

First Michigan winter record of Lark Sparrow, Wayne Co.



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The Lark Sparrow (*Chondestes grammacus*) is a large, handsome sparrow with a distinctive harlequin face pattern and dark central breast spot. It breeds in open habitats over much of western North America and winters from central Texas through central Mexico, and sometimes as far south as El Salvador. Wintering concentrations in the U.S. are the San Joaquin Valley, CA, south-central AZ, south-central TX, and the northern Great Basin (Martin and Parrish 2000).

In Michigan, Lark Sparrows are considered casual, now seen mostly in migration following a decline that began in the 1950s (McPeck and Adams 1994). There were only eight records, all spring migrants, from southeast Michigan and southwest Ontario between 1945 and 1974 (Kelley 1978). There are two records from Wayne Co.: one from Greenfield Village, Dearborn, on 21 Aug 1980 (Craves 1996) and another at Lake Erie Metropark on 26 Nov 2003 (P. Cypher, pers.comm.). The latter is also the only record between 27 October and 11 April (McPeck and Adams 1994).

On 12 Jan 2004, a Lark Sparrow appeared in my backyard in Dearborn, Wayne Co. It fed on the ground or from a hanging feeder in the company of more typical feeder birds. It was viewed for brief periods in my yard or my neighbor's yard through 24 Jan. While it did not appear to be especially wary, it did disappear for long stretches, when I suspected it was resting in some thick holly or a dense spruce tree. One evening, it sang for approximately 15 m.

This is the third record of Lark Sparrow for Wayne Co., and the first winter record for Michigan.

Ohio has a small breeding population of Lark Sparrows, but Peterjohn (1989) notes that breeding birds are rarely seen past August, the species is an accidental migrant, and gives one winter record (25-27 Jan 1964, Cuyahoga Co.). A bird photographed on the Western Hamilton Co. Christmas Bird Count (CBC) on 21 Dec 2003 has been tentatively identified as a Lark Sparrow (Fazio 2004). Other winter records for Ohio are one in Holmes Co. on 30 Dec 1997 to 4 Apr 1998 (Whan 1998) and one from 1 Nov to 26 Dec 1998 near the

Holmes/Coshocton Co. line (Conlon 1999). These latter two locations are not far apart, and it is possible they represent the same bird (B. Whan, pers. comm.). Several other Ohio winter records are questionable: no details were given for Lark Sparrows recorded on the Saftem (Mahoning/Columbiana cos.) CBCs in 1977-1979 (NAS 2002), and the sightings were not picked up by regional compilers for American Birds; the situation was the same for one reported on the 1981 Grand Lake-St. Mary's CBC (Auglaize/Mercier cos.).

There are two winter records for Indiana: two on the Lafayette CBC (Tippencanoe Co.) in 1954, and one at a feeder in Mishawaka (St. Joseph Co.) on 4-6 Feb 1997 (Mumford and Keller 1984).

Bohlen (1989) states that in Illinois, Lark Sparrows are considered occasional migrants, and rare to locally common summer residents, and that the few winter records are inadequately documented. There have been no winter records in Illinois in the last eight years.

Temple et al. (1997) list no records from November through January for Wisconsin. There have been none recorded on Christmas Bird Counts since that time (NAS 2002).

The status in Ontario is occasional, rare summer resident in the south, vagrant in winter (James 1991). Published winter records for Ontario are one on the Moscow Christmas Bird Count, in Lennox and Addington Co., 30 Dec 1985 (NAS 2002); one present at a feeder in Guelph, Wellington Co., in winter 1992-1993 (NAS 1993); and one in Lennox and Addington Co., 24 Nov to 22 Dec 2001 (Bain 2002a,b). Oddly enough, the species is nearly annual in winter in Nova Scotia, with six being located in winter 2001-2002 (Bain 2002b,c).

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