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Birds of the Great Plains: Family Alaudidae (Larks)

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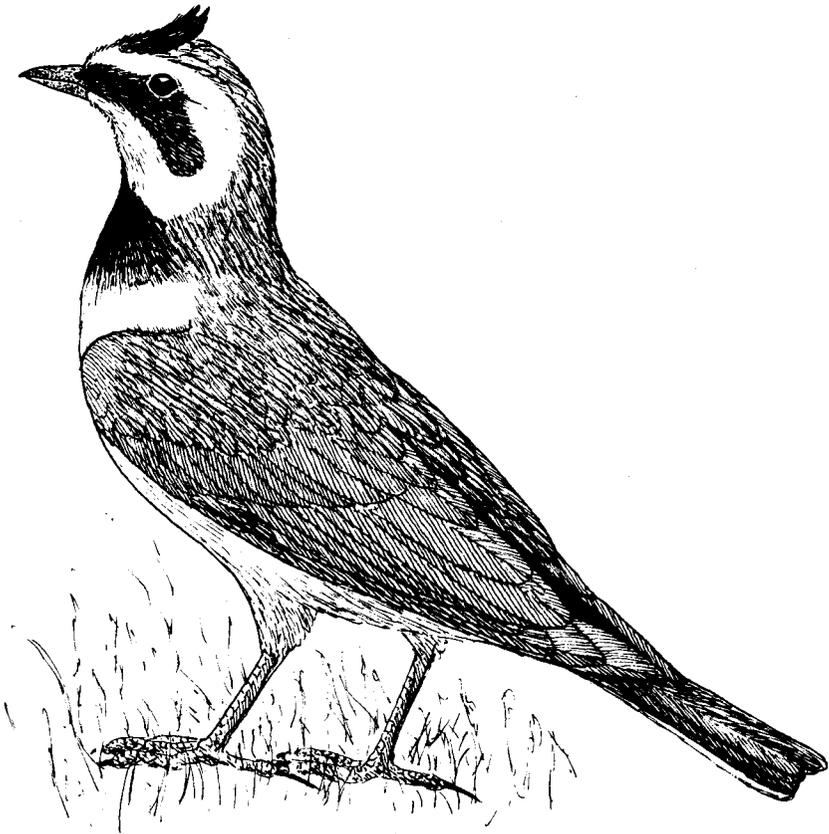
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FAMILY ALAUDIDAE
(LARKS)



Horned Lark

Horned Lark

Eremophila alpestris

Breeding Status: Pandemic, breeding in suitable habitats throughout the region.

Breeding Habitat: In the Great Plains the horned lark is associated with natural or planted low-stature grasslands and cultivated fields; it is also found in deserts and alpine regions.

Nest Location: Nests are typically placed in a depression so that the upper edge of the nest is level with the ground surface. There is often little or no vegetational cover around the nest, or it may be next to and partly hidden by a clump of grass. The nest is a cup of coarse grass stems, lined with finer materials.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: From 3 to 6 eggs (12 North Dakota nests averaged 4.0, and 16 Kansas nests averaged 3.6). The eggs are grayish white peppered with brown spots. The incubation period is 11 days. Frequently double-brooded.

Time of Breeding: North Dakota egg dates are from April 7 to July 10. Kansas egg dates are from March 11 to June 10, and those from Oklahoma are from March 16 (female with egg in oviduct) to August 4.

Breeding Biology: In the midwestern states, horned larks begin to establish and defend territories in January and February, while pairs are being formed. Territories are large (averaging about 4 acres in two studies) and are defended by males, but only against other males. Two advertisement songs are uttered, either on the ground or in the air. These songs seem related to courtship rather than to territorial defense and are most common after losing a mate or fledging a brood. Courtship feeding and other displays are also performed at this time. The female selects a nest site almost anywhere in the territory and constructs the nest alone. She digs a cavity with her bill and feet, often "paving" it on one side with various objects, for still uncertain reasons. The paving may cover and hide the fresh dirt that has been dug out or may help keep the nest lining from blowing away during early stages. The female may begin incubation slightly before the clutch is completed but more often begins when the last egg is laid. There is a relatively short nestling period of 9-12 days, averaging about 10, and the young birds leave the nest when their flight feathers are only about one-third to one-half grown. Until they are some 15 days old the young are able to fly only a few yards. The young birds begin to flock soon after leaving the nest, and in many areas the female shortly begins a second nesting.

Suggested Reading: Beason and Franks 1974; Verbeek 1967.

