

UNUSUAL BEHAVIOR OF THE HORNED LARK

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At 0720 (MST) on 12 May 1976, while conducting bird census work on the Idaho National Engineering Laboratory (INEL) 2 km west of Atomic City, Bingham Co., Idaho, we noticed a Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris*) dead on the road and a conspecific acting strangely nearby. Observing the birds from our vehicle, we recorded the following information from a distance of 5 m.

The live bird was paler and less distinctly marked than the dead one. We therefore classified the former as a female, the latter a male. A necropsy later confirmed the male's sex. The birds were on an infrequently traveled road in a habitat dominated by Big Sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*). They were within 150 m of two Horned Lark nests with eggs we had located on 10 and 11 May. Although direct evidence was lacking, the subsequent behavioral displays by the live bird indicated that the birds we were observing had most likely been a mated pair. We first saw the female within 1 m of the carcass. She was obviously greatly agitated, hopping and flying very short distances in a sporadic manner. She flapped violently in an exaggerated fashion, hovering for a second or less and landing within 0.5 m of the point of takeoff. She spent an instant motionless on the ground, and then fluttered and hopped toward the carcass, twice actually landing on it. Using her beak she grabbed the dead bird three times by the wing and several times by the head, pulling it towards the side of the road roughly in the direction of the nests. She then flew to a sagebrush about 2.5 m distant, called in a high fast chipping manner for about 5 seconds, and returned to the road with sporadic and exaggerated wing-fluttering. She then resumed hopping about, fluttering, probing, tugging at the body, and chipping intermittantly.

We observed this behavior sequence six times in 10 minutes and then approached the birds. By this time, the carcass had been moved about 0.5 m from the original position. As we advanced the female did not flush from her position by the carcass until we were within 1.5 m. She then flew only about 3 m away, landed in a sagebrush and resumed the high-pitched chipping mentioned previously. When we left the carcass, she immediately returned to her former position and continued her agitated behavior. We observed for several minutes more, and left the area. When we returned 6 hours later, only the carcass remained. It had been moved completely off the road, approximately 1 m from where we had last seen it. Later investigations revealed that both of the Horned Lark nests in the vicinity of the displays were unsuccessful. One was found empty (predation?) 2 days after our observations, and hatchlings in the second nest were trampled by domestic sheep nearly a week later.

The behavior of the live bird strongly suggests that these Horned Larks were a mated pair. A similar increase in activity and call rate upon separation from a mate has been recorded for Zebra Finches (*Poephila guttata*), Eurasian Bullfinches (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*), Eurasian Tree Sparrows (*Passer montanus*) and Bearded Tits (*Panurus biarmicus*) (Butterfield 1970, Wickler 1972:95-99). All these passerine species reportedly pair for life. To our knowledge, ours is the first description of behavior

NOTES

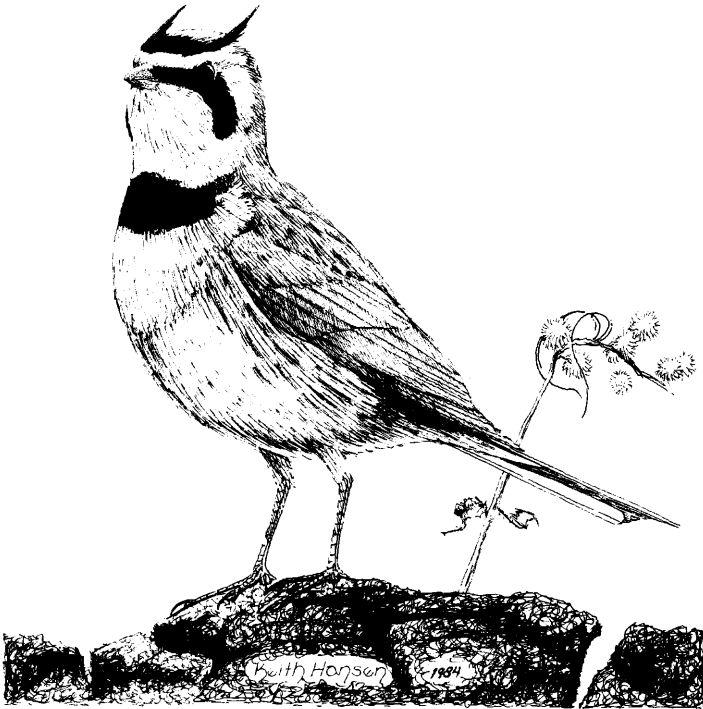
which suggests postmortem mate fidelity in a passerine species that, at the most, forms a pair bond for only one breeding season.

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Sketch by Keith Hansen