

Juvenile Horned Lark

Tony Leukering

Birders visiting the Colorado plains in June and July are rarely confused by juvenal-plumaged Horned Larks, as the species is abundant there and juveniles are to be expected in summer. But a surpris-

ing number of birders are taken aback by the same plumage in April—and the confusion can (and does) lead to misidentifications. Sprague's Pipit is the chief species for which these juvenile larks are mistaken, but it is not the only species.

Horned Lark breeding season

In Colorado's lowlands, Horned Lark is the first passerine species to initiate breeding in the year, lagging behind only Rock Pigeon, Eurasian Collared-Dove, Great Horned Owl, Bald Eagle, and sometimes Red-tailed Hawk for overall first-breeder honors.

In early, warm springs, the species initiates courtship and pairing as early as February, a time at which Colorado still hosts untold thousands of wintering Horned Larks originating from farther north. Because of the species' very abundance, most observers pay scant attention to Horned Larks where they are so common, so they may not notice this change in behavior when the calendar says that it is still winter. Though Bailey and Niedrach (1965) state that the species nests "upon the prairies from mid-April into early July" and the first Colorado Breeding Bird Atlas (Kingery 1998) lists nest-building dates of 21 April to 12 June, that same Atlas also lists the span of dates for fledged young as 7 April to 22 August. This discrepancy in Atlas data is due to a methodological error for recording dates for breeding behaviors in that project.¹

While the Atlas fledged-young date span is probably close to accurate, I would guess that at low elevations, the earliest nests just might produce fledglings before April, though the absolute number of such nests is probably extremely low. Thus one could run across juvenal-plumaged Horned Larks in Colorado at any time from late March into September, with the earliest birds being found at low elevations and, probably, the latest ones at high elevations.

Spring and summer Sprague's Pipit reports from Colorado

During my 13 years in Colorado, no fewer than five spring seasons saw reports of Sprague's Pipit from near the foothill edge in April or early May. At least two of those reports were shown to be referable to juvenile Horned Larks. In addition, the Colorado Bird Records Committee also reviewed at least one August report of Sprague's Pipit from the alpine zone (Leukering & Semo 2003), and that report, too, was probably referable to juvenile Horned Lark, as Sprague's Pipit is not a tundra breeder.

While Sprague's Pipit may, indeed, be a regular migrant through the Colorado

¹ Instead of retaining all information on date and behavior, the Atlas retained only the "highest" breeding code in any given block, along with the date that the indicated behavior was noted. Thus, if a Horned Lark (or other species) was found building a nest in late March and then fledged young were noted in early April in the same block, only the fledged young would have been entered in the Atlas database, because they represented a "higher" breeding code than nest-building. The current Colorado Breeding Bird Atlas will retain all data to avoid this type of error.

plains in spring (as it is in fall), I would suggest that it would be quite rare as far west as the Front Range counties—thus, while the species is of possible occurrence there, any report should be considered with caution.

Identification

On the back cover, the top two pictures are of juvenile Horned Larks, and the bottom picture is of a Sprague's Pipit. The lark in the left photo is slightly younger than the lark in the right photo, as the left bird apparently has not started its pre-formative molt, while the right one has already attained a strong suggestion of an adult's black malar mark. While the left one (from California) is of a subspecies that does not breed in Colorado, it still shows the scaly upperparts and plain face typical of juvenile Horned Larks, but also considered such important field characters in identifying Sprague's Pipit.

One of the best characters separating larks from all North American pipits is primary projection (pp, the distance that the longest primary projects beyond the tip of the longest tertial on the folded wing); note that all three back-cover pictures have this character highlighted. Larks, in general, and Horned Larks in particular, have a long primary projection. In Horned Lark, this distance is about equal to half the length of the longest tertial. Pipits have very short primary projections, and Sprague's Pipit's longest primary barely projects past the longest tertial, with the distance being less than even an eighth of the length of the longest tertial. In fact, at least some individuals show no projection at all.

Apart from their longer primary projection, juvenal-plumaged Horned Larks also sport obvious white spots on the scapular tips, thicker-based and darker bills than pipits, and generally darker legs (but these can also be pink). Sprague's Pipits have pink legs, paler and thinner bills, and blackish tertials.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Graham Etherington, Kevin Karlson, and Martin Meyers for the use of their pictures for this article. Thanks also to Larry Semo for reviewing a previous draft of the manuscript.

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Juvenile Horned Lark, Sierra Valley, Plumas County, CA, 10 July 2005. Photo by Martin Meyers



Juvenile Horned Lark, Pawnee National Grassland, Weld County, CO, early July 2002. Photo by Kevin Karlson



Sprague's Pipit, near Salton Sea, Imperial County, CA, 17 January 2009. Photo by Graham Etherington