds included Mourning Doves (Zenaidura macroura), Horned Larks (Eremophila alpestris), Eastern Meadowlarks (Sturnella magna), Dark-eyed Juncos (Junco hyemalis), Tree Sparrows (Spizella arborea) and a flock of Lapland Longspurs (Calcarius lapponicus) numbering 40-50 individuals.

Pleased at finding such a substantial flock of longspurs in inland Bridgewater, I decided to take a closer look for possible rarer species. I entered the field on foot, however, travel was difficult since the snow was knee-deep or deeper in many areas. The scattered flock of feeding longspurs allowed a surprisingly close approach, often to within 100'. While systematically checking each bird, one individual caught my eye as it flitted a few feet between the corn stalks. I was especially struck by the large amount of white on the tail. Closer inspection showed it to be a noticeably smaller and shorter tailed bird than adjacent Lapland Longspurs. Suddenly, most of the flock flew into the top branches of a bordering hedge row about 8' off the ground. The smaller bird was quickly located again as it fluttered on its perch, its tail pattern was plainly seen again. This time, the white base and dark center with an inverted T pattern was definitely seen, thus convincing me of my initial suspicion that the bird in question was a McCown's Longspur (Calcarius mccownii).

While viewing the bird for almost 15 minutes in bright sun at no less than 50' with 7X50 binoculars, the following details were noted. The upperparts were a warm brown with distinct, but not sharp, dark stripes. These stripes were most pronounced on the back. The nape lacked all trace of rusty and showed little contrast with the back. The head pattern was interesting in that it showed a striking resemblance to that of a Grasshopper Sparrow (Ammodramus sava-narum) or a miniature female Dickcissel (Spiza americana). There was a prominent buffy eye stripe and what appeared as the faint suggestion of an eye ring on the buffy-brown cheek area. The crown was finely striped throughout with thin dark brown or blackish stripes. There was a thin brown malar stripe, which heightened the resemblance to a Dickcissel. The wings and their coverts were of the same buff tones as the back and there was evidence of faint buffy wing bars. No chestnut shoulder patch was able to be seen.

Beneath the chin and throat area appeared light gray or white with a prominent pinkish buff across the upper breast. This buff area was similar in shape to the winter bib of a Dickcissel and in color it resembled the upper breast coloration of an immature Grasshopper Sparrow or of one of the interior races of the Sharp-tailed Sparrow (Ammodramus caudacuta). Streaking, if present at all in this buffy area, was faint and indistinct. The lower breast and belly were white or light gray in contrast to the upper breast. There were no dark smudges or crisp streaks anywhere on the breast or flanks.

The short tail, the bird's most distinctive marking, was pure white on the outer edges from the base to the distal end. The central pair of tail feathers were black from base to distal end. All other rectrices appeared white from base to about 3/4 the length of the tail, with the last 1/4 being tipped with black. The resulting pattern was striking in that it produced the characteristic inverted black T on a white tail. The tail was slightly notched and the pattern here described was clearly visible in flight from above and below as the bird flew with the other longspurs. The overall pale appearance, short tail and flashing tail pattern all combined in making the bird easy to pick up on the wing at quite a distance.

At one point the McCown's Longspur was heard calling. Its note was 2-3 sharp rattles, perhaps slightly higher in pitch than the corresponding notes of the Lapland Longspur.

Satisfied with my own observation, I left the field at 11:15 A.M. to call other observers for confirmation. By 2:00 P.M., Richard Forster, Paul and Francine Buckley, Ruth Emery, Kathleen Anderson, Norman Hill and Sibley Higginbotham had arrived and together we relocated the bird and observed it both flying and sitting for over an hour. On this occasion, the bird was observed through 20X telescopes as well as binoculars and all observers had ample opportunity to confirm my original identification. The BUCKLEYS, Hill, Anderson and the writer all had previous experience with the species in the West.

While a more complete survey of the literature will follow, a cursory search points to this being the first modern record east of Illinois. The record of a McCown's Longspur recorded by C.J. Maynard (1896) taken on January 7, 1877 in Ipswich by E.A. Bangs is dubious in that in reality that specimen was purchased in the Boston Market and may have come from anywhere in New England. What few other sight records exist in the East are all considered unsatisfactory.