

Since 1940, the species has had a remarkable range expansion in the east. In the winter of 1979-80 it had reached the Starkville, Mississippi area (see article by Jackson, this issue).

The presence of the species on the coast of Mississippi, represented by just this one sight record, prompts the question of its origin. Was it another wanderer from the west, as are so many fall migrants, or was it the advance guard of the range-expanding eastern birds?

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Lark Bunting in Mississippi - Photographic Documentation

Judith A. Toups and Malcolm F. Hodges

4 Hartford Place, Gulfport, Mississippi 39501
9 Arbor Circle, Ocean Springs, Mississippi 39564

On 29 August 1980, at 7:00 a.m., Toups discovered a Lark Bunting, Calamospiza melanocorys, feeding on the ground at her backyard feeder in Gulfport. The bird was immediately identified, without field guide, due to Toups previous experience with the species in Colorado. Hodges joined Toups at 8:00 a.m. and secured numerous photographs. The bunting was seen often throughout the day until 7:30 p.m. Observations were made from a distance of 12-15 feet in good light, for periods of as long as five minutes. Viewing aids were 7X35 binoculars, but we often watched the bird unaided by binoculars.

The bunting was pale enough to be instantly separated from the numerous House Sparrows (Passer domesticus) nearby, and when compared directly, was slightly larger than that species, and noticeably smaller than a male Cardinal (Cardinalis cardinalis). Its posture was upright, its manner alert. There was some twitching of the tail. The bird exhibited caution in approaching the feeding station, moving in short hops through a lower oak canopy. It waited until the feeding area was well populated with other species before coming in. Conversely, it was unfailingly the last bird to fly when the area was disturbed.

A plumage description follows. The field marks which helped us to positively identify the bird as a Lark Bunting are underlined. We believe that the description points to the bird being an adult female nearing the end of its post-nuptial molt.

Head: Feathers of crown were medium brown streaked with gray or light buff. At all times the crown feathers were erected, suggesting a head shape similar to sparrows of the genus Zonotrichia. There was

a pale superciliary line and a light eye-ring. The cheek was dark. A very light (almost white) line ran from the nape forward - under the dark cheek up to below the eye, ending where the mandibles meet. This line formed a near white half-circle and was distinctive. The bill was a typical "finch" bill, but was less heavy than that of a Purple Finch (*Carpodacus purpureus*). The bill was dark, the lower mandible being slightly lighter than the upper. The throat was pale gray or off-white, and had no streaking except for a thin black malar stripe.

Back: Upper and lower back were medium brown with pale streakiness. Upper tail coverts slightly darker.

Wings: Wings were of the same general color as the back, medium crown and buff. When folded, a gray-white wing patch was prominent. With the bird in flight, this patch was judged to measure about 1 and 3/4 inches in width and was the definitive field mark.

Breast and abdomen: The sides of the breast were streaked with moderately heavy brown; streaking extended to the flanks. Streaks were more numerous on the upper breast, and coalesced into a dark central spot similar to that of the Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*). The streaks showed prominently, as in the Purple Finch, against the generally gray color of breast and belly.

Tail: The tail was carefully observed for light edgings, however, the two outer rectrices were missing. The central tail feathers were edged with about 1/8 inch of light gray. These central feathers were about 1/4 inch shorter than the others, giving the moderate length tail a slight notched look which is at variance with the even, slightly rounded tail of the Lark Bunting; however, assuming that the bird was molting, this variation is understandable.

Legs: The legs were flesh colored.

The history of the Lark Bunting in Mississippi is brief (Gates et al. 1980). The species was first noted by Larry Gates, in the fall of 1979; a female or immature bird at Bellefontaine Beach, Jackson County, Mississippi. In March of 1980, a male Lark Bunting in breeding plumage was observed by Martha and David Hamilton, and Terrie Fairley, in Petal, Forrest County, Mississippi.

The Lark Bunting is a bird of the short-grass prairie, and breeds from British Columbia, Manitoba, and Minnesota south to Texas and New Mexico. It winters from southern Texas and Arizona to central Mexico (AOU 1957).

The species is a notorious wanderer, especially during its migrations. Records from the eastern United States are numerous and

have come from New York, Maine, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, the Carolinas, Georgia, Tennessee, Florida, and elsewhere. The neighboring states of Alabama and Louisiana have listed the Lark Bunting as part of their avifauna since 1966 and 1952, respectively (Imhof 1976, Lowery 1974).

Hodges obtained several photographs of the bird which are recognizable as to species, and document the Lark Bunting as a member of Mississippi's avifauna. Copies are on file in the Department of Biological Sciences, Mississippi State University. The species is probably of more frequent occurrence than these few recent records indicate.

Literature Cited

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 Imhof, T.A. 1976. Alabama birds. 2nd ed. University of Alabama Press, University.
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Audubon's Caracara - First Mississippi Record

Sidney A. Woodson and Sarah M. McClellan
 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

P.O. Box 1104, Jackson, Mississippi 39205
 Hillside National Refuge, P.O. Box 107, Yazoo City, Mississippi 39194

On 13 March 1981 while flying a waterfowl survey, we observed an Audubon's Caracara (Caracara cheriway) on Hillside National Wildlife Refuge. The bird was first noticed as it flew toward and alighted in the top of an oak tree at the edge of the wood line. Field markings observed at this time were its dark belly, whitish dark tipped tail, and pale white wing patches. Also noted were the pinkish red face, black on the top of the head, and long yellow legs. To the south of the wood line lies a field, and to the west lies an area of open shallow water of approximately 94 acres. We flew by the bird 6 to 8 times and observed the distinguishable characteristics from within approximately 50 feet from the bird. The bird did not seem disturbed by the airplane's presence and did not fly as we left the area. Time of day was around 3:00 p.m. and the weather was partly cloudy, temperature 65° F and wind velocity 8-10 mph.