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.

The Oxford airport is on a nearly flat area that lies across the watershed divide between two small streams several km to the east and west. The nearly flat tract had no stream beds, only a few low swales that accumulated water after heavy rains or snow melt. Smith's longspurs used many different habitats in and around the airport. There were some 60-70 ha of mowed grass runways and adjacent edges, constituting 50-60% of the airport property, up until the mid-1960s. The grasses were cut to a height of about 10 cm. The longspurs usually roosted out in the middle of the sod area, feeding either there or in adjacent cultivated fields. One spring they did roost in the stubble of a short (10-15 cm) hay field that was present next to the sod area.

The most favored feeding habitat during the late 1950s and early 1960s was the remains of a large field of cultivated tomatoes, present only for several springs. The various weeds and grasses that had been allowed to grow between the tomato plants and perhaps the remains of the dried tomatoes themselves seemed really attractive to the longspurs. In other years they were found in corn stubble and closely mowed hay. I have no notes showing the birds had any interest in winter wheat, soybeans or similar crops, though they might conceivably be attracted to a freshly planted field of spring wheat. All the published reports of the diet of this species involve seeds of various grasses, sedges, and similar plants during migration and winter (e.g., Kemsies 1968).

Several springs at Oxford, we attracted the longspurs to 40-80 kg of fine cracked corn that was spread across a half hectare or so of nearly bare soil in the sod area of the airport a week or two before they were expected. The longspurs were usually able to find this food, if scattered enough in an appropriate habitat. Once found, they readily came to it. One of the most important attractions to the birds was water. In the middle of every day, we would see the flock go to water. If a shallow skiff of water was present on the airport, they would go there. On days when surface water was not available at the airport, the birds would circle up and then move some distance from the airport for a couple of hours. Although no serious attempt was made to follow the flock at the time, we suspected they flew 1-3 km from the airport to private stock ponds or other sources of surface water.

The Smith's longspurs were almost never closer than 100-150 m to a fence or tree line, and rarely were seen in vegetation higher than about 20 cm, except for the corn stubble. On several occasions they perched on thin, isolated saplings that were next to the small pools of water at which they were drinking or bathing. The saplings were usually less than 4 m tall.

To find Smith's longspurs, I think most serious birders need to spend a lot of time in large fields. The minimum size of any set of fields without fences or trees I would think of searching would be at least 10 hectares, if not 20 or much more. A more optimum complex of adjacent fields (grass, hay, corn stubble, etc.) should total about 100 hectares or more. Such fields should be nearly flat, with no tall trees, power lines, or extensive fencerows present. Timothy and other hayfields mowed close to the ground in late fall would also be likely habitats. Naturally, any extensive mature grasslands such as at airports that have been mowed for decades should be searched. Commercial sod farms are very unlikely habitats due to the monocultural

and weedless nature of those fields. Any grasslands that routinely harbor nesting or migrating upland sandpipers *Bartramia longicauda* would be an indication of the extensiveness and quality of such grassland habitats. If anyone discovers an extensive commercial tomato-growing operation some summer in appropriate terrain, I would certainly advise checking the field out the following spring. The regular presence of Lapland longspurs during the winter might also be an indicator of appropriate habitats for the Smith's longspurs. Since the two species are very difficult to separate by calls, observers should try to observe carefully any flocks of longspurs: a few Smith's might be mixed into a flock of Laplands.

Since the early 1970s farmers have been using no-till farming. Most crop fields likely have extensive weeds and grasses in them all fall and into early spring the next year. This practice may well be the single biggest hurdle to finding Smith's longspurs in glaciated Ohio at this time, as it now may now provide thousands of square km of weedy corn fields at the end of each growing season just in western Ohio. I have no notes or recollection of finding the birds in plowed fields or in the stubble of crops such as wheat, rye, oats or soybeans, even when next to the sod areas of the Oxford Airport.

Birders could be stationed at some widely spaced intervals (ca. 1 km) in the middle of the day in appropriate habitats at the right times of the year (November and April, mostly) to hear the flocks going for their daily water. Dry periods would make this effort more likely to produce birds than when every field has some water standing on it. Fine cracked corn scattered in late October or late March in areas where birds have been reported in the past might also attract the species.

In summary, airports with extensive areas of mature, but mowed, grass and adjacent agricultural fields are probably the best candidates for finding this species. Besides gaining access to potential habitat for closer searches, a large number of birders need to organize their efforts so as to methodically cover as much potential habitat in the narrow window of time that the birds are most likely to be present. In Ohio, I would also restrict searches to the glaciated section that lies mostly to the north and west of I-71 and the periods of about 25 October to 25 November and 25 March to 25 April.

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