

On Behavior of the Horned Lark

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On March 12, 1973, accompanied by my wife, Annie Cook, I went to Yazoo County and we observed at least five or six different pairs and several individual horned larks (Erimophila alpestris) in Joe Stoner's soybean fields. The open field area comprised at least 1000 acres, had been fall plowed and fallowed after harvest and was situated about one mile east of Holly Bluff, Mississippi. The day was windy. No aerial singing activity was heard. After several flushings one male did sing from a perch on a clod. I recorded on tape a short bit of song. Playback resulted in more singing and territorial response and a closer, short recording of the ground song was made. Because of high wind and noise I decided to abandon further recording efforts.

We returned to the same area on March 19. The day was clear with intermittent, slight wind. We saw several individual or paired larks before playback of previously recorded song bits had any effect. Most of the fields had been disced and rowed during the previous week. As we drove along turnrows we made frequent stops. At the edge of a bare but not recently plowed field we observed an aerial battle between two male larks. They would rise from the ground, fighting in the air and climbing to perhaps 50 feet before dropping to the ground. This was repeated several times. There was no fighting on the ground but wing-dropping, tail-spreading, bluffing and retreating actions were responses made by both males. This was obviously territorial defense behavior.

The previously made recording was played and this time only one of the males responded. He sang first from a clod at a distance, then flew nearer with a fluttering flight. Continued playback caused this male to approach the recorder and automobile. His response was dropping and fluttering of the wings, spreading the tail and frequently pecking the ground

with intermittent song interspersed with a single call note and double call notes. Response continued until I was able to assemble the recorder and microphone. I was able to record a series of song and calls made from the ground. The response to playback continued in the same manner and the bird came closer, often within 10 feet of the microphone. Wind noise subsided and I obtained a good sequence of 5 or more intermittent song and call notes. After ceasing recording and continuing the playback, the bird's response behavior continued as long as I played the calls from within the car and he became agitated, showing little fear; almost no fear of the automobile as he approached one side less than 10 ft. away. The bird then made one aerial flight song as a response but rose no higher than 100 feet for perhaps 15 seconds before dropping back to earth.

Alongside another turnrow we sighted another pair of larks. The female was feeding along a wet furrow beside the turnrow. She seemed totally unconcerned and allowed an approach within 30 ft. of the car. Both birds were studied at close range with binoculars. The female was very much lighter-colored than the male. A playback of the recordings produced responses similar to the other male but no aerial flight was made. The female showed no concern and continued her feeding activity for several minutes.

No effort was made to locate nests. The males could have been photographed easily from outside the car while responding to the recorded song playback.

Breeding records for the horned lark have been recorded earlier in 1961 in this same field by Phares and Turcotte, reported in MOS Newsletter, Vol. 6, No. 3, page 7 and Vol. 6, No. 3, page 5.

Based on these and similar observations made before and since I conclude that horned larks establish and defend ground territories by aerial fighting, demonstrative actions on the ground and by the use of aerial and ground song and call notes.

