

CONTENTS

VOLUME 31(4), December 1998

EDITORIAL	1
BROWN, CJ. Redbilled Firefinches breeding in Windhoek	2
KAESTNER, PG. Guide to the larks of Namibia: Part one	3
HINES, C. Birding down under	11
OSBORNE, T & L. Etosha bird notes II	18
BRANCH, W. Feeding observations on raptors in Etosha	20
SHORT NOTES	21
MENDELSON, J. Albino Gabar Goshawk in Windhoek	22
DUFFIELD-HARDING, J. Tsaobis Leopard Park field trip	23
OSBORNE, STRINGER & WEARNE. Walvis Bay wader weekend	25
ACTIVITIES	
Proposed programme for 1999	27

EDITORIAL

Summer's definitely here with the arrival of migrants and the promise of rain, and that means that we're nearing the end of yet another year. This is the fourth and final edition of *Lanioturdus* for the year. As many of you are aware, Chris Hines is roaming the globe at the moment and has trustingly left me (Carole Roberts) in charge of getting this edition out. (Hmm, I'm afraid the "Short Notes" are a little short this edition.) After having spent a month "down under" birding in Oz, Chris is now "up North" studying for a couple of months in the Netherlands. However, he hasn't forgotten us or *Lanioturdus* and submitted an article on his trip to Australia which mentions all sorts of winged wonders – frogmouths and friarbirds, parrots and pittas (to mention just a few). I have a feeling, though, that we might expect a much shorter article on his trip to the Netherlands!

There's no excuse for ignoring many of those LBJs in 1999! Peter Kaestner has put together a guide to the larks of Namibia for us. It will be published in two parts, the first of which is in this edition. He has tried to make it easy for us by highlighting the characteristics and range of each species found here, and has provided a field key as well. Peter stresses that the key should be regarded as incomplete because it needs to be put to the test (yes, that's our job), and that he would appreciate any comments to help improve it. So, birders, get out there and hit those larks!

I don't know about the rest of you, but I certainly didn't get out and about as much as I would have liked to this year. In this issue we have published a preliminary list of activities and outings for 1999 so we can all plan our trips early. If anyone has any ideas, requests or queries in this line, they should contact Dieter or Jeremy. See you out there!

That really just leaves me to extend heartfelt thanks to all those who've contributed to the journal over the past year – it can't happen without you – you've been great! Wishing you all a wonderful Christmas and a prosperous, bird-filled New Year!

REDBILLED FIREFINCHES BREEDING IN WINDHOEK

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In a recent article entitled "The Pavlovian Phenomenon" (1997: *Lanioturdus* 30(4): 32–37) I reported on the presence of free-ranging Redbilled Firefinches *Lagonosticta senegala* in my garden in Windhoek West. The distribution of this species in Namibia is confined to the extreme north of the country, from the Kunene River across the northern Cuvelai system at about 18° S to the Okavango River and into Eastern Caprivi (Harrison *et al.* (eds) 1997, *The atlas of southern African birds*. Vol. 2). The birds in Windhoek are most probably escaped cage birds.

When first seen, some three years ago, there were three birds, one male and two females. For the first two years we regularly saw either two or three birds together. They were secretive and shy, and effective at avoiding predation. An attack by a Gabar Goshawk *Micronisus gabar* on a mixed group of feeding birds saw the firefinches making off first, and disappearing deep into thick foliage while the Gabar chased after a House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*.

In late February 1998 four firefinches were seen. Two were young birds begging from an adult male and a female bird. The two young were similar to the female but had no red on the face and no white spots on the chest. These young birds have survived until the present time (November 1998) and four firefinches are now regularly seen, one male and three females. All are now in adult plumage.

This record is of interest because (a) it shows that Redbilled Firefinches can survive some 700 km south of their normal range in an urban environment where gardens are watered and planted with trees and shrubs, and where seed is provided to birds on a regular basis; (b) the firefinches can breed and raise young successfully, thereby being able to establish and potentially maintain a wild population in Windhoek (and possibly other towns), and extend their natural range; and (c) it provides us with a breeding record for

the species, with egg-laying having taken place in late January, about one month after the first good rains of the season, and in the main nesting period recorded for this species in southern Africa (Maclean 1993: *Roberts' birds of southern Africa*).

It remains to be seen whether the Redbilled Firefinch will survive and increase to become a common garden bird in Windhoek.

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO THE LARKS OF NAMIBIA PART ONE – INTRODUCTION/OVERVIEW

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The 20 plus species of larks recorded from Namibia are examined with the goal of helping beginner birders identify this fascinating group. The first part is an overview with keys and tables to help identify the species; part two will give more information on each species, including tips on finding the larks in Namibia.

Introduction

While not as rich as some equatorial countries, Namibia's avifauna displays a high level of endemism. Spectacular near endemics such as the White-tailed Shrike, Damara Rockrunner, and Herero Chat draw birders from around the globe to Namibia's savannas and deserts. The uniqueness of Namibia's birdlife is not appreciated by many, however, due to a tendency for some birders to overlook the larks as "little brown jobs".

I must admit that I have never completely understood why so many people are reluctant to sort out larks. It may be because of their drab colouration which reminds one of a pipit or cisticola. (Now if you really want a try to sort out a mess, tackle those two genera!) Though superficially similar, larks are fundamentally different than the other confusing birds. For one, they have evolved into several genera. To a taxonomist, that raises interesting questions about the extent of genetic divergence between

different forms and species limits. The second thing about larks is that being largely terrestrial they have evolved to match the colour of the substrate on which they live, producing a bewildering array of forms. (If you want a good idea what I am talking about, just take a look at the range maps in Mackworth-Praed and Grant's *African Handbook of Birds, Series Two – Birds of the Southern Third of Africa* or the races of larks listed in an old Roberts.) One thing in our favour – larks tend to be conspicuous, especially when breeding. They are often feeding out in the open, or singing from a bush or in the air. Their songs are often easy clues to their identification.

Since I am only a taxonomist in my dreams (I'll leave the real work to Peter Ryan, Keith Barnes, *et al.*), I will focus here on trying to present the larks of Namibia in a manner that makes them more palatable to beginning birders. One important plea: Lark taxonomy is quite fluid, with the anticipated publication in January of Peter Ryan's revision of the Long-billed Lark complex and other ongoing taxonomic work. You can contribute to the knowledge of larks. Take good field notes of what you see and, if possible get tape recordings of the songs of the larks you identify. It helps if you can pinpoint the exact location of your observation by the use of topo maps or a Global Positioning System receiver. Do report your sightings to an ornithologist (preferably Dr Ryan at the Percy Fitzpatrick Institute).

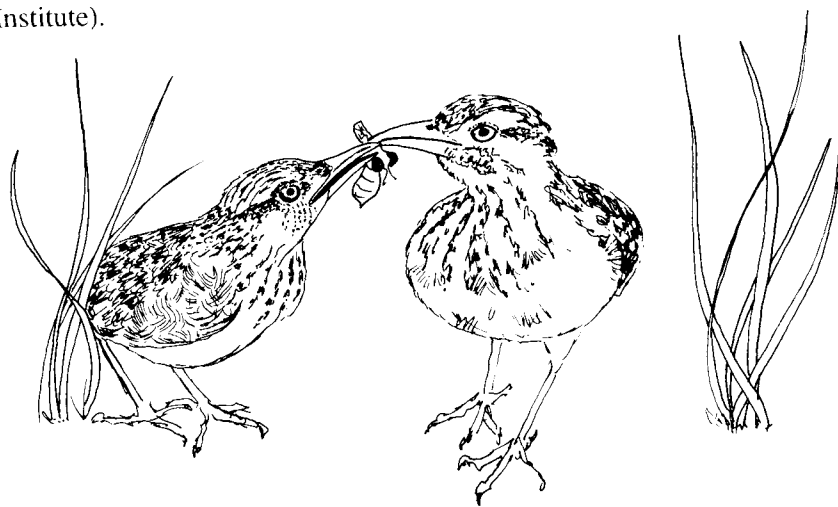


Table 1 gives a list of the 21 species of larks that have been recorded in Namibia. (One, the Bimaculated Lark, is only known from a September 1930 record; it has not been seen in Namibia since. Recent analysis has indicated that the bird may have been an escaped cage bird. Since it has apparently been recorded again from southern Africa recently and it is an abundant winter visitor in Sudan, it should still be looked for.) Additional forms (which may be good species) will be discussed as we go along. Please note that the information discussed here only pertains to Namibian species. It may or may not be true of all these birds in the world.

Table 2 lists the generic characteristics. This is followed by a field key designed to help you sort them out. (The key is a work in progress. Please use it and report any problems/improvements to the Editor.) A second paper will discuss identification hints for all of the species found in Namibia along with information on how to find them.

What makes a lark?

One of the secrets to success here is ensuring that you are looking at a lark in the first place. Because of the diversity that I mentioned earlier, characterizing larks is somewhat difficult. They are small-to-medium sized terrestrial passerine birds with medium-to-long legs, medium-to-short square tails, and relatively stout bills. They are usually cryptically coloured, blending into the arid substrate upon which they spend most of their time. One way of defining a lark is by eliminating the competition. I'll assume for argument's sake that we can eliminate the terrestrial non-passerine birds which possibly could be confused with a lark, i.e. dikkop, courser, quail, and button quail. The first group of passerines which could be confused with larks are thrushes, chats and robins. The chats, especially, can be quite confusing since they share the lark's trait of having evolved to match the desert soil in colouration. This is especially true in Namib forms of the Tractrac Chat, which is very similar to Gray's Lark. Chats, however, can reliably be separated from larks by their thin bills, and frequent habit of flicking their wings forward upon alighting. Robins which might be confusing, differ from larks in their longer tails, shorter legs, and thinner bills. They also tend to be skulking species that live in the interior of bushes and near cover. Larks are usually much more obvious.

There are a couple of types of warblers that could be confused, but their tails are either too long or rounded, and their bills are never thick enough for a lark. Speaking of thick bills, I guess we need to eliminate the weavers and other finches. These brown birds (at least the female and eclipse plumaged individuals) are all dumpier than larks and have very stout (short) bills. Larks are never yellow or pure red, like weavers and bishops can be. Chat Flycatchers could turn a head, but no lark that big is completely unstreaked.

Pipits are the biggest pain. Both because they are superficially similar to larks, but also because they themselves are so difficult to identify. Pipits share larks' mostly terrestrial lifestyle, square tails and cryptic colouration, but they differ in significant ways. First, pipits almost always have longer tails than larks. Most importantly, pipits, which are all in one genus, *Anthus*, are fairly uniform. (Remember they're hard to tell apart.) They have uniform, straight and relatively slender bills. They rarely, if ever, sing. The pipits that look like larks almost always have pale or white outer tail feathers. Finally, they often bob their tails like wagtails (to which they are closely related).

The last confusing species is the appropriately named Larklike Bunting. I must say that they have made me look twice on several occasions. The best characters for separating them are the longish tail (all larks this small have quite short tails), the almost complete absence of streaking below (the upperparts and breast are pretty uniform), and propensity to form large flocks (only Finchlarks share this trait, and they're pretty distinctive). Though they sometimes associate with larks, Larklike Buntings usually live in somewhat rockier habitats than most larks. And, they are shaped like buntings.

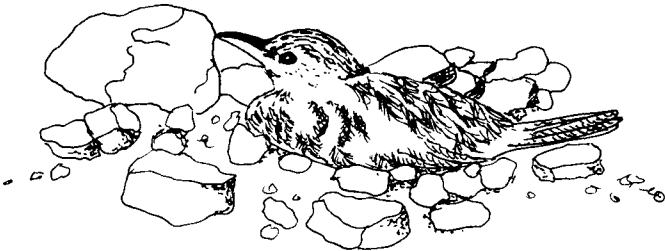
Well, by now, you are probably asking if there is not just one thing that can be used to separate larks from other birds. Well, they can be differentiated from other passerines (songbirds) by the scaling pattern of their "legs". Actually, the leg that you see is called a tarsometatarsus or sometimes just tarsus for short. The back of a lark's "leg" is rounded and covered with small scales, as opposed to large plates. Have fun trying to see that in the

field.

Table 1: An annotated list of the larks of Namibia

Terrestrial larks		Namibian range
Large larks		
Longbilled Lark	<i>Certhilauda curvirostris</i>	
*Benguella Longbilled Lark	<i>Certhilauda (c.) kaokensis</i> (incl. <i>benguensis</i>)	north and west of Brandberg
Karoo Longbilled Lark	<i>Certhilauda (c.) subcoronata</i> (incl. <i>bradshawi</i> and <i>damarensis</i>)	Spitzkoppe south, not coastal
Cape Longbilled Lark	<i>Certhilauda (c.) falcistrostris</i>	coast near of Oranjemund?
Dusky Lark	<i>Mirafra (Pinarocorys) nigricans</i>	northern half; summer only
Medium larks		
Thick(Large)billed Lark	<i>Galerida magnirostris</i>	Karoo along Orange River
*Barlow's Lark	<i>Certhilauda barlowi</i>	south of Koichab River, Aus
Red Lark	<i>Certhilauda burra</i>	two records, far south
Karoo Lark	<i>Certhilauda albescens</i>	possible in far south
*Dune Lark	<i>Certhilauda erythrochlamys</i>	Kuiseb to Koichab Rivers
Bimaculated Lark	<i>Melanocorypha bimaculata</i>	one record Swakopmund; escape?
Spikeheeled Lark	<i>Chersomanes albofasciata</i>	throughout except north-east
Redcapped Lark	<i>Calandrella cinerea</i>	scattered throughout
Small larks		
*Gray's Lark	<i>Ammomanes grayi</i>	gravel plains of Namib Desert
Sclater's Lark	<i>Spizocorys sclateri</i>	south-east, local in Nama Karoo
Stark's Lark	<i>Spizocorys (Eremalauda) starki</i>	west to south; low rainfall
Pinkbilled Lark	<i>Spizocorys conirostris</i>	local, Etosha to Keetmanshoop
Chestnutbacked Finchlark	<i>Eremopterix leucotis</i>	northern half of Namibia only
Blackeared Finchlark	<i>Eremopterix australis</i>	southern Namibia, Nama Karoo
Greybacked Finchlark	<i>Eremopterix verticalis</i>	widespread
'Bush' Larks		Namibian Range
Note: Sorted, generally, larger to smaller. None found in bushless Namib		
Rufousnaped Lark	<i>Mirafra africana</i>	northern half of Namibia, widespread
Fawncoloured Lark	<i>Mirafra africanoides</i>	red Kalahari sands throughout
Clapper Lark	<i>Mirafra apiata</i>	scattered throughout
Flappet Lark	<i>Mirafra rufocinnamomea</i>	far north and Caprivi only
Monotonous Lark	<i>Mirafra passerina</i>	northern half of Namibia, local
Sabota (Bradfield's) Lark	<i>Mirafra sabota</i>	widespread

* Endemics and near endemics to Namibia



As I mentioned before, one of the good things about lark identification is that the group comes in many different forms, or genera. Let's finish the introduction by looking at the nine or ten genera into which Namibian larks are presently classified. First, let's look at all the genera together in a table sorted by character.

Genus	Bill	Size	Colours	Habits/Other
<i>Certhilauda</i> (Longbilled larks)	long, curved	big	brown, variable	T; bare, rocky ground; long tail
<i>Chersomanes</i> * (Spikeheeled)	long, thin, curved	medium	rich, white throat	T; short tail, white corners
<i>Mirafr</i> a (Dusky) (<i>Pinarocorys</i> *)	medium	big	dark above, bold below, face	T; thrush-like , summer migrant
<i>Certhilauda</i> (Redbacked larks)	medium, curved	medium	tan to reddish	T; sand dunes , rarely karoo
<i>Galerida</i> * (Thick (Large)billed)	medium, heavy, yellow base	medium	dark, streaked	Karoo veld west of Rosh Pinah
<i>Mirafr</i> a (Bush)	medium	medium to small	brown, red wing	bushes
<i>Calandrella</i> * (Redcapped)	medium, dark	small to medium	variable, reddish pectoral patches	T; red cap ; plain below
<i>Melanocorphy</i> a* (Bimaculated)	medium	small to medium	greyish; black pectoral patches	T; white tail tip , 1 record, Swakop
<i>Spizocorys</i> (Stark's) (<i>Eremalauda</i> *)	short to medium	small	tan, streaked	T; short tail, crest
<i>Spizocorys</i> Pinkbilled/Sclater's	short, pale	small	tan, streaked	T; short tail; not Kalahari / Namib
<i>Eremopterix</i> (Finchlarks)	short, very thick	small	bold, with black	T; large flocks dark rocks, roads
<i>Ammomanes</i> * (Gray's)	short, pale	small	pale , plain, white	T; black tail tip

(Most important characters are in **bold**)

1	Primarily terrestrial, only occasionally singing or perching in bushes or trees. Arboreal, perching in bushes and trees, occasionally feeding on the ground (<i>Mirafra</i>)	2 21
2	Size and shape of a Kurrichane or Olive Thrush Smaller than an Olive Thrush, with a proportionally shorter tail.	3 6
3	Long, curved bill; colouration generally tan or brown with indistinct streaking Medium bill; dark unstreaked back; boldly streaked below with patterned face Dusky Lark	4
4	North-west, Brandberg Mountain to Angola border . Benguella Longbilled Lark South of Brandberg	5
5	Generally interior south of Spitzkoppe to Orange River . Karoo Longbilled Lark Possible along coast near Oranjemund (larger, browner than KLBL) Longbilled Lark	
6	Sparrow sized; bill very thick; usually in large flocks; (fincharks) Bill not very thick; size small or medium	7 10
7	Belly black (restricted to centre of belly in females) Belly not black, streaked, with all black and brown males female Blackeared Finchlark	8
8	Ear patches white Ears and entire underparts black, dark brown above; south-east male Blackeared Finchlark	9
9	Back mainly grey; widespread and common Back mainly chestnut; local in the north only	Greybacked Finchlark Chestnutbacked Finchlark
10	Bill long and thin; tail short, with white corners, upright stance, white throat Spikeheeled Lark Bill not long and thin	11
11	Top of head dark red, contrasting with brown back; belly white Top of head not red, or if so, same colour as red back	Redcapped Lark 12

- 12 Bill medium and thick with yellow base; heavily streaked; far south
..... **Thick(Large)billed Lark**
Bill not as above, i.e. medium and thick with a yellow base 13
- 13 With distinct black pectoral patches; white tipped tail; greyish colour
..... **Bimaculated Lark**
Without black pectoral patches 14
- 14 Medium sized; usually reddish above; inhabit dunes or Karoo ('redbacked'
larks) 15
Small sized; with small bill and relatively short tail (*Spizocorys* and
Ammomanes) 18
- 15 Ventral streaking extends on to lower belly; along South African border in
Karoo **Karoo Lark**
Ventral streaking only on chest 16
- 16 Chest streaking indistinct/lacking; tan above; between Kuiseb and Koichab
Rivers **Dune Lark**
Chest streaking present; redder, not tan above 17
- 17 Chest streaks black; bill medium; south of Koichab River and Aus **Barlow's
Lark**
Chest streaking heavier but less distinct; redder above, bill thicker; on S.A.
border **Red Lark**
- 18 Back unstreaked; overall very pale; tail with broken black bar, white at base
..... **Gray's Lark**
Back streaked brown 19
- 19 Crested; pale brown; in Namib stony desert and grass; common and widespread
..... **Stark's Lark**
No crest; darker above and below 20
- 20 Short, conical, pink bill; very local from Etosha Pan to Keetmanshoop,
pans **Pinkbilled Lark**
Bigger bill, lower mandible upturned; black mark under eye; open Nama
Karoo **Sclater's Lark**
- 21 Wings with chestnut or reddish edgings 22
Wings brown; distinct supercilium gives capped appearance; common .. **Sabota
Lark**

- 22 Underparts richly coloured, with contrasting white throat 23
Belly white, little streaking 25
- 23 No crest; smaller, with short tail; gives flight display with beating wings 24
Crested; large, stocky, and richly coloured; simple song; flaps wings
perched **Rufousnaped Lark**
- 24 Narrow white edge to tail; widespread; wing-flapping flight followed by
whistle **Clapper Lark**
Buff edge to tail; only in far north and Caprivi; flight display lacks whistle
..... **Flappet Lark**
- 25 White near eye; red Kalahari sands; song a series ending in a buzzy note
..... **Fawncoloured Lark**
No white by eye; browner; monotonous "Bangladesh" call; local
nomadic **Monotonous Lark**

Acknowledgements

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BIRDING DOWN UNDER

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Australia has always been high on my list of birding priorities – home to nearly 300 endemic bird species and filled with all sorts of interesting things like kookaburras, kangaroos and koalas. The problem is where to start! Australia is huge, a continent and a single country with a diversity of birds and habitats to go with this scale of things. I decided that the tropical north-east was the place to start, based on the endemics there and the access to other areas of interest such as the Great Barrier Reef. In October this year I spent a month travelling around this part of the country between Cairns and the northern tip of Cape York.