

# The Smith's Longspur in Illinois

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In *The Birds of Illinois* (1989) Bohlen gives a brief but good description of the early history of Smith's longspur in Illinois, citing one of the earliest records as coming from the Calumet area of northeastern Illinois by Nelson in 1875. There are a few other early records from the Chicago area, but as the prairie and grassland disappeared, so did the longspurs. Bohlen himself has to be given credit for the "discovery" of this species in the modern era. With his dedication to looking for what was considered an uncommon to rare and elusive species before about 1970, Bohlen began finding the longspur regularly, and in some numbers, in Illinois. Bohlen and others found the longspur in a variety of shortgrass situations, with alfalfa /clover fields the most used habitats. Several observers, including the author, have found the species at airports, golf courses, and other artificial and natural short grass situations. All favored habitats are typically on flat ground with little topographical relief, reminiscent of the species' wintering and breeding grounds. I would be interested to know of any "hilly" areas where this species is found during migration.

As clover and alfalfa had become scarce by the 1970s, birders began noticing they could find Smith's longspurs in other agricultural field habitats, and by the mid to late 1980s several birders were regularly checking for and finding this species in unplowed corn stubble, specifically when it contained a common weed species, foxtail. It is probably no coincidence that these birds are now almost always found in Illinois fields with foxtail. I have many times found Smith's longspur in alfalfa fields, but more often flush them from patches of foxtail growing along the borders of such fields or in small patches throughout the field. Expounding on what Jeff McCoy says for Indiana, this species undoubtedly uses the foxtail mainly for a food source and possibly secondarily as cover. In analyses of stomach contents collected for this species, both in Illinois and elsewhere, the seeds of various species of foxtail have been found. In other locations this species seems to prefer the seeds of three-awn grass. The longspur does utilize a smaller-seeded agricultural crop in migration—wheat—in areas farther west. Smith's is almost strictly a seed-eater outside the breeding season.

In the corn stubble fields where longspurs are now mainly found in Illinois, foxtail is virtually the only thing growing which could provide sustenance for this species. It is even becoming increasingly difficult to find foxtail in these stubble fields as farmers continue to rid their fields of any weeds, especially foxtail, which tend to bind up their combines. It is my opinion that Smith's longspur takes very little if any corn in these fields, possibly only cracked pieces, as I have never observed them picking up corn, a behavior that would easily be visible with binoculars at some distance. Any time I have tried to determine what the longspurs are eating, the matter (likely seeds) has been so small as to be practically invisible, as foxtail seed would be at a great distance. Furthermore, I have never found this

species in corn or soybean stubble without at least some foxtail, even if just a tiny patch in an otherwise "clean" field.

Concerning spring migration, Bohlen (1989) classifies Smith's longspur as a "common spring migrant and occasional fall migrant." I would add the modifier "regular," as the species is common every year in spring, although there do seem to be some years when it is not as numerous or as easy to find. Very few Illinois birders, perhaps only two or three, bother to look for this species in fall. If any are found in fall, reports are usually of only one or two birds. If more people looked for Smith's at the time, there would undoubtedly be more fall records, though the species overall is much more common in spring. Most of the fall records come from the western half of the state, although there are a few Chicago-area records from the Lake Michigan shoreline. The bulk of this species' fall migration takes place well to the west of Illinois, with the closest large numbers coming from western Missouri.

Most of this species' occurrences in Illinois fall within a rather wide swath across the middle portion of the state from about Springfield in the west to the Indiana line in the east. It is no coincidence that these regions of the state happen to be where Illinois' most active birders searching for the species reside. The other "hot spot" is the greater prairie-chicken refuges in southeastern Illinois, where much research is being done and from whence a few active birders occasionally report good numbers of longspurs, as do others attending prairie-chicken field trips there. Outside of the above-mentioned areas few records exist, and many are either historical or very recent, on the part of a couple of active birders seeking to extend the known limits of this species' range in the state. Just last year and again this year, ornithologist Doug Stotz of the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago found Smith's longspur in Iroquois County for perhaps the first time, even though Indiana birders had been finding them just across the border to the east in Indiana near Enos. Doug also pushed the species' range a little farther north, into Marshall County, in a part of the state (southern edge of north-central Illinois) where they had not been recorded before. Specimens in the Field Museum collection from back in the 1970s for Lee and Ogle Counties in far north-central Illinois vouch for some of the most northerly records in the state. Another individual found both spring and fall birds in McDonough County in the southern edge of northwestern Illinois, just north of where good numbers were formerly found in Knox County by an observer who no longer birds there. Northern Illinois is likely near the northern edge of this species' known range as a migrant, as there are extremely few records from anywhere in Wisconsin, including even the southern edge, despite a few concentrated searches there in recent years.

Judging from the past 30 years or so (from which many data exist), no discernible peaks and valleys in numbers are apparent for this species. It is regularly found here in good numbers, especially in areas immediately adjacent to the Illinois River valley, if much searching is done. Flocks in the 100-200 range are not uncommon and flocks of 500 or more have been found. Further east, in Vermilion and Champaign Counties in the extreme east-central part of the state, flock size is normally in the 25-75 range with flocks numbering from 100-150 occasionally

present, although up to 500+ may be located by checking several fields in a day. Unfortunately, these data may not be that meaningful when it comes to peaks and valleys because only a handful of Illinois birders regularly spend much time looking for the species in the state. Most others just come on a couple of the yearly field trips conducted to find the species, and hard-core listers look only until they find their "year bird," and then spend no more time pursuing the species.

In my opinion, Smith's longspur numbers are probably relatively stable overall, with the habitats used during the winter and breeding seasons changing very little from year to year. In fact, prevailing winds during migration may have more to do with how common the species is from year to year locally, especially at the periphery of its migratory range. I also believe this species' apparent numbers may be affected more by the conditions it finds in the areas it uses during migration than at any other time during the year. This time period may be the limiting factor in its life history. I definitely agree with Whan's assessment as to how often this species is or is not found, and in what numbers. In the Midwest at least, its discovery has everything to do with how much time a birder is willing to search, and if that person knows how, where, and when to look. I would agree that birder knowledge and effort has everything to do with Ohio's odd status for the species.

### Spring and Fall Migration

The species is most often found from mid-March through mid-April in Illinois. Since Illinois is a very long state from north to south, arrival and departure dates as well as peak numbers may vary a fair amount depending on where you look in the state. Numbers (including peak numbers of birds per flock) tend to be the greatest in western Illinois, and diminish somewhat as you go east, although this species remains common in Illinois clear to the Indiana border. For several years, a few birders in the Illinois River valley in the center of the state took it upon themselves to look earlier and earlier each year and once came up with an early arrival date of the last few days in February or the first few days in March.

Smith's longspurs likely arrive in Illinois in late February in years with unusually early and strong warm fronts out of the southwest. This timetable agrees well with their departure from wintering grounds in Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas in middle to late February each year. Generally speaking, 20 March – 15 April is peak time for the longspur in Illinois. Most of these birds arrive in full basic plumage, and by the time they begin to depart, males are well into alternate plumage. The casual birder can regularly find this species well into April, but those who care to take the time to search the species' preferred open field habitat can still find at least a few birds up until a few days before the spring bird count, anywhere from about 4-10 May. Unfortunately, only rarely are a few dedicated souls still looking anytime after late April.

The very limited fall data reveal it is best to search for this species during the first two weeks of November, when most records have occurred. However, this is likely the "peak" time, if that term can be used for a bird whose largest reported numbers for the fall season are one to a handful. If birders regularly looked, the

extremes would likely be mid-October to early December, and indeed there is a record for mid-October in Bohlen (1989), and we (the Illinois Ornithological Records Committee) have recently accepted a mid-December CBC record for southeastern Illinois.

One fallacy that continues to be passed on from source to source, even including the *Birds of North America* account for this species (Briskie 1993), is that the Smith's longspur winters in the upper Midwest. This is simply not the case. In the above source, for winter range, it is stated "...central Iowa south". Not only is this incorrect, there are no mid-winter records at all for the entire states of Iowa or Illinois, and virtually none in Missouri except for some traditional wintering areas in prairie fragments in the west and southwestern areas of that state. To my knowledge, these are the farthest northern regular winter records. Statements made by a couple of very early ornithologists, very likely erroneous, that this species wintered in Iowa and Illinois continue to be passed on as fact. The *National Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds* (Bull and Fearrard 1994) says, "Nebraska south." Wrong. The Peterson Guide (Peterson 2002) shows northern Missouri and southern Iowa. Again, wrong.

Concerning a few things birders need to know before and while they are searching for this species, I have already discussed the general habitats in which we find Smith's longspurs in Illinois. One more consideration is how much more difficult it has become to find any grassland in Illinois due to the conversion of almost all tillable ground to intensive row-crop monocultures. Most of these birds are found only in these intensively farmed areas where little grassland remains. There are still a few areas in Illinois where fairly large grasslands persist, including extreme southern Illinois (rather ironic, due to the fact that this was historically forest), far western Illinois, and extreme northwestern Illinois. These locations currently, and to a somewhat similar extent historically, have held very, very few active birders. At least some of these "good" habitats are likely being visited by Smith's longspurs, and they are also using CRP (Conservation Reserve Program) lands, where I have found them occasionally in east-central Illinois. In fact, the southeastern Illinois region (in and around lands being managed by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources for Illinois's remaining greater prairie-chicken population), where there is a mixture of restored prairie grasses and cool-season European grasses with an active management regime of burning, grazing, and field rotation, has produced the largest flocks and numbers of Smith's longspurs found in the state, several times in the thousands of birds. Again, unfortunately few active birders visit this part of the state with any regularity, so data on numbers even for this productive spot are spotty and irregular at best. It is just easier to find them in the very small (relatively speaking) "islands" of foxtail-covered corn stubble fields in central Illinois. Again, as mentioned earlier, these longspurs are virtually never found in soybean stubble fields, likely due to their extremely "clean" nature (i.e., free of foxtail and other weeds). Lapland longspurs, however, can commonly be found in both corn and soybean stubble.

### Finding Smith's Longspurs in Illinois

Here is my approach to searching for Smith's longspurs. For those who want to find the species farther east from Illinois, this method may be the fastest and easiest.

This species prefers large open fields in the extensive farm belt of central Illinois that was formerly part of the Grand Prairie region, with the proportion of open field in a given landscape (compared with forested or urban/suburban etc. habitats) 90% or greater. When surrounded by much forest, even large fields are not likely to have this species.

I begin by driving into any location with large, open fields, and start looking for the tell-tale signs of a good field—patches of yellowish or yellow-gold foxtail plants. If the plants are on private property, one must get permission from landowners to walk particularly good-looking fields. If you drive the country roads slowly with the car window down, you can sometimes hear the birds if you have familiarized yourself with the rather distinctive rattle call note, and maybe even get a quick glimpse of a flock wheeling about over the middle of a field. You are not likely to see this species along roadsides as you can Laplands.

As Jeff McCoy remarks, there does seem to be somewhat of a micro-habitat within fields in which birds can often be found. Once in a field, the observer will want to check all patches of foxtail. I stress "all" as there will often be several to many patches and often most if not all of the birds will be in only one. That one remaining patch of foxtail in the far corner of the field should definitely be checked, as it may be the only spot in the whole field where the birds are. This species also seems to like the damp or wetter areas within a field. That is not to say they like flooded fields, but completely dry fields do not seem to be as productive as a field with at least a few wet spots. Smith's longspurs in Illinois have often been noted drinking from such small wet spots in the fields. In part this may have to do with foxtail's association with moister soil conditions.

My notes on this species' behavior are very similar to Jeff McCoy's, and also match the observations of virtually all Illinois birders. I have been highly successful at showing folks this species on my field trips, which routinely include between 40 and 55 birders, and my success rate at showing literally hundreds and hundreds of birders good looks at this species is 100 percent. Part of this is likely due to my approach, and the few others who now lead field trips for this species have adopted this method.

One note on which Jeff McCoy and I disagree is the effect of weather on the likelihood of getting good looks at this species. Bright, clear, sunny days with no wind are not the best days, at least in some aspects, when trying to see this species. Upon entering a field to look for the birds on such days, even if you know almost exactly where they are it can often be very difficult to approach the birds close enough for a good look. That is probably because on windless days the birds apparently can hear you approaching, especially with the loud crunching noises that are unavoidable in their favored corn-stubble habitat. Upon hearing a birder's approach, the species will either press itself low to the ground or hide (seemingly purposefully) behind the relatively wide stalks of the corn stubble, whereupon even

the largest flocks can instantly disappear. When one approaches too closely (6-12 ft or less), first one bird will fly, and many times its rattle call will take several others (sometimes all) into the air. Every few steps thereafter will continue to flush the remaining birds, also well-camouflaged and hidden from view. It is always better to begin searching the surrounding areas where the initial bird was flushed before continuing to walk, as there are almost always other birds close by ready to flush with the next couple of steps you take. They will nevertheless not be easy to see!

Once airborne on a clear, sunny, and windless day, the flock will continue to circle the field, many times going so high as to disappear entirely or, if you can keep an eye on them, land in a far side of the field or in a different field entirely. If, on the other hand, alone or with a small group, you are able to approach some longspurs with great stealth and patience on such a quiet clear day, you may be lucky enough to spot some birds before they spot you. Setting up a scope and observing the birds by looking down the open areas in the parallel rows of corn stubble is much easier when the wind is not blowing.

The flip side is that on windy and/or overcast days, this species seems much more reluctant to take flight, even if hearing your approach over the noise of the wind. Many times, even if they are flushed, they will often either hug the ground or fly much lower than on clear, windless days. They also tend to fly shorter distances before re-landing, often distances measurable in yards instead of field lengths. Sometimes they will even just run rapidly across the ground for short bursts in such weather, with head held lower than the rest of the body, before stopping to hide. The same holds if you wait to search a field until late in the day when it is approaching dusk, but still with plenty of light to see. Once again, the longspurs seem reluctant to fly very high or far under such conditions.

Although small groups are best, I have successfully shown up to 55 individuals good looks at this species. The key in this situation is to have a number of people (8-10+) willing to carry their scopes into the field for what will sometimes be extended walks back and forth across the field. Otherwise, it is helpful either to stay together so as not to flush the birds continually, or have everyone spread out in a line and walk TOGETHER, SLOWLY, across the field, stopping once someone sees or flushes a bird, then getting a scope on it (at the same time looking for other nearby hiding birds), or stealthily making a closer approach.

One of the main strategies in finding this species is becoming proficient at separating the rattle call of the Smith's from the somewhat similar call of the much more common Lapland longspur. In Illinois, the latter species has become greatly reduced in numbers by the time Smith's is peaking in April. However there are still days when Laplands can be quite numerous during this period. One can find Laplands in the same field as Smith's, and sometimes even within yards of one another. Still, the two species nearly always stay in distinct, separate flocks. Only once or twice in my 20+ years experience with the two species have I noted what appeared to be a single Smith's trying to join a flock of Laplands, and I have had numerous occasions, usually several times each year, where both species are in the same field.


Although tapes can help you learn the call, the best way is to learn with experience, in the field, hearing the birds while making a positive sight identification. Often hearing the bird's distinctive and diagnostic (with experience) call will be your first clue as to its presence. Although many less experienced birders tell me they cannot distinguish between the two species' rattle calls, those who have learned the calls over several years of looking and finding say it is easy to tell Smith's calls from those of the more common Lapland.

Although I find it rather difficult to get much use out of verbal or written descriptions of bird songs or calls, here is my take on the differences between the two species' calls. To me, the Smith's longspur rattle sounds more metallic, or more like a clicking sound, whereas the Lapland has a much "drier" sound to the rattle. Smith's call is usually longer or more drawn-out, likely with more clicks or rattle notes to a series. One description I read in a book some time ago concerning the Smith's rattles seems the most apropos—"like the winding of a cheap (or child's) watch."

The Smith's longspur occasionally does sing on migration, usually only on clear, sunny, windless, and often warm days—not a frequent occurrence in March and April in the Midwest. It would be good to learn the song. The species is also very responsive to recordings of its rattling call, although that will often cause the birds to become airborne.

The main attributes I find easiest to observe on a bird in flight at almost any distance is the much buffier overall coloration compared with a Lapland, more extensive white edging to the outer tail feathers, and the presence of at least a small white or whitish shoulder patch, present on both males and (much more restricted) on females, even in full basic plumage on first arriving from the wintering grounds. Any of these is diagnostic to this species, although I would advise the inexperienced to use the amount of white in the tail cautiously. The only other species one is likely to encounter in the same time of year and habitat in the Midwest that could possibly be confused with Smith's longspur is the basic-plumaged Lapland longspur and perhaps the vesper sparrow. Of course, chestnut-collared and McCown's longspurs are a distinct possibility as vagrants, but would be extremely rare. The few other species I regularly encounter when looking for Smith's longspurs are savannah and song sparrows, horned lark, common snipe, killdeer, and American golden-plover.

## References

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- Peterson, R. T. 2002. *A Field Guide to the Birds of Eastern and Central North America*, Fifth Edition. Houghton Mifflin, Boston. 

## Recent Actions of the Ohio Bird Records Committee

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### Accepted Records

In order to be accepted, records require a minimum of nine accept votes from the eleven-member committee.

**Northern Gannet** *Morus bassanus*—Lake County, 28 December 2001, observer Ben Fambrough.

**Wood Stork** *Mycteria americana*—Hancock County, 27 June to 11 July 1966. A fascinating historical record, complete with diagnostic photographs, just brought to our attention after having been discovered among historical documents at Bowling Green University.

**Wood Stork** *Mycteria americana*—Portage County, 9 September 2001, observers Brad Stemen, Jennifer Hillmer. The first Ohio record since 1966.

**Ross's Goose** *Chen rossii*—Licking County, 28 December 2001 to at least 7 January 2002, observers Jason Estep, Aimee Morrison, Tammera Nickerson, Dan Sanders, et al.

**Black-headed Gull** *Larus ridibundus*—Lorain County, 20 December 2001, observer Sean Zadar.

**Black-headed Gull** *Larus ridibundus*—Lake County, 30 December 2001, observers Larry Rosche, Ray Hannikman, Emil Bacik.

**California Gull** *Larus californicus*—Lake County, 11 March 2002, observers Ben Fambrough, Sandy Wagner, Rob Harlan.

**Selasphorus hummingbird sp.**—Hamilton County, December 2001. A female, probably an adult and either rufous or Allen's, that was visiting a feeder. Despite good photographs, no one felt that it could be identified with certainty to species. Statistically, rufous hummingbird would certainly be the most likely.

**Louisiana Waterthrush** *Seiurus motacilla*—Summit County, 29 December 2001, observers Larry Rosche, Carl Johnson, Judy Semroc, et al. An amazing and indisputable record. Excellent photographs were obtained. This species is very rare in North America in the winter, and practically unknown in winter in the Midwest. Most depart Ohio by the end of August, and there are few records past early September.

**Summer Tanager** *Piranga rubra*—Lorain County, 4-25 January 2002, observers Larry Rosche, Ron Lang. Like the aforementioned waterthrush, a spectacular and unexpected winter record of a neotropical species. Also a good lesson in why not to assume that late or winter tanagers/orioles/warblers will be the most common species found during the breeding season. It was thought by some that this bird was a scarlet tanager, but photos and excellent descriptions by observers clearly document the bird as a summer tanager. To my knowledge, the latest previous record was 10 November.