

We had flushed several Savannah Sparrows (*Passerculus sandwichensis*) and were searching for rails in the marshy places when we flushed a sparrow that was immediately separable from the Savannahs by its "sharp" tail and very pale, streaked back. The bird flew a short distance and landed. It was subsequently flushed at close range at least a dozen times. Making it fly was very difficult, and it would generally flush several feet or yards from where it was seen to land. It would neither perch nor respond to "squeaking." Carter saw it once very briefly on the ground, but all other observations were in flight, usually at distances of between 10 and 30 feet. It showed a definite preference for the wet sedges and rarely left them.

The bird was approximately the size of a Savannah Sparrow. It had a sharp-pointed tail, an orangish eye-line, and a very pale, well-streaked back. Both authors noted a light crown stripe, and Bishop observed streaking on its cream-colored sides.

After careful consideration and repeated reference to field guides, the authors determined the bird to be a Le Conte's Sparrow. All observed field marks, the bird's actions, and the habitat confirm the identification. There are four previously published records for this species in North Carolina. C.S. Brimley collected one at Raleigh on 21 April 1894 (*Birds of North Carolina*, 1959, p. 376). Single birds were observed on 23 October 1963 in Wake County (*Chat*, 30:30), on 17 October 1968 at Franklin (*Chat*, 34:49-50), and on 29 November 1970 at Morehead City (*Chat*, 35:59). There are several records for South Carolina, and *South Carolina Bird Life* (1970) considers it a "rare and erratic winter resident between October 25 and April 27." The 1957 edition of the *A.O.U. Checklist* gives much of the southeastern United States as the normal winter range, but terms Le Conte's Sparrow as "casual" in North Carolina.

On 9 October 1971 Carter had observed a very similar bird at the same locality. The bird showed the same preference for wet sedges, and was exceedingly hard to flush. It was seen only in flight. It appeared darker on the back than did the Le Conte's Sparrow, and had a sharp tail and an orangish eye-line. Due to the extreme rarity of Le Conte's Sparrow in North Carolina, and the dark-streaked back, Carter concluded that the bird was a Sharp-tailed Sparrow (*Ammodramus caudacuta*). At the time of this observation, Sharp-tailed Sparrows were being found far inland in tower kills at the WECT tower near White Lake, Bladen County, N.C. (unpub., Carter and Parnell). Carter now feels it is best to retract the record for the Sharp-tailed Sparrow since a reasonable doubt about its accuracy has arisen due to the recent record of the very similar Le Conte's Sparrow at the same locality. The Sharp-tailed Sparrow record appeared in the *Chat* (35:105) and in *American Birds* (26:49).

Notes on Wintering Lapland Longspurs in Northampton County, N.C.

J. MERRILL LYNCH

539 Henry Street, Roanoke Rapids, N.C. 27870

21 June 1972

About 15 Lapland Longspurs (*Calcarius lapponicus*) were present at Occoneechee Neck, Northampton County, N.C., 12 through 27 February 1972. These birds were associated with a large flock of 250 to 310 Horned Larks (*Eremophila alpestris*) during their 16-day residence here and were seen by five observers. The purpose of this note is to acquaint the reader with plumage characteristics of the longspurs and with the behavior of the lark-longspur flock.

Occoneechee Neck is an area of low, flat, and extensive farmland interspersed with tracts of bottomland and swampy hardwoods located in the western coastal plain. It is situated on a wide bend or "neck" of the Roanoke River about 12 miles SE of Roanoke Rapids, N.C. Elevation varies from 40 to 65 feet above sea level.

On 12 February the Lapland Longspurs were feeding with about 310 Horned Larks in a 275-acre plowed field almost totally devoid of vegetation. Bill Collier and I carefully

studied two male longspurs in the flock. Both appeared to be in the process of obtaining breeding plumage, possessing a conspicuous rufous-reddish nape contrasting against their brownish streaked crown and back. This was the most outstanding feature of their otherwise drab plumage. The underparts were whitish except for a black patch extending across the breast and dark side streakings. Females were much more inconspicuous with no distinctive markings. About the size of a House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*), they appeared much like brownish, finely streaked sparrows. Differentiation between the longspurs and larks was fairly easy; while on the ground the dark streakings on the back and the short, sparrow-like bill separated the longspurs. In flight, longspurs were more undulating and their short, slightly notched dark tails were apparent. Although longspurs are slightly smaller than larks, I found this to be an unreliable field mark.

Longspurs were most easily identified by their distinctive flight call: a low, staccato, rattling "ticky-ticky-tic," easily separable from the high, sibilant squeaks of horned larks. This note was heard frequently in flight and was seemingly the only vocalization.

Behavioral aspects were studied in detail with the more interesting ones discussed here. While feeding on the ground, the longspurs freely mixed with the larks, never remaining segregated from them. Both species flew together in tight, compact flocks but quickly spread out after landing in a field. Observation was sometimes difficult because of their habit of feeding in the bottom of furrows where they remained hidden for long periods. Their brownish backs blended in quite closely with the soil, providing excellent protective coloration. Being inhabitants by nature of large, bare, and open areas without cover, this species must depend on its coloration for survival. Each time a soaring hawk passed over the flock, both longspurs and larks immediately squatted low against the ground, compressing their bodies and remaining still until the threat passed. In this position they became virtually invisible. This curious behavior is a clear example of survival adaptations of open-country birds. Chapman (*Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America*, 1939) quotes Seton on similar longspur behavior:

"When in the hills they have a curious habit of squatting just behind some clod, and, as their colors are nearly matched to the soil, they are not easily observed, nor will they move until you are within a few feet; they then run a few feet and squat again."

While feeding, both species were quite active, maintaining a fairly fast gait. Almost all individuals in a flock moved in the *same* direction on the ground, apparently in this manner gleaning the surface of food most efficiently. On one occasion I walked parallel to a progressing flock for a distance of about 100 feet. One flock never remained in any one spot more than 10 to 15 minutes.

Cold weather and high winds did not visibly affect the birds' feeding activities (wind chill factor to -5) although these conditions could adversely affect human observation.

During their 16-day stay here, the longspurs were seen by Harry and Edmund LeGrand on 19 February and by Mike Browne on 22 February. Repeated observations revealed at least six male birds plus eight or nine female and immature male longspurs present with the larks. These individuals ranged within .7 mile of where they were first discovered, a fairly small area considering the hundreds of acres of similar habitat in the vicinity.

Environmental factors (such as a major food shortage) are not believed to be a factor in the longspurs' appearance this far south because their occurrence in North Carolina in the winter of 1971-1972 was not widespread. It is possible that the species may be a regular, but rare, winter visitor in the state, having been largely overlooked in previous years. It should be looked for, especially in large Horned Lark flocks in the northern sections of the state in winter.

Pearson, Brimley, and Brimley (*Birds of North Carolina*, 1959) cite only six occasions in which this species has been recorded in the state, most of these in the early 1900s in coastal or mountainous localities, the latest in 1946. There is also a recent record of one on the Bodie-Pea Island Christmas Bird Count (*Chat*, 36:22). It appears the Occoneechee Neck sightings represent the largest number ever found at one time in the state and also the first interior coastal plain record.