

The Horned Lark

Crawford County's Winter Bird

By Warren Uxley

The Horned Lark (*Eremophiia alpestris*) is one of those birds that would never have been seen in Crawford County 250 years ago - there was no suitable habitat for it before the changes brought by the first European settlers. Horned Larks thrive in the most barren of landscapes; deserts, the short grass prairies adjacent to the Rocky Mountains, the Sagebrush flats of the Great Basin, the Arctic Tundra, literally any bare open terrain; these are its favorite haunts. Here in Ohio corn and soybean stubble, while looking uninviting to the vast majority of creatures, is perfect habitat for the Horned Lark.

A wide-ranging bird, it can be found in North Africa, Eurasia and most of North America. Any species that is distributed over such a wide geographic range will show a great deal of morphological diversity (body size, color, bill shape and wing length). In North America, authorities recognize 21 different subspecies.

In the 19th century the "Prairie" subspecies (*E. a. praticola*) rapidly expanded its range eastward as the forests and tall-grass prairies were cleared and the land plowed for agriculture. An early breeder, the Horned Larks will be sitting on eggs in mid-March and can rear up to three broods per year.

The onset of fall brings with it a fundamental change in the social structure. Breeding pairs break up and flocking behavior becomes the norm. The numbers also balloon at this time because two other subspecies begin to arrive as they leave their more northern breeding grounds. Nesting in northern Ontario, Labrador and Newfoundland, the "nominant" race (*E. a. alpestris*) differs from the Crawford County residents in that they have yellow throats and eyebrows while the locals have white throats and eyebrows. Lesser numbers of the Hoyt subspecies (*E. a. hoyti*) trickle in from the central Canadian high Arctic with their pale yellow throats, white eyebrows and their overall more subdued coloring.

The sparse, bare and exposed agricultural fields present a bleak prospect to the casual observer but the Horned Larks make a living there. Eating seeds, the birds move through the fields in flocks that number in the hundreds twittering cheerfully as they move.

While the birds will take advantage of any grains that the combines miss, much of what they eat are seeds from a few non-native annual grasses. The Foxtail grasses in particular make up a significant portion of their diet.

Farmers may not like seeing the Giant Foxtail grass (*Setaria faberi*) in their fields but the very act of plowing the ground creates the ideal situation for it to thrive. The Yellow Foxtail (*Setaria pumila*) abundantly borders all of our rural roads because the county's mowing schedule favors that species. Foxtails have a strategy that is based on exploiting disturbed ground. Plowing once a year or mowing once a month creates opportunity for these and other grasses that need disturbance.

For the Horned Larks the Foxtails are a gift from heaven. These grasses produce prodigious amounts of very large seeds that the birds find irresistible. When winter storms cover the fields with snow, large numbers of Horned Larks can be seen foraging where the plows have cleared the road edges exposing the seeds of the Yellow Foxtails.

To get a glimpse of these birds simply pull over next to any corn or soybean field this winter and listen for the twittering calls. There is a good chance that they will be there. If you are lucky you might get to see some Lapland Longspurs or Snow Buntings as well; more about them later.

