

**FIRST NEST RECORD OF THE LARK SPARROW
(*CHONDESTES GRAMMACUS*) IN ALABAMA**

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On 3 May 1998, while travelling south along Fennell Road in Limestone County, approximately 3 mi (4.8 km) from Belle Mina, two birds flew up from the edge of the dirt road. The birds were relocated at the edge of the grassy right of way and a newly sown cotton field, and were immediately identified as Lark Sparrows (*Chondestes grammacus*). The two birds spent the next few minutes foraging in the grass, and one individual strutted, raised its head feathers and repeatedly fanned its tail revealing white-tipped rectrices. Both birds then flew to the other side of the road and landed on the sparsely vegetated ground. Again one bird fanned its tail after standing on clumps of dirt and at one time was seen tugging at a dry grass stalk as if trying to pull it out of the ground. High-pitched, sharp "tsep" calls were given repeatedly, but no song was heard. We observed the pair for about 10 min and concluded they probably had formed a pair bond.

We returned to the nest area on 9 May. Because of the observations made on 3 May and because the dry, grassy right of way adjacent to an almost bare field appeared to be suitable breeding habitat for Lark Sparrows (Imhof 1976, *Alabama Birds*), we looked for a nest. After a few minutes of searching, a Lark Sparrow flushed and landed near the edge of the road. When we examined the area from which the individual had flushed, a nest was located in a slight depression in the ground that was partly surrounded by a dry wiry weed clump. The nest, which contained four near-white eggs marked with a few brownish speckles (Figure 1), was a deep cup made mostly from fine dry weed stalks and rootlets. It appeared to be well camouflaged even from the open side of the weed clump and was very difficult to see when observed from a distance of a few feet (Figure 2). Furthermore, the nest was on the northeast side of the weed clump and was therefore shaded. Others also have noted that Lark Sparrows often select shaded nest sites (Imhof 1976). The female Lark Sparrow was a tight sitter and allowed us to photograph the nest at a distance of eight ft (2.4 m) (Figure 2).

On 17 May, we returned to the nest site area and found that it had been mowed. The nest was partially destroyed and the eggs were gone, but a Lark Sparrow pair was still in the area. On 24 May, only a singing male Lark Sparrow was located in the cotton field near the old nest site. Visits to the area after this date failed to find any Lark Sparrows. Further, the right-of-way on the east side of the road had been mowed and the area no longer appeared suitable for nesting.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first documented Lark Sparrow nest in Alabama. Although Imhof (1976) cites five breeding records, only dependent young were reported. Breeding season sightings have primarily been in the Tennessee Valley and western portion of the Upper Coastal Plain with a few sightings in the Mountain

Region and Gulf Coast (Imhof 1976, G. D. Jackson, pers. com.). In Red Bank, Lawrence County, individuals have been seen annually during the breeding season since 1993, with up to eight adults reported in a given year. Many of these reports suggested that the Lark Sparrows observed were probably nesting (G. D. Jackson pers. com.).



Figure 1. Lark Sparrow nest and eggs at Belle Mina, Limestone County. Photo by Dean Cutten.



Figure 2. Female Lark Sparrow on nest at Belle Mina, Limestone County. Photo by Dean Cutten.

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