

1993 Lark Sparrow Observations in the Oak Openings Area by Michelle T. Grigore

As part of an in-depth project entitled "Avian Habitat Preferences and Implications for Management of the Oak Openings' Savanna, Prairie and Dune Communities", I was able to closely observe the habits of nesting Lark Sparrows in the Oak Openings area (Lucas Co.) during the summer of 1993. While the overall project involved constant effort mist netting, point counts and vegetation surveys, no mist netting was attempted in areas where the endangered Lark Sparrow was known to occur. This was due to the concern that even the minimal disturbance of constant effort netting might endanger the nesting success of this rare species. In those areas where Lark Sparrows were known to be present, life history observations were made and limited banding of nestlings occurred.

Two sites were found to harbor Lark Sparrows: 1) the fields and sand dune areas along Girdham Road near Reed Road in Oak Openings Preserve Metropark (managed by Metroparks of the Toledo Area) and 2) Kitty Todd Preserve (Lucas Co.), managed by the Ohio Chapter of The Nature Conservancy. The Girdham Road site consisted of two large fields separated by a north/south (Girdham) road. North and east of these fields, along Girdham Road, was the sand dune area. This latter area has been a reliable nesting site for a pair of Lark Sparrows for many years. Kitty Todd Preserve was included in the study because a pair of Lark Sparrows was observed there in April 1993. At Kitty Todd, a large "L-shaped" field and another smaller field were chosen for the study due to the presence of sand blow-outs, a feature which was also present at Oak Openings Preserve sites where the Lark Sparrow has had a history of nesting.

Five pairs of Lark Sparrows were observed during the 1993 breeding season: three pairs at Oak Openings Preserve and two at Kitty Todd Preserve. All were successful in fledging young in 1993 and three nests were found. Vegetation was surveyed around the nests after fledging to study habitat usage. A brief summary of the observations follows.

Precopulatory behavior was observed at Oak Openings Preserve Metropark by one pair of Lark Sparrows at Girdham and Reed Roads on May 9 and by one pair at the sand dunes on May 11. A third Lark Sparrow was seen at Girdham and Reed at this time, and the three birds spent much time chasing each other, using the entire field for this activity.

When Kitty Todd Preserve was surveyed on May 29, four Lark Sparrow fledglings still too young to fly were observed with their parents in the larger field. It was later estimated that these birds were 7 to 8 days old. On June 9 the second pair of Lark Sparrows at Kitty Todd were observed feeding young at their nest. By June 15 these young had fledged but were still on the ground in dense brush and grass.

1993 Oak Openings Fall Raptor Watch

(T Kemp / M Anderson)

	SUMMARY			TOTAL	MAXIMUM COUNTS			MAXIMUM COUNTS		
	1993				1993			1991-93		
	SEP	OCT	NOV		#	DATE	WIND	#	DATE	WIND
TURKEY VULTURE	125	1850	35	450	10/13	ne/e	450	10/13/93	ne/e	
OSPREY	14	16	1	4	10/2	nw	4	10/2/93	nw	
BALD EAGLE	2	2	1	1	var		2	11/2/91	sw	
NORTHERN HARRIER	1	6	6	2	10/23	sw	2	10/23/93	sw	
SHARP-SHINNED HAWK	141	242	29	57	10/23	sw	60	10/4/92	e	
COOPER'S HAWK	11	27	8	6	10/23	sw	6	10/23/93	sw	
NORTHERN GOSHAWK	0	1	2	1	var		1	var 1993		
RED-SHOULDERED HAWK	10	43	29	22	10/23	sw	33	10/31/92	e/nw	
BROAD-WINGED HAWK	1802	9	0	1085	9/18	nw	1590	9/12/92	e/sw	
RED-TAILED HAWK	15	160	159	33	11/20	w	74	10/31/92	e/nw	
ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK	0	0	3	2	11/20	w	2	11/20/93	w	
GOLDEN EAGLE	0	0	1	1	11/20	w	2	11/2/91	sw	
AMERICAN KESTREL	6	26	0	14	10/2	nw	14	10/2/93	nw	
MERLIN	0	3	0	1	var		1	var		
PEREGRINE FALCON	2	2	0	2	9/28	w	2	9/28/93	w	
HAWK (SP?)	4	3	2	9						
ACCIPITER (SP?)	1	6	3	10						
BUTEO (SP?)	16	33	20	69						
EAGLE (SP?)	0	1	3	4						
SMALL FALCON (SP?)	2	1	1	4						
TOTAL	2152	2431	303	4886						
HOURS (EST)	38.8	69.8	33.3	141.8						
BIRDS/HOUR	55.5	34.9	9.1	34.5						

On June 16, two active nests were observed at Oak Openings Preserve. One pair, at Girdham and Reed, were actively feeding young. The four nestlings were banded with U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service bands. A second nest with three eggs was found at Oak Openings at the sand dunes. The female was not incubating the eggs and laid a fourth egg on June 17; three of the four eggs hatched on June 28. On June 25 a fifth Lark Sparrow was seen in the field at Girdham and Reed, and a third nesting pair confirmed at Oak Openings on July 5 when four adults and five young were seen in the Girdham field (the sand dune pair were still feeding their nestlings at this time). The sand dune Lark Sparrows fledged later that day at six days of age but the young stayed on the ground or in low trees at ten days. By twelve days of age, these fledglings were flying well and the adults had ceased to give alarm calls when the young were approached.

One Lark Sparrow family at Kitty Todd left the area between June 29 and July 7, and the second pair left by July 13. At least one of the Lark Sparrow families was present in the Girdham Road field on July 7, but gone by July 20. The sand dune Lark Sparrows were still present on July 20. Two fall sightings of Lark Sparrows in migration were also noted; on September 24, one bird was seen at Secor Metropark (Lucas Co.), and on October 4 another was spotted feeding on bare sand at the King Road landfill in Sylvania Twp. in Lucas County.

In terms of habitat usage, the observations during the breeding season showed that Lark Sparrows used the open sand blow-outs to forage in, presumably for seeds. At Kitty Todd, a disked area was also used like the blow-outs and could serve as a substitute foraging area in a management unit. The Lark Sparrows fed their young almost exclusively caterpillars and other insect larvae during the time they were observed feeding at the nest. This food was gathered in goldenrods and grasses during the time observation took place. The nests were all placed at the base of a dewberry plant in bare sand or clump grasses. The nests were sunk below the surface of the sand, being composed of fine grasses and lined with small roots. Fledgling Lark Sparrows hid in thick grasses, goldenrod and brush for several days before perching close to the ground. Once they could fly, the young birds spent a good portion of their time resting in the trees at the edge of adjacent woods or feeding on the ground, often begging from their parents even weeks after hatching. Adult birds tended to use small trees and taller plants as singing perches and defended a circular territory around the nest of roughly 75 to 100 meters in diameter. In the Kitty Todd and Girdham Road fields, the pairs often searched for food in the same areas outside their defended territories, although squabbles did develop between pairs at times. Large fields of at least 10,000 square meters appeared to be necessary for nesting, although data on size preference is tentative at best. It will be important to continue the monitoring initiated here to eliminate one year bias, establish trends, and to evaluate habitat manipulation.

One final word— please observe and honor all posted signs when looking for Lark Sparrows in the Toledo area. The species is often

relatively easily found simply by walking along Girdham Road north of Reed Road in Oak Openings Preserve during May and June. The song is loud and musical, and the species is often very active and colorful for a sparrow. The white outer tail feathers and distinctive chestnut, black and white head pattern all aid in identification. Keeping in mind that fewer than 10 pairs likely nest in Ohio even in the best of years, the Lark Sparrow is one of our most critically threatened nesting species.

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Lark Sparrow. Oak Openings MP, Summer 1992.
Photo by Gary Meszaros