

SOME RARE BIRDS AT STRATHROY, ONTARIO

By A. A. WOOD

THE FIRST snow storms of late fall are always closely watched for rare birds which may be driven to cover or to the fields for food, in their southward movement. The night of November 10, 1926, a heavy fall of snow came, continuing throughout the night, in the morning becoming a blinding storm, making it difficult to see clearly across a twenty-acre field. In this morning's (November 11) trip, the first bird observed was a Marsh Hawk, which on closer approach was seen to be hovering over a flock of Snow Buntings. These flocks are always given close scrutiny, when encountered, for Lapland Longspurs; but before reaching these a flock of about thirty horned larks was found feeding on a little knoll near the edge of the field. The first shot secured two Eastern Horned Larks (*Otocoris alpestris alpestris*), two Hoyt's Horned Larks (*O. a. hoyti*) and one Lapland Longspur (*Calcarius lapponicus*), three birds I had never, in all my field work, seen alive before.

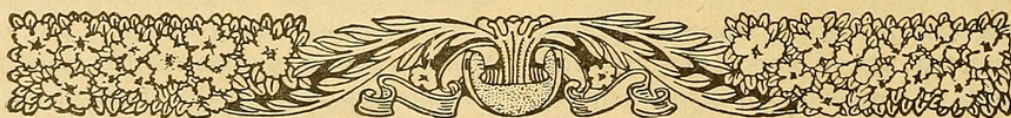
The flock, on being carefully looked over appeared to contain about 200 Snow Buntings, 30 Horned Larks, 5 Lapland Longspurs and 2 Vesper Sparrows, with the Marsh Hawk hovering about. After being disturbed the Horned Larks and Longspurs left the Snow Buntings, the Longspurs being most restless of all, circling the field four or five times before alighting, although many false landings were made by coming down to a few inches from the snow and rising again.

The Longspurs on the ground could never be seen feeding, even at twenty-five yards; the snow was very light and loose, about eight inches deep, and the birds seemed to be feeding at the base of the weeds under the snow; their location could be told by the movements of the weed tops. The notes had similar qualities to some of the Bunting flock notes, but were quite distinctive, uttered only while on the wing. This morning 2 male *hoyti*, 3 male *alpestris*, and a male and female *lapponicus* (in immature plumage) were

taken. The next morning a few larks were located picking sand from a wind-blown knoll; 4 male *praticola* and one male *alpestris* were collected; the flock contained one longspur. Close watch was kept in the locality, but no more larks appeared until the 23rd, when two males and one female *alpestris* were secured.

Immediately after getting the large larks on November 11, I wrote Roger T. Hedley, Duncrief (fifteen miles north of here) who is always untiring in his efforts to record new local birds, to be on the lookout for Horned Larks. On November 23 he fired one shot into a flock, securing 2 male *hoyti* and 2 male *alpestris*. These he gave to Mr. W. E. Saunders, London, who sent them, together with some of my skins, to Dr. H. C. Oberholser, Washington, D.C., for positive identification.

In view of the extreme difficulty of finding the large larks in Southwestern Ontario a few short notes on the locality of these captures may be of interest. Strathroy, near the west side of Middlesex County, is midway between Lakes Huron and Erie, nearly straight south of the eastern shore of Lake Huron, a distinct migratory route particularly in the fall. One mile east of the town are the fields where the larks were found. The locality is very clear and open, the woodlots being small and widely separated. The soil being all blow sand, most of the plowing is left until spring, with the result that rank weeds are left in profusion—ideal feeding grounds for winter seed-eating birds. Besides the weeds there is always an abundance of sweet clover and alfalfa left in the fields. The favourite foods of the larks appear to be (in order of preference): Ragweed (*Ambrosia artemisiæfolia*), Pigweed (*Amarantus retroflexus*), Green Foxtail (*Setaria viridis*), and Lamb's-quarters (*Chenopodium album*). The suitability of this particular group of fields to larks is shown by the abundance of *praticola* here every spring, particularly during February and March.





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