

HORNED LARKS (*EREMOPHILA ALPESTRIS*) NESTING IN THE COASTAL PLAIN OF ALABAMA

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Horned Larks (*Eremophila alpestris*) expanded their range into Alabama during the first half of the 20th century as part of a southern expansion that brought breeding Horned Larks to Kentucky between 1910 and 1920 (Beason 1995). Imhof (1976) described Horned Larks as breeding locally in the Tennessee Valley and the eastern portion of the Mountain Region, but listed no summer records in Alabama south of Birmingham. Beason (1995) reports no breeding in the coastal or coastal plain regions of any of the southeastern states except Louisiana, where they apparently are found in the flood plain of the Mississippi River. Griffin (1951) first documented breeding in north Georgia in April 1950. In June 1991, Patterson (1991) found indications that Horned Larks were probably breeding in Dublin, which is in Georgia's coastal plain. Six years later, Chandler *et al.* (1997) first documented breeding Horned Larks at a sod farm in Georgia's coastal plain in Bulloch County. The objective of this note is to document breeding at a sod farm in the coastal plain of Alabama, at approximately the same latitude as Dublin and Bulloch counties, Georgia.

In January 1999, we observed Horned Larks feeding along the roads and near slightly higher portions of the Woerner Turf and Sod Farm between Sinclair and Lowndesboro in Lowndes County, Alabama. Johnson went to this sod farm frequently over the next several months and usually encountered Horned Larks, most often near the roads. On 22 May 1999, Johnson found a juvenile Horned Lark not far from two adults. Although she watched the birds for over an hour, she never saw the adults feed the juvenile. On 6 June 1999, Johnson watched what she believed to be a male Horned Lark catching insects on the road. A female lark was in an adjacent field, moving about in a small area. The male would fly low to the field and cautiously walk toward the female lark with the food in his mouth. Both then moved to a tall weed with overhanging leaves. The male then began feeding the insects to birds out of view that were thought to be young in a nest, which apparently was tucked in against the base of the weed. Male Horned Larks rarely feed their young (Beason 1995). Johnson could not get close enough to see the adult transfer food to the young. When she returned on 9 June, the field had been mown, and there was no sign of the nest or the larks.

On 11 June 1999, Johnson located two adult larks and a juvenile in the same

general area, one field to the south. On 20 June 1999, Johnson observed two adult Horned Larks in a plowed field with no vegetation. They repeatedly made twittering sounds and flew up and landed near the same spot. Although the birds remained together, Johnson did not see them mating. One of them moved underneath a very large dirt clod and settled in for approximately fifteen minutes. The other lark remained nearby. Johnson checked the area, but could find no nest. After a week of heavy rains, she found the clod dissipated, and the field covered with water.

On 4 July 1999, Johnson saw a female Horned Lark collecting vegetation in her mouth, apparently to use as nesting material. On 6 July, the authors watched one lark walking and feeding in a low area with short grass. The lark then flew directly to the area of higher weeds where Johnson had earlier observed a female Horned Lark with nesting material. After searching the area, however, no evidence of nesting was found. An hour later, Johnson watched the lark fly to the same area, but could not observe more closely, because a tractor was mowing the weeds. After the whole area was mown, there were two Horned Larks on the side of the road. One sat on the cement at the edge of the road and called.

On 11 July 1999, the authors and Fred Bassett visited the Woerner Sod and Turf Farm and located a Horned Lark nest. The female flew into the unplowed field near where we were standing [perhaps 0.3 mile (0.43 km) from the west gate] and put some vegetation under a weed. After she flew off, Gardella walked over to the spot and picked up part of the weed to expose a nest in which the vegetation was arranged into a cup. During the afternoon of 13 July 1999, Johnson and Tommy Pratt noticed Horned Larks at the eastern portion of the sod farm. There were at least three adults and four juveniles. Pratt saw one of the adults feed a juvenile. Back at the western portion of the sod farm, Johnson and Pratt relocated the nest. One egg was lying on the ground by the weeds, and another was in the nest, which was now lined with grass. It appeared deep enough so that a mower could go over it and not destroy it.

Harrison (1975) described a Horned Lark nest as a shallow cup of coarse stems and leaves and lined with fine grasses. It often has a "patio" of small pebbles or clods. The nest that we discovered lacked a "patio". It was also less shallow than we had expected. On 14 July, Johnson and Gardella returned to the unplowed field in the western portion of the farm and found two eggs in the nest. Back on the eastern portion, there were at least eight or nine Horned Larks. Some were rather streaked and had no black on their faces. We assumed that they had recently fledged. Others had some blackish smudges on their faces, and we deemed them to be older. This group included at least two adults.

On 18 July, there were three eggs in the Horned Lark nest. Unfortunately, the sod farm operators had sprayed the field, and the weeds were either dead or wilted. The nest was conspicuous. On 21 July, Johnson observed that the three eggs were still present with the female close by. However, the sod farm operators were preparing to roll the field with a huge roller.

These observations indicate that at least one pair of Horned Larks produced at least one juvenile (22 May), an unknown number of additional young (6 June), four young juveniles (14 July), an unsuccessful nest attempt 20 June and another 4 July. There may have been other unsuccessful attempts, as Beason (1995) noted that they generally renest within two days of nest destruction.

The southward expansion of the breeding range for Horned Larks in the southeastern United States appears to be continuing. Schiefer (pers. comm.) knows of no coastal plain breeding records in eastern Mississippi. However, summer records in south Georgia suggest breeding there. Sewell (1995) reported a record in Decatur County on 15 June 1995. Schneider (pers. comm.) lists three additional records from far south Georgia in late May and early June, but they are all "observed" only without any codes to confirm breeding. Griffin (1951) and Patterson (1991) each commented on the difficulty of locating a Horned Lark nest. One reason is that the parent does not fly directly to the nest to feed its young. Instead, it flies to the general area and then takes a circuitous route a considerable distance through the grass to the hidden nest (Wilson, pers. comm.). Thus, it is likely that Horned Larks are in fact breeding where they have been found in Georgia. In light of the continued southward expansion, birders in south Alabama should be looking for this bird nesting between March and July on bare ground or in fields of short grass or stubble in sod farms, airports and other similar habitat.

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