

FIRST DOCUMENTED BREEDING OF THE EURASIAN SKYLARK IN ALASKA

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Introduced, resident populations of the Eurasian Skylark, nominate *Alauda arvensis arvensis*, breed locally on southern Vancouver Island, British Columbia, and the San Juan Islands, Washington. (AOU 1983: 488). In Alaska, the species occurs naturally as an annual rare migrant and casual summer visitant to the western Aleutian Islands (Near Islands group) and a casual migrant and summer visitant to St. Lawrence Island and the Pribilof Islands, in the Bering Sea (Kessel and Gibson 1978; Byrd et al. 1978; Gibson 1981). All Alaska specimens are of the northeast Asiatic form *A. a. pekinensis*, which breeds as far east as the Koryak Highlands, Kamchatka, and the Kurile Islands (fide D. D. Gibson, University of Alaska Museum; Vaurie 1959; Portenko 1963). Breeding has been suspected in Alaska (twelve birds, including a singing male, at St. Paul Island, 1–9 July 1970; Kessel and Gibson 1978), but there has been no solid evidence of breeding, and no skylarks have previously been identified as females in the field. Here we report the first evidence of breeding by the Eurasian Skylark in Alaska and the first evidence of breeding by non-introduced skylarks in North America.

On 22 May 1995 we were leading a bird tour group of 20+ people at St. Paul Island, Pribilof Islands, Alaska, when Toochin heard the song of a Eurasian Skylark. Upon locating the bird he discovered that there were several birds singing over an open grassy area along the road 0.5 km north of the St. Paul airport. It was a clear day, and our group watched the birds perform dramatic flight songs and chase each other about for an hour, often at very close range. We soon determined that there were three singing males and another bird whose behavior suggested a female. The presumed female skylark gathered dead grass at one location, then flew 20 m and deposited the material at another location. This circuit, from the gathering spot to the depositing spot, was repeated many times as we watched. One male skylark stayed very close to the female, following her back and forth on this circuit. The male did not gather any nest material; instead, he sang while hovering over the female as she collected material and sang from a raised mound near the depositing site. The other male skylarks occasionally approached too near the female during their display flights, and the attending male immediately drove them away, then returned to the female. We assumed that the female was building a nest. We returned to the location several times during the ensuing three days, sometimes finding singing males, sometimes finding no skylarks, but we did not again find the female.

Shortly before departing the island on 26 May, we returned to the site again and found the nest with four eggs 20 m west of the road (Figure 1). The eggs were dark olive-green and completely covered with fine dark brown specks, heaviest on the larger end. The nest was a deep cup built on the ground in a tussock of tall grass, and it was constructed of coarse stalks with a lining of finer grass woven into the lower portions. Although the nest was in a clump of tall grass, its top was not hidden, and it was open to a southern exposure. We lacked instruments, so were unable to measure the nest or eggs. Several people with the tour photographed and videotaped the nest (photos on file at the University of Alaska Museum). Both birds were in attendance, the male singing and displaying the entire time, and as we departed the area the female flew to the nest, presumably to incubate the eggs. Our findings concur with the details of skylark nesting habits detailed by Cramp (1988).

NOTES

We reported the skylark nest to Sean D. Smith, tourism director of St. Paul Tours, and he monitored the nest for several days after 26 May. Unfortunately he found no sign of eggs or egg shells at the nest on 30 May. It is highly likely that the eggs fell prey to Arctic Foxes (*Alopex lagopus*), which are common on the island. The skylarks continued to be seen, and on 16 June M. Danzenbaker (pers. comm.) found another nest in the same area only 1 m from the road. This nest contained three nestlings approximately one week old. Two adult skylarks were seen in the vicinity of the nest. Both were carrying food and were quite agitated by the observer's presence. No nestlings were found at or near this nest on 19 June. Although skylarks leave the nest within 7 to 11 days of hatching (Cramp 1988), it is likely that this nest also fell prey to Arctic Foxes, as the adults and juveniles should have been nearby. Skylarks were last seen around the St. Paul airport on 22 June.

We thank Sean D. Smith for following up and sharing his observations of the skylark nests after our tour departed St. Paul Island. We also thank Mike Danzenbaker for sharing his observations of the second skylark nest. We thank Daniel D. Gibson and an anonymous reviewer for making useful suggestions to the text.

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Figure 1. Eurasian Skylark nest on St. Paul Island, Alaska, May 1995.

Photo by Mike Toochin

NOTES

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