

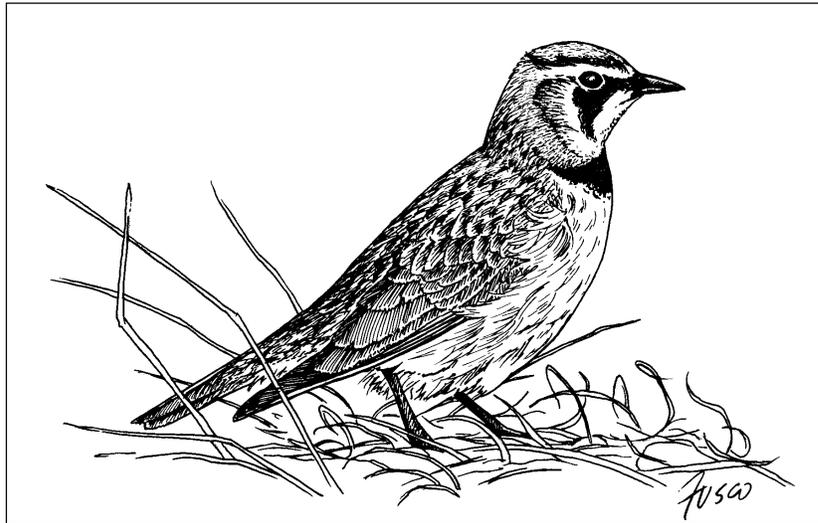
WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

ENDANGERED AND THREATENED SPECIES SERIES

HORNED LARK

Eremophila alpestris

THREATENED



Habitat: Large fields, open areas, shoreline beaches, grasslands, and agricultural areas.

Weight: Males, 1.13 ounces; females, 1.08 ounces.

Length: 7-8 inches.

Wingspan: 12.25-14 inches.

Life Expectancy: Unknown; however, banded skylarks (from the same family) have reportedly lived over 8 years.

Food: Weed seeds, waste grains, caterpillars, ants, wasps, grasshoppers, leafhoppers, and spiders.

Status: State threatened.

Identification: The brownish horned lark is best identified by its very distinctive head pattern: black "horns" (feather tufts), a white or yellowish face and throat, a broad, black stripe under the eye, and a black bib. The female is duller overall than the male and the horns are less prominent. In flight, the most obvious characteristic is the mostly black tail with white outer feathers. In winter plumage, the black areas on the head and breast are partially obscured by pale edgings. The horned lark is larger than a sparrow.

Range: In North America, the horned lark nests from Alaska and Canada south to West Virginia, North Carolina, Missouri, Kansas and coastal Texas. It winters along the Gulf Coast.

Reproduction: The horned lark nests in large, open areas that are barren, sandy, stony, or have sparse grass cover. In Connecticut, the horned lark nests on beaches and open areas, mostly along the coast.

Breeding has also been documented in grassland areas at airports. Breeding usually begins in mid-June. The cup-shaped nest is built on the ground in a shallow depression, usually in the shelter of a plant tuft or stone. The nest is made of dry grass and plant stems, loosely put together, with a fine inner lining of plant down and hair. Small pieces of peat or pebbles may be assembled around the nest or on one side of it. The 4 smooth, glossy eggs are pale greenish-white and heavily speckled with fine buff-brown; there is often a blackish hairline. The eggs are laid at daily intervals and incubated by the female for 10 to 14 days. After hatching, the altricial (helpless) young have brown skin and long, pale down. They are cared for by both adults and leave the nest after 9 to 12 days.

Reason for Decline: Horned lark populations have steadily declined as dry, open uplands have reverted to forests or have been destroyed by development. As with

other ground-nesting birds, high populations of predators, such as raccoons, skunks, and housecats, have also contributed to the decline of this species.

History in Connecticut: Horned larks are common migrants and winter visitors in Connecticut, but are rare nesters. When eastern forests were cleared for agriculture, a western subspecies, the "prairie" horned lark (*E. a. praticola*), expanded its range eastward and was first reported nesting in Torrington, Connecticut, in 1891. Through the early 1900s, horned larks expanded their nesting areas south through Litchfield County. Scattered nesting occurred throughout Connecticut and the number of nesting pairs was never very high. As agricultural practices changed and development increased, horned lark nesting decreased and a population decline was noted for the Northeast.

Interesting Facts: The horned lark is known for the way it travels; it walks instead of hopping and sings from any slight elevation on the ground. The song, a clear "tsee-ee," is irregular, high-pitched, and often prolonged.

In its courtship flight, the male horned lark quietly ascends 300 to 800 feet or more above ground and

begins a high-pitched, tinkling flight song as it circles. When the song ends, the lark drops headfirst, with closed wings, waiting until it almost crash-lands, before opening its wings and pulling out of the dive.

The claw on the hind toe of the horned lark is long and straight. This "larkspur" is characteristic of members of the lark family.

Many of the horned lark's regional names reflect its favored habitat: prairie bird, shore lark, road lark, and wheat bird. Even its genus name, *Eremophila*, is Latin for "desert-loving," further illustrating this bird's fondness for bare, open ground.

Protective Legislation: *Federal* - Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. *State* - Connecticut General Statutes Sec. 26-311.

What You Can Do: Protection of open grassland and agricultural areas is essential to conserving breeding populations of horned larks. Maintaining fields, both inland and along Connecticut's coastline, and keeping a safe distance from horned lark nests will help protect this species.

CONNECTICUT RANGE

