

**LARK SPARROWS (*CHONDESTES GRAMMACUS*) BREEDING
IN AUTAUGA COUNTY, ALABAMA**

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The Lark Sparrow (*Chondestes grammacus*) is considered a rare-but-regular breeder in the Tennessee Valley and Black Belt regions of Alabama (Jackson 2001). In the Tennessee Valley region, recent evidence of breeding has been noted in Limestone (Cutten and Cutten 1998), Madison, Lawrence (Jackson 1999), and Lauderdale counties (Jackson 2000a). In the Upper Coastal Plain, breeding evidence has primarily come from the Black Belt (Imhof 1976). As early as 1890, Lark Sparrow breeding was reported from Hale County (Howell 1924). In addition, Reid (1988) found them on a U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service Breeding Bird Survey route in Sumter County in 1986 and 1987. Recently, Upper Coastal Plain breeding season records outside of the Black Belt region have come from Perry (Jackson 1999) and Chilton counties (Jackson 2000b). This paper documents a breeding record from an additional county in the Upper Coastal Plain region and presents a brief historical review of the distribution of this species in eastern North America.

On 11 June 2000, Reed found a Lark Sparrow singing on a power line at the edge of the Autauga County Wildlife Management Area. The sparrow was in a field north of Autauga County Road 66, 0.5 mi (10.8 km) from the intersection of Autauga County roads 57 and 66 (DeLorme *Alabama Atlas and Gazetteer*: page 44, grid A5; 32° 36' N, 86° 32' W). He watched the bird for approximately 30 minutes without seeing any further sign of possible breeding.

On 2 July 2000, three weeks after Reed saw a singing male, Fred Bassett and Gardella found at least five Lark Sparrows. Two males were singing from a telephone wire that was approximately 100 yds (91 m) from the location of the Reed sighting. All five sparrows were between the start of Autauga County Road 66 and the first bend in the road. The sparrows flew from the wire to the field and then either returned to the wire or flew to one of several roadside trees. Bassett and Gardella watched one adult Lark Sparrow feed an insect to a fledgling that had nothing but pinfeathers in its tail. This sighting is the southernmost breeding location in Alabama (G. Jackson, pers. comm.).

There are breeding populations of Lark Sparrows just north and just west of Alabama. In Mississippi, the Lark Sparrow is a rare and local breeder in western Hinds County, in the Black Belt and hill counties of the northeast and possibly

in the northern counties bordering Tennessee. It is not found in the southern half of eastern Mississippi (Turcotte and Watts 1999). In Tennessee, Lark Sparrows are regularly found in summer at local sites in the limestone cedar glade regions of the inner Central Basin, but their numbers have been decreasing. There are scattered reports from the rest of the state, mainly on heavily grazed pastures and cultivated fields (Nicholson 1997).

The distribution of Lark Sparrows in the eastern United States has changed twice during the history of this nation. Prior to settlement, the bird was found primarily in the west, with few records east of the Great Plains. As the population of the country grew and pushed westward into the heartland, the Lark Sparrow range appears to have expanded eastward, although some believe that the sparrows simply returned to areas they had bred in earlier (Robbins and Blom 1996). By 1911, Lark Sparrows were breeding as far east as New York. The range expansion was due not only to the clearing of the forests, but also to the early agricultural practices that created fields containing sparse herbaceous vegetation with bare soil, interspersed with woody vegetation (Robbins 1990, Martin and Parrish 2000, Bull 1974). Such habitat is perfectly suited to the Lark Sparrow (Sample and Mossman 1994).

Lark Sparrows began to experience a range contraction by the 1930's as intensive agricultural practices, development, and reforestation claimed much of the Lark Sparrow habitat east of the Mississippi (Robbins and Blom 1996). Many eastern states completely lost their breeding populations (Martin and Parrish 2000). However, Lark Sparrows have maintained vestiges of their former range in locations where mowing, burning or grazing maintain the critical habitat requirements (Dechant *et al.* 1999).

There does not appear to be any systematic data supporting a renewed eastern range expansion for the Lark Sparrow. However, a report of a male in Tallapoosa County, Georgia last summer (Georgia Rare Bird Alert - July 26, 2000) and the recent Alabama records suggest that this beautiful sparrow might be found just about anywhere that suitable habitat exists.

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