

It is unfortunate that an area once noted for the presence of migrant and breeding grassland species such as Smith's longspur, Sprague's and American pipits, American golden-plover, upland sandpiper, short-eared owl, and loggerhead shrike is now suitable habitat only for such species as eastern meadowlark (early spring), horned lark (winter through early spring), northern harrier (late fall through winter), mourning dove, European starling, and house sparrow.

Based on the present status of Smith's longspur in North America, it may be worth the effort of local and state conservation organizations to encourage land managers to return portions of this property back to more grassland-like conditions. This could be accomplished through the planting of hay and wheat crops, or more native grassland plant species as a means of managing for the species in Ohio.

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Smith's Longspur: Occurrence in Indiana and Hints on Finding Them

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Smith's longspur was not regarded as a regular migrant through Indiana until the late 1940s and early 1950s, when birders seeking the last remaining prairie chickens in Newton County, near the town of Enos, began encountering them every April. Since then many records have accumulated, almost exclusively in the westernmost counties, from Lake Michigan south to Gibson County. They are difficult to locate even in areas where they are known to occur in numbers each spring, so it is not surprising that very few birds have been found elsewhere in the state, especially since their preferred corn-stubble habitat is not a very inviting locale for birding in early spring.


The peak time for Smith's in the Midwest is early to mid-April, but they can sometimes be found in late March and early May. Rarely are they found in anything other than corn-stubble fields, and they are very particular about the type of fields they feed in: the fields must be untouched by the plow since the harvest. Plowed fields are for the Lapland longspurs. In searching these unplowed corn-stubble fields, however, one's odds will be exponentially increased if a field can be found with copious amounts of the magic element that few Smith's can resist: FOXTAIL. Foxtail is a straw-colored weed that grows in thick clumps and is often smashed down and matted in the spring, sometimes missing its fluffy "tail" seed head. It commonly grows around the borders of fields, but when it is found growing throughout it is as good as gold for Smith's longspur in western Indiana. It is not certain whether they feed on the seed or use it for cover, but it is clear they have a penchant for it. It also helps if the accompanying stubble is not cropped too short: a foot or two high is good. A little vegetation of other types growing between the rows also helps, and thus fields that have been left fallow for a year or two are best. Smith's tend to gravitate toward the lower damper portions of the fields, so try these areas first.

If possible, try to pick a day with as little wind as possible. On calm days the longspurs are more likely to make short flights and to call, and it is easier to hear them at a distance. They are usually heard before they are seen. Their call is a rattle similar to the Lapland's and is difficult to differentiate without experience with both, but sounds slower and louder. The best way to describe the difference is to think of the Lapland's call as fast, thin, and dry and the Smith's as slow, fat, and wet, as though they are spitting as they give it. They will often come in and investigate when one plays a recording of this rattle call. Good examples of it can be found on both the Peterson Western Birds CD and the National Geographic Society's Bird Sounds CD.

Determining they are in a field is one thing; actually seeing anything other than a group of small specks flying quickly away is another. When in low flight, how-

ever, the white outer tail feathers and white shoulder patches are easy to see. The best strategy, once their calls have been heard, is to set up a scope and look down a set of rows, then continue moving a few rows and scanning again and again until they are spotted. If one tries to get close enough to see them through binoculars they usually either fly to a distant field, crouch dead still and become invisible, or run to one side or the other so that your line of sight is blocked by cornstalks. If you do flush one or more nearby, look carefully around in the immediate vicinity, as sometimes the entire flock does not flush at once. When they freeze they can be exceedingly difficult to spot and they are probably closer than one thinks. Be patient and still and they will start feeding again. If a single bird happens to become isolated from the flock it will almost always allow extremely close approach.

Another strategy, during dry years when flooded fields are scarce, is to find one of the few remaining flooded fields and wait with a scope while birds come in to drink.

Given the fact that American golden-plover, a much more conspicuous prairie migrant that abounds in the same general areas as Smith's longspur, occurs in numbers in certain areas of eastern Indiana and western Ohio, one would think that Smith's longspurs may also be passing through these areas, but are as yet undetected. Hopefully these notes will spur a few adventurous birders to set out into the great corn-stubble wastelands in early spring in search of this much sought-after species. 



Taken in Benton County, Indiana, this Smith's longspur photograph shows a commonly encountered plumage in the Midwest—a male in mid-molt. Photo by Jeff McCoy on 13 April 2002.

Notes on Finding Smith's Longspurs in Ohio

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Each spring in the 1950s and early 1960s Smith's longspurs *Calcarius pictus* were found at the Oxford airport in Butler County, Ohio (Kemsies and Austing 1950, Kemsies and Randle 1953, pers. obs.). There was one fall record of a flock there during the last half of November 1958 (Sheppard 1959). All the spring records were between 15 March (1957) and 26 April (1958), with most records between about 1 April and 20 April. Flocks ranged from about a dozen to as many as about 300 (1957), with most flocks in the range of 50-75 birds. Since 1963, there have been no reports from the airport that I can find, although I suspect a few knowledgeable birders from the Cincinnati area still visited the airport each April for several years after that time. This note is about the types of habitat and behavior of the longspurs as observed in and around the airport.

The numbers of migrant Smith's longspurs passing through Ohio must be relatively small. The longitude of the easternmost nesting area in Canada is that of Lakewood, Ohio. Most of the birds winter well to our west, with only a few in the nearest part of their range in western Tennessee, northern Mississippi, and Alabama. The birds do seem to associate with the same areas while on migration from year to year, if the conditions remain suitable for them.

Finding this species each spring, once discovered at the Oxford airport, was not always easy. Even when they were known to be present, observers often had to explore the many fields on the property. Smith's longspurs only rarely called while on the ground, and then mostly when others were flying overhead; calls while on the ground were often audible at no more than 30-50 m. However, when flushed, they readily gave dry rattle calls that could be heard for several hundred meters as the flock wheeled and settled down some distance away. Although Lapland longspurs *C. lapponicus* were sometimes present at the airport at the same time, the two species were usually not seen to mix, especially once the larger flocks were in flight. Elsewhere, Smith's will sometimes associate readily with other longspurs when the former is numbered in just a few individuals.

Smith's longspurs are very cryptic while on the ground. It was often possible to approach them within distances of less than 10 m and still not be able to see them. They would often freeze low to the ground when they felt threatened and might remain in this state for 5 minutes or more. Since the flocks were scattered over an area, searchers usually needed to be about 40-50 m apart in order to encounter some member of the flock. Once a flock was seen settling to the ground, a very slow and deliberate approach was required to actually obtain close looks at the birds to verify their identity.