

HORNED LARKS AT TURF FARMS IN THE SOUTHEASTERN GEORGIA COASTAL PLAIN DURING THE BREEDING SEASON

John W. Parrish, Jr.

303 Meadowlark Circle, Statesboro, GA 30461

Email: jparrish@georgiasouthern.edu

Horned Larks (*Eremophila alpestris*) were reported to have bred in the lower Coastal Plain of Georgia (Chandler et al. 1997). I have observed this species during breeding seasons at the Titan Turf Farm (formerly East Georgia Turf Farm) for more than two decades. From 1-14 June 2009, I surveyed several other turf farms in Bulloch, Candler, Effingham, Emanuel, Evans, Screven, and Treutlen Counties for evidence of breeding Horned Larks, since Georgia is the southeastern limit of the breeding range of larks in the U.S. (Beason 1995, Parrish et al. 2006). Surveys were conducted by walking throughout, or slowly driving the perimeter of each turf farm, while intermittently broadcasting recorded songs of the Horned Lark for about an hour.

Adult and juvenile Horned Larks were found on 2 turf farms in Bulloch County. One turf farm was near the intersection of GA 24 and Stilson-Leafield Road (32° 28.5' N, 81° 36.5' W), and the second was on GA 24, about 5 km north of that intersection (32° 29' N, 81° 35' W). Both turf farms are part of the Circle R Turf Farm operation. Additionally, singing larks were detected at a farm at the intersection of US 80 and Arcola Rd (32° 20' N, 81° 36' W), and at the Old Happy Turf Farm at the intersection of Old Happy Rd and Rocker Rd (32° 16' N, 81° 41' W), both in Bulloch County. The former land, on US 80, has been farmed for carrots and peanuts for the past few years. Singing adult and immature Horned Larks also were observed at 2 adjacent turf farms in Evans County (32° 05.5' N, 81° 50.5' W; 32° 06' N, 81° 51' W) near the intersection of former GA 250 and GA 129. Adult larks were observed feeding 3 nestlings at the latter turf farm (Fig. 1).

Horned Larks were not observed at the Mill Branch Turf Farm (32° 35' N, 81° 43' W) on GA 17 (32° 35.5' N, 81° 42.5' W), or at Millhaven Company (32° 56' N, 81° 39' W) in Screven County; the latter historical turf farm is now farmed for mostly peanuts and cotton. Larks also were not seen at the Collins Evergreen Turf Farm (32° 20' N, 82° 05.5' W) in Candler County. Larks, likewise, were not present at the Jennings Turf Farms in Emanuel County (42 Shellcracker Lane, 32° 30' N, 82° 28.5' W) or at 2 locations in Treutlen County

(along GA 56, 32° 27' N, 82° 30' W; along GA 86, 32° 28' N, 82° 54' W). The Home Grown Turf Farm in Effingham County (32° 34.5' N, 81° 26' W) also lacked Horned Larks.

These survey results document the continued presence of Horned Larks at Titan Turf Farm during the breeding season, and at 4 additional breeding sites in Bulloch County. I detected Horned Larks breeding in adjacent sod farms in Evans County for the first time, the southernmost breeding sites currently known in Georgia. I could not find any active turf farms south of Evans County (Bryan, Chatham, Liberty, Long, and Tattnall Counties) during my survey. Although larks are absent from Florida in the summer (Sibley 2003), 14 larks were seen on the 2009 Jackson County Christmas Bird Count (Eyrrie 2009), near the southwestern corner of the Georgia Coastal Plain, where Sewell (1995) had reported larks present in the summer.

The failure to find larks at some of the turf farms is not confirmation of their absence there, as I did not observe larks during an extensive survey at one of the 2 turf farms in Evans County, but I did observe a pair of larks feeding young at a nest with 3 recently-hatched nestlings at the same farm 4 days later (Fig. 1). I detected Brown-headed Cowbirds (*Molothrus ater*) on turf farms with breeding Horned Larks, but not where larks were absent. Cowbirds commonly parasitize lark nests, although sometimes with little deleterious effects as the lark eggs often hatch before those of the cowbirds, and the lark young fledge early, leaving cowbird nestlings unattended (Beason 1995).

While my survey was not intended to be an exhaustive census of Horned Lark breeding in the southeastern Coastal Plain, it clearly shows that larks often can be found breeding at turf farms in this area of Georgia. Future research should include surveys of other turf and sod farms in Georgia. Other sites should be surveyed also because larks will breed in open pastures, old fields with low grass cover, golf courses, and other areas with barren ground (Burleigh 1958, Beason 1995, Beaton et al. 2003, Parrish et al. 2006).

Although lark populations appear to be relatively stable, except for declines in the northeastern U.S., the results of this study seem to confirm indications that Horned Larks are on the increase in the southeastern U.S. (Beason 1995). However, the recent downturn in the economy will probably result in a dramatic decrease in turf farm operations, which will likely be converted to traditional crop farms. Whether the decrease in available turf farms will have an impact on breeding Horned Lark populations in southeastern Georgia will require subsequent research.

Literature Cited

- Beason, R.C. 1995. Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris*). In: A. Poole, editor. The birds of North America. [online] <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu.bnaproxy.birds.cornell.edu/species/195>
- Beaton, G., P.W. Sykes, Jr., and J.W. Parrish, Jr. 2003. Annotated checklist of Georgia birds. Georgia Ornithological Society, Occasional Publ. No. 14, 156 pp.
- Burleigh, T.D. 1958. Georgia birds. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, OK. 746 pp.
- Chandler, C.R., J.M. Cawthorn, and G.M. Turano. 1997. Breeding by Horned Larks on the lower Coastal Plain of Georgia. Oriole 62:1-3.
- Eyrie. 2009. ABA blog for young birders. [online] <http://birding.typepad.com/youngbirders/2009/01/florida-winter-break.html>
- Parrish, J.W., Jr., G. Beaton, and G. Kennedy. 2006. Birds of Georgia. Lonepine Publishing, Auburn, WA. 384 pp.
- Sewell, J. 1995. From the field. Oriole 60:96-103.
- Sibley, D.A. 2003. Field guide to birds of eastern North America. A.A. Knopf, New York, NY. 431 pp.



Figure 1. Three Horned Lark nestlings in Evans County, 14 June 2009.