

Lark Sparrow *Chondestes grammacus*



Folk Name: (none)

Status: Migrant, Winter Visitor

Abundance: Rare

Habitat: Fields, lawns

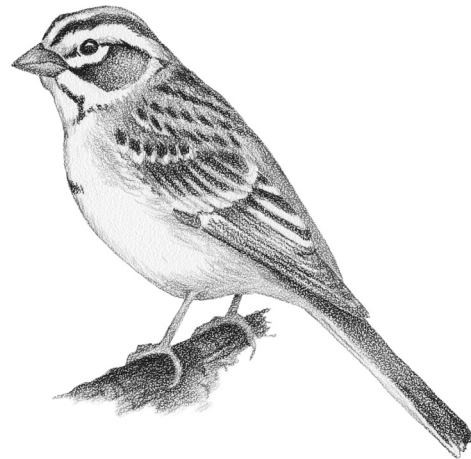
The Lark Sparrow is a breeding bird of western North America. It prefers to nest in early successional habitat like brushy pastures, prairies, farmlands, and roadsides. Within these areas, they prefer sites that are interspersed with bare substrate. The Lark Sparrow is primarily a casual to rare migrant in the Carolinas, and sightings have been declining for decades in the eastern United States.

This large long-tailed sparrow has been found as a rare and erratic breeding bird in some eastern states. The nesting habitat of this species is ephemeral in nature. The habitat is lost after a few seasons unless regular management is conducted to keep it in its early successional state.

H.H. Brimley collected a nest with four eggs in Wake County on July 24, 1890, providing the only confirmation of nesting in the Carolinas for almost a century. In the summer of 1981, Doug McNair made a “shocking discovery” of a breeding population of Lark Sparrows near the town of Derby in Richmond County. It was the first nesting confirmed in the Carolinas in the twentieth century. He located three or four breeding pairs and a nest with five young on 22 May. Nesting was confirmed at Fort Bragg in Hoke County in 1984. Nesting was confirmed at Camp Mackall in Scotland County in 1988 and has been sporadic there since. Jay Carter found one Lark Sparrow near Emery in the Sandhills portion of Montgomery County on May 15, 1988, but no evidence of breeding



Lark Sparrow in Charlotte backyard on March 20, 2013.
(John Scavetto)



was reported. Nesting has been suspected at Fort Bragg as late as 2016.

Possible nesting was first reported in South Carolina in 1987. Robin Carter reported two birds on territory near Lucknow in Lee County, SC, in late June and early July, but “no strong evidence of nesting was detected.” Nesting was first confirmed in South Carolina in 1995, when a pair was observed feeding young in Aiken County. The second confirmation of breeding in that state came from Chesterfield County in 2008. An adult Lark Sparrow was photographed feeding young at the Carolina Sandhills NWR. Lark Sparrows have been reported there almost every year since.

We have a half dozen reports of Lark Sparrows sighted in the Central Carolinas in the twentieth century. A lone Lark Sparrow was reported seen during the count week of the Stanly Spring Bird Count held April 24, 1971. Regrettably, no details were published with this sight report.

Heathy and Claire Walker found a single Lark Sparrow in a hedgerow amongst a flock of White-crowned, Vesper, and White-throated Sparrows, in Cleveland County on January 6, 1984. The bird was observed for 15 minutes in a known “Dickcissel breeding spot,” located about 3 miles northeast of Kings Mountain, NC. Editors noted this unusual bird was “well described” by the observers. On December 28, 1985, David Wright sighted one in south Charlotte that remained through January 11, 1986. This was the only Lark Sparrow ever counted on a Charlotte Christmas count.

Taylor Piephoff discovered one at the Irwin Creek WWTP in Charlotte on August 16, 1991. Judy Walker reported a flock of five Lark Sparrows at Pee Dee NWR during the Christmas Bird Count on January 4, 1998.

These birds were later relocated by several others. This count was described at the time as “a record total for the species during the winter.” Taylor Piephoff reported one at the McAlpine Greenway in Charlotte on April 24, 1998.

On September 8, 2003, Piephoff found one in Mint Hill Park off Highway 218. The bird was foraging in the short grass around the volleyball pits. Johnathan Cooley

and several others reported a pair of Lark Sparrows were found on the Christmas Bird Count at Pee Dee NWR on December 29, 2007. Lee Weber photographed a Lark Sparrow in his backyard in Charlotte on February 2, 2013. The bird disappeared a couple days later and then reappeared there on 18 March. It was seen and photographed by many observers.