

# Mystery photographs

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**91** What we have in plate 89 (and repeated here) is a robust lark, standing on a rock, with the breeze creating a 'black hole' in its breast and perhaps exaggerating its crest. From the relative size of its bill and its legs, it is not a small bird, and thus we are led quickly to the larger, crested larks of West Palearctic distribution, namely those in the genera *Galerida*, *Lullula* and *Alauda*. For a moment, an apparently bold supercilium hints at the Woodlark *L. arborea*, but the absence of that species' classic black-and-white greater primary coverts—and that thumping bill—prevents any lingering over that theory. Could it be a Skylark *A. arvensis* in an odd pose? No; that species is actually rather small-headed and light-billed, and surely even the ruffled breast would show more of the well-striated pattern that is so characteristic of it. The heart sinks and the mind fogs, for clearly we have to deal with a *Galerida* lark, and that is never an easy task. The genus has seven members in the world, but only two tease observers in the West Palearctic: the Crested Lark *G. cristata* and the Thekla Lark *G. theklae*. There is little relief in this fact, however, since the former radiates into 17 races and the latter into five forms in that region alone. Furthermore, the characters that distinguish them are not constant, their morphology being extremely pliable and reflecting their habitat tones. Happily, the awful pair displays neither full sympatry of distribution nor complete habitat overlap. In this case, the rock is a piece of Bahrain, so we can relax in the knowledge that the nearest Thekla Larks are in far west Egypt and highland Ethiopia. The bird, photographed by Dr M. R. Hill, is



**110.** Thekla Lark *Galerida theklae*, Portugal, May 1965 (*A. N. H. Peach*)

a Crested Lark, of the racial cline *altirostris-magna*. Finding supporting field characters in a single photograph to maintain mere geographical elimination is not easy, but the spike-like crest, the length and depth of the bill, the unmarked ear-coverts, the lack of obvious black splashes on the breast feathers overlapping the lesser wing-coverts, and the hint of an obvious extension of primaries beyond the tertials all steer towards the

**111.** Thekla Lark *Galerida theklae*, Menorca, October 1983 (*Brian Thomas*)



Crested and away from the Thekla Lark.

Where most observers will meet the two species, in Iberia and Northwest Africa, patient stalking should allow more distinguishing characters to be seen. Since studies in the early 1960s, the most trustworthy have been taken to be build (with the Thekla the smaller, lighter and narrower-winged), bill length (with the Thekla's 20% shorter), neck and breast spots (with the Thekla's more obvious and more extensive, reaching the nape), underwing colour (rufous on the Crested, but grey on the Thekla) and voice (with the Thekla's call di- or tri-syllabic and less ringing in tone). For further discussion of these differences and others, please see my notes of 1965 (*Brit. Birds* 58: 337-341). It would be good if someone could do better in time for the texts for *BWP*, vol. 5, which I have just started! D. I. M. WALLACE



112. Mystery photograph 92. Identify the hooded gull. Answer next month