



Lesser Short-toed Lark in Dorset: new to Britain

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During the morning of 2nd May 1992, IRD left the bird observatory at Portland Bill, Dorset, to search the 'Top Fields' for migrants. He was accompanied by a Young Ornithologists' Club group, of which he was an assistant leader. At about 10.10 GMT, he noticed a small, pale passerine as it flew away over a large barley field in the dry limestone valley opposite the observatory. He followed it through binoculars but moved on after failing to relocate it with a telescope during five minutes of scanning. At 17.40, he returned to the field with the YOC group while the leaders, Anna Hughes and Charles Wilkins, prepared dinner. The odd bird again flew out from near the path. This time, it settled some 40 m away and was viewable on the ground. It was clearly a small, pale lark.

IRD returned to the observatory to report his find and began discussing the identity of the lark with Martin Cade, the assistant warden. Quite sensibly, MC suggested that it might be a pale Sky Lark *Alauda arvensis*. IRD could not accept this, although he was unable to suggest a conclusive alternative. A number of other birders in the lounge eavesdropped on the conversation, but no-one showed any real interest. IRD returned to the field and, a short while later, was joined by AH, whose first impression was that it was a Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla*. At this stage, however, it was first heard to call, and its small size also became apparent when it was compared directly with a Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra*. AH immediately ordered the fastest YOC member to run back to the observatory, where the incumbents at last erupted from their semi-somnambulant state and were soon running breathlessly up the hill. CW, who was already on his way, was the first to suggest that it might be a Lesser Short-toed Lark *C. rufescens*.

Pretty soon, there were some 20 observers gathered on the track, including S. J. Broyd, MC, R. & S. Hibbett, R. Newton, I. Pembroke, R. J. Senior, R. Taylor and KEV. The bird was feeding at a range of perhaps 40-50 m but slightly against the light. After a quick binocular view, KEV pronounced it a Short-toed Lark. Once in the telescopes, however, it soon became apparent that it was 'wrong' for that species. Most obviously, it had a clearly streaked breast band, a small bill, and a crested effect, while it lacked both a prominent supercilium and

a strong median-covert bar. Unaware of CW's earlier suggestion, we excitedly began to discuss the realistic possibility that it was a Lesser Short-toed Lark and we edged closer in an attempt to see the all-important primary projection. Inevitably, we flushed it across the field, but it called loudly twice, and those of us who were familiar with the call became convinced that it was indeed a Lesser. As it flew, E. T. Welland arrived from the opposite direction, having been told that there was a 'funny lark' in Top Fields. He was also familiar with both species abroad, and he quite independently recognised the call as being that of Lesser Short-toed and was confident enough to suggest this identification to SJB.

The bird settled on the path, near where it had originally been flushed. Despite close views (down to 30 m), it was still not possible to see the primaries as the lark grovelled in a small hollow or frustratingly contrived to keep them hidden behind vegetation. Eventually, it flew again and proved to be rather flighty until it settled on an area of bare earth in the northeast corner of the field. There it gave excellent prolonged, unobscured views at about 30 m, and at this point we could all clearly see that it had a good 'half-inch' (1.3-cm) primary projection. Around this time, we were joined by several local observers who had been summoned by a frantic telephone call. These included P. A. Coe, P. Kent, K. Pritchard, I. Prophet and D. & G. Walbridge. The lark was kept under observation until about 20.15, when it flew over to the far side of the field. By this time, it had been seen by perhaps 30 observers, several of whom were very familiar with the species in Spain, the Canary Islands, North Africa or the Middle East, and others with the eastern forms in China.

The following dawn saw a crowd of some 400 observers gathered, but, disappointingly, the bird had gone. Some confusion ensued over the identification of a Sky Lark and, a few days later, MC received an anonymous and abusive telephone call saying that our bird had been a 'runt Sky Lark'. Following the publication of a preliminary account of the observation (Dickie 1992), KEV received a long telephone call from Lee Evans informing him that the word was out on the grapevine that the bird had indeed been a runt Sky Lark. This was a portent of things to come. Two descriptions by IRD and KEV were submitted to the British Birds Rarities Committee, but assessment was protracted since one member 'pended' the record on the grounds that he considered (a) that it was full of anomalies, (b) that several of the features indicated Short-toed Lark and (c) that the descriptions did not eliminate Oriental Lark *A. gulgula*. As all records with eight or nine 'accept' votes are automatically reconsidered by the entire committee, the original descriptions were recirculated, along with further independent ones from SJB, MC and ETW, as well as with additional notes from GW added to the file in his capacity as a BBRC member. On the second circulation, the lone non-accepting member retained the file for almost a year before returning it to the Chairman with a further 'pend' vote. It then resumed its journey around the Committee, but was lost in the post halfway through this second circulation. The file was reconstructed and the record was swiftly accepted unanimously on the third circulation, the 'blocking member' by then having retired. A request from that member to be allowed to continue to take part in the assessment of the record, even after having left the Committee, was declined, but all ten accepting members were aware of the circumstances and of the arguments which the dissenting but now absent member had put forward. Subsequently, the Portland occurrence was

accepted unanimously as the first British record in a single circulation of the British Ornithologists' Union Records Committee*, the members of which, as is usual, saw not only the documentary evidence, but also all the BBRC comments and correspondence. The species was, of course, already in Category A of the British & Irish List by virtue of some previous records in Ireland (see below). The following is a synopsis of the five submitted descriptions and GW's BBRC comments.

Description

In general appearance and structure, it was a small, evenly proportioned, compact *Calandrella* lark, rather short-tailed and similar in size to Short-toed Lark. It often appeared somewhat finch-like because of its small, stubby bill and MC stated that, at first glance, it reminded him of a Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*, an effect heightened by its bill. SJB considered it 'noticeably smaller' than nearby Sky Larks, while ETW noted that it was 'much smaller' than a Sky Lark which he had flushed on his approach. In his initial views, IRD considered it to be slightly shorter than a Whinchat in direct comparison. When feeding, it crept quietly but busily along the ground, sometimes in a low, shuffling manner. The back was rounded and it sometimes appeared hunched, but it was longer-necked and more upright when alert. Initially, the wings were held relaxed, with the primaries drooping below the level of the tail, but later, when more active and alert, they were held on a level with the top of the tail. When disturbed, it would often creep away rather than fly. When flushed, it flew fast and direct, low over the ground in typical *Calandrella* manner, and it would drop straight to the ground from full flight, with no hovering. It was basically pale sandy-brown in appearance, considerably paler than Sky Lark, and GW considered it to be a fawn or greyer shade of brown than the greyer-type Short-toed Larks which he has seen. In flight, it looked quite strikingly pale and sandy, an effect heightened by the very pale belly and underwing. It showed a darker tail, with contrasting pale outer tail feathers, but it lacked a pale or white trailing edge to the wing.

The following more-detailed notes expand on the above:

HEAD Short-toed Lark has a head shape and pattern rather reminiscent of female House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*, with a largish bill, a usually rounded crown, a fairly prominent supercilium and a dark line behind the eye. This bird failed to give this impression. Its head usually looked less rounded than that of Short-toed, with a somewhat steeper forehead. It quite often showed a crested effect, with a sharp angle at the crown/nape juncture, this often being caused by the wind catching the rear crown feathers; they were more typically laid flat when feeding in sheltered conditions. It is important to note that the raised crown feathers did not impart such an obviously crested appearance as on Sky Lark. Compared with Short-toed, it had a rather plain-faced appearance within which the dark eye stood out. The crown was evenly and finely streaked

brown on a sandy-brown background, perhaps recalling Sky Lark. The buffy supercilium was narrow and faint and blended well with the rest of the head. There was only a narrow inconspicuous dark line behind the eye. The eye itself was surrounded by an obvious pale creamy-buff ring which merged with the lores and supercilium around the front of the eye. The most distinctive facial character was a narrow, but quite noticeable, brown line which extended back from the bottom of the lower mandible, curving upwards below the lores and ending approximately level with the rear of the eye, thus forming the lower border to the pale eye-surround. Ear-coverts plain and variously described as light sandy or buffish-white. Indistinct dark moustachial stripe merged into dark ear-covert surround (comprised more of streaks than a solid area of colour) which

*Although a member of that Committee, KEV did not vote on the record.

curved up to meet narrow dark eye-stripe, thus giving complete border to ear-coverts. To KEV, whole facial pattern was characteristic of Lesser Short-toed Lark. GW thought that nape was contrastingly paler and unstreaked, but IRD described it as sandy with dark flecks visible only during the best views.

UNDERPARTS Throat and lower neck pale buffish-white. Across the breast was a noticeable pectoral band of profuse, even, fine streaking, the general impression recalling Sky Lark. The band was less deep in the middle, but was continuous right across the breast. At the sides, the streaking became more organised and more heavily lined. The streaking was delicate, profuse and unlike the more random streaking shown by some Short-toed Larks. It failed to show even a hint of dark patches on the breast sides. Underparts variously described as 'pale with a sandy wash', 'pale buff' or 'sandy-grey'. In hindsight, KEV thought them buffer and less white than on most Short-toeds, while GW also considered them buffer than on that species. Flanks faintly streaked.

UPPERPARTS Pale sandy-brown with distinct greyish cast, heavily streaked dark brown (perhaps heaviest on lower mantle). Two heavy blackish streaks down scapulars, these feathers overhanging innermost wing-coverts. Lower back, rump, uppertail-coverts and closed tail sandy with light greyish cast.

WINGS Median coverts, greater coverts and tertials brown, noticeably edged buff. Lacked the obvious dark median-covert bar shown by most Short-toed Larks (which recalls that of Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris*), because centres of median coverts were brown—not dark brown or black—and did not coalesce to form a bar; in fact, individual feathers could be picked out because of their broad, light buffy-brown fringes. Lesser coverts appeared basically sandy-grey, while primary coverts were noticeably blacker than other wing-coverts. IRD noted secondaries and primaries as being slightly paler than rest of upperparts, forming paler wedge back from the alula, under the tertials. MC noted underwing as pale, 'perhaps dirty whitish'.

PRIMARY PROJECTION This was obviously the key feature and the one that caused us the most frustration. At any distance, it was very difficult to determine where the tertials ended and where the primaries began and the evaluation of this was hampered by the lark frequently moving through the newly sprouting barley. At closer ranges, it frustratingly managed to conceal this vital part of its anatomy behind vegetation or in hollows.

On many occasions, we were 95% certain that we could see a primary projection, but it took us a good three-quarters of an hour to see it well enough to be 100% certain. The problem was caused by the fact that the primaries themselves were very faded, sandy-brown, and so appeared more-or-less concolourous with the tertials. When seen well, however, it was possible to count down three tertials from the shortest uppermost to the longest lower one and a primary projection of about half an inch (1.3 cm) was clearly visible beyond the lowest tertial. MC considered that the exposed primaries were approximately equal to half the length of the overlying tertials. In a close, semi-back-on view, the primary projection was in fact obvious. Viewing through a 50× *Questar* telescope at 30 m, SJB was able to count three visible primary tips with the space between the tips of the second and third being greatest. RH, GW and ETW were also able to view the primaries through the *Questar*. There was no question of the bird lacking the covering tertials. Although the tertials were also worn (particularly the longest), it was nevertheless quite easy to count them and to see their pale buffy edges. The primary projection was clearly visible on both wings.

BARE PARTS *Bill* Very distinctive: noticeably small and pointed, and much less conspicuous than the more sparrow-like bill of Short-toed Lark. Structurally similar to that of a Little Bunting *Emberiza pusilla*, but with the mandibles convex, not concave (IRD). Quite conical, with straighter mandibles than Short-toed, more like Linnet's in both shape and proportions (KEV). Small and somewhat stubby, on occasions giving the head a small finch-like appearance; when concentrating on the head, it was the small bill which always stood out (SJB). In colour, it had a dark tip and a greyer base (described by MC as 'grey-horn'). *Legs* Quite noticeably orange or fleshy-orange.

CALL Clearly and loudly heard on three occasions, less clearly on others. It fitted exactly KEV's memory of the call of Lesser Short-toed Lark, which he had last heard in Morocco in 1990. Immediately after it called the first time, he wrote it down as: 'a rapid, almost buzzing "ddddd", sounding like four notes concerned together'. He added that 'this call was obviously different from the more usual calls of Short-toed Lark', which, in his most recent notes, he had noted as a hard 't-trip trip', 'chip chip' or as a 'hard chirruping'. The call was, in fact, difficult to describe and this accounted for a variety of transcriptions by the various observers. SJB described it as a 'distinctive,

buzzy "chrrr", given several times as the bird flew from one spot to another'. ETW considered it 'a loud buzzing churring note', quite dissimilar to the 'hard chirrupy call' which he associates with Short-toed Lark. GW variously transcribed it as 'dddr', 'ttrr', 'trrr' or 'drrr' and as 'a rasping dry rattle, very distinctive and quite different from Short-toed,

being lower in pitch and louder'. MC described it as a short, dry, quite buzzing 'dddr'. As an interesting postscript, MC again encountered the species in southern Morocco in November 1992 and he first detected and correctly identified the birds by 'the dry, buzzing call identical to that heard from the Portland bird'.

Identification

The separation of Short-toed and Lesser Short-toed Larks has been covered by Dennis & Wallace (1975) and summarised by Alström *et al.* (1991). Despite their superficial similarity, the two species are not difficult to identify, given a reasonable view, and there is a feeling amongst those who know them that there has been a tendency to overstress their similarities, rather than their differences. Lesser Short-toed has something of the character of a 'miniature Sky Lark', an impression which Short-toed never gives. Even those Short-toeds which show breast streaking are not a problem, since the streaking tends to be sparser and more 'random' than that shown by Lesser. Despite this, KEV took the opportunity to examine carefully some 50 Lesser Short-toed Larks (race *polatzeki*) on Fuerteventura, Canary Islands, on 19th April 1993. This was particularly useful as it was at the same time of year as the Portland bird (just 13 days earlier). Every individual had worn primaries and many had them equally as worn and faded as those on the Portland bird (at this time of year, these feathers are perhaps nine months old and have been subjected to a lot of strong sunlight). At a distance, every individual appeared to show concolorous primaries and tertials, but, at closer ranges, some less-faded individuals had slightly darker primaries. Their crests were raised very frequently and, as with the Portland bird, were often caught by the wind, but tended to be lowered when feeding. The call was also similar and he again noted it as 'a distinctive, rattling, dry "dddr"'. Interestingly, in flight, several of the larks on Fuerteventura showed a very narrow white trailing edge to the secondaries, a feature not apparently recorded previously.

Distribution, movements and habitats

Much of the following information is taken from *BWP*. Lesser Short-toed Lark frequents the mid-latitude steppe and semi-desert zones and, compared with Short-toed Lark, it exists on barer, poorer, drier, more saline, more clayey or more gravelly sites, although the habitat distinctions between the two are not totally clear-cut. It is normally a lowland species, but the Transcaucasian race *pseudobaetica* ascends to alpine meadows at 3,000 m.

The breeding distribution of Lesser Short-toed Lark extends from Spain, the Canaries and Morocco in the west, across North Africa to Turkey and the Middle East and through the southern parts of the former Soviet Union to Manchuria. In Spain, it is considered to be largely sedentary, while in North Africa it is resident to dispersive and perhaps nomadic. Farther east, it is more migratory, and breeders from the former Soviet Union withdraw mainly into the southern part of the breeding range in winter. Even in eastern Turkey, it is mainly a summer visitor. In the Far East, it moves southwards into northern parts of the Indian subcontinent and southern China.

Geographical variation

Lesser Short-toed Lark forms a superspecies with the Rufous Short-toed Lark *C. somalica* from east and northeast Africa and with the Indian Short-toed Lark *C. ruyal* from the Indian subcontinent. In the Palearctic, there is marked and complex geographical variation involving mainly the ground colour of the upperparts, the width of the shaft streaks, the amount of white in the tail, size, and bill shape. *BWP* recognises ten races in the western Palearctic and an additional four to six in the east. The ranges of *heinei* and *leucophaea* overlap to the east of the Caspian Sea, apparently without interbreeding, so most authors now split *leucophaea* with the four to six other races from central and eastern Asia as the Asian Short-toed Lark *C. cheleensis*.

No attempt has been made to ascribe the Portland bird to any particular race. On the face of it, a southern origin from Spain (race *apetzii*) or from North Africa (race *minor*) would seem most likely. In this respect, it is interesting to note that MC found that the Lesser Short-toed Larks in southern Morocco in November 1992 were in all respects similar to the Portland bird. Given the relatively sedentary nature of the western populations, however, one should perhaps not rule out the possibility of vagrancy of one of the migratory eastern races, such as *heinei* from the steppes and semi-deserts of the southern parts of the former Soviet Union.

Previous European vagrancy

BWP mentions seven spring and four autumn records from Malta, but the species is surprisingly rare in northern Europe. The only other records from the British Isles involve a remarkable series of some 42 individuals in southern Ireland in 1956 and 1958 (*Irish Bird Report* 4: 15, 24; 6: 20, 30; *Brit. Birds* 53: 241-243). Alström *et al.* (1991) noted an old record from Heligoland, Germany, on 26th May 1879, and two more-recent ones from Finland in November 1962 and January-February 1975. Five recent records have been listed in the 'European news' reports in this journal: Falsterbo, Skåne, Sweden, on 27th-28th April 1986; Mølen, Larvik, Vestfold, Norway, during 7th-23rd November 1987; Wauwilermoos/Lucerne, Switzerland, on 28th-29th April 1989; Hoburgèn, Gotland, Sweden, on 10th-11th May 1991; and in Austria on 7th April 1993 (*Brit. Birds* 80: 13; 81: 9; 85: 10; 88: 39). The Portland bird fits in with the recent pattern of spring occurrences, which have been mainly during 27th April to 10th May.

Summary

A Lesser Short-toed Lark *Calandrella rufescens* was seen by about 30 observers at Portland Bill, Dorset, on 2nd May 1992. It is described in detail and a summary is given of the species' range and geographical variation. Other records of European vagrancy are listed.

References

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EDITORIAL COMMENT Rob Hume, Chairman of the BBRC, has commented: 'There have always been instances of rare birds disappearing overnight to leave a frustrated crowd of people with nothing to do but grumble the next day. With modern communication methods, there is inevitably more chance of a large crowd being drawn to see a "bird that never was"—something that has been misidentified, much to the embarrassment of the observers and the information network concerned—or a bigger crowd than before being disappointed if the bird has flown. Trying to assess the likelihood of either event before putting out news, by whatever means, is not easy. It is unfortunate that the second situation ("You should have been here yesterday") may lead to an assumption that the first is also true ("It was only a Sky Lark"); indeed, this may help to assuage disappointment. Rare-bird record assessment is sometimes as much about human nature as it is about bird identification.

'In this instance, however, an overwhelming case has been made for the identification of the small lark as Lesser Short-toed. Details of general impression, head pattern, bill shape, breast and wing markings, the relative tertial/primary lengths on the closed wing as confirmed by several observers, and the call, all add up to a firm identification which the present Committee accepts without question. The delay in the assessment process, which will be known to some readers—but, I suspect, is of little interest to many others—was unfortunate, particularly the loss of a substantial file in the post. To be fair to the Royal Mail, we lose very little in the post: it *would* have to be this one.'

Dr David T. Parkin, Chairman of the BOURC, has commented: 'The problems relating to the identification of this bird are well discussed by I. R. Dickie and Keith Vinicombe in the main article. Several very experienced observers saw the bird, and there can be no serious problems over its separation from possible confusion species. Size, plumage, primary projection and call are all documented. The objections raised by the single dissenting voice on the BBRC were discussed and dismissed by the BOURC, and the bird was accepted as a Lesser Short-toed Lark in a single circulation. As one of the finders of the bird and a member of the BOURC, Keith Vinicombe was excluded from commenting and voting.

'One member of the BOURC was among the throng who turned up the following day, and failed to see the bird. In the file, he has commented that: "I was unaware of anyone even claiming a runt Skylark—amazing how these stories arise and then spread." Another commented: "I confirm that KEV and others among the observers are widely held in very high regard. Collusion and fabrication are easily discounted in this case."

'There is no evidence of this species being involved in the current bird trade. Although there are records of importation in the past (London Zoo, pre-1929, *Avicultural Magazine* 64: 146), it is unlikely that western populations would be involved these days. The coincidence of date for records from several European countries is striking. The record has been accepted as the first for Britain (*Ibis* in press), although Lesser Short-toed Lark is already on the British & Irish List on the strength of the records from Ireland in 1956 and 1958 (*Ibis* 102: 629).'