

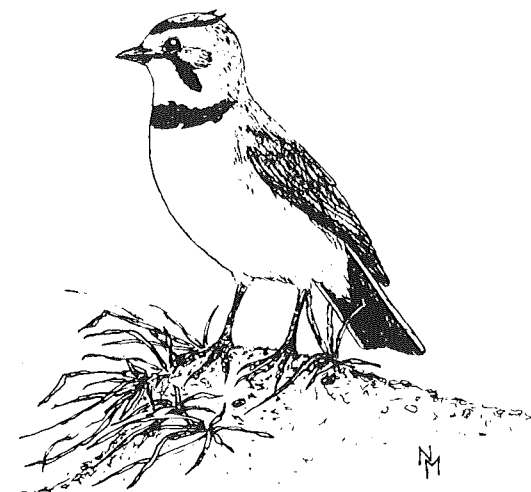
Horned Lark

Eremophila alpestris

The Horned Lark is the only native North American member of the true larks (Alaudidae) and, like most related Old World species, inhabits open, sparsely vegetated areas. Pickwell (1942) suggested that the major requirement for nesting is bare ground. The Horned Lark's habitat in Vermont includes the cropped grass of airports and athletic fields, harrowed fields, freshly turned sod, and overgrazed pastureland. But because it requires largely unvegetated barrens, overall this species is thinly distributed. These pale brown groundbirds that blend into the landscape, often scurrying behind furrows or simply moving to match the background, were probably overlooked in some priority blocks. Another factor contributing to low confirmation and detection is the species' early breeding schedule. Many pairs have young out of the nest by early May.

Observers can locate these larks most effectively by listening for their weak, high-pitched songs and tinkling flight calls. The nest is a hollow made by the female and lined with grass or other fine, stringlike material, often protected from wind by a tuft of vegetation, a dirt clod, or a rock. A female will normally leave a nest when an intruder is 50–100 m (164–328 ft) away from it; the bird will skim over the field and take up a station where she may eye the intruder. With patience an observer may sometimes wait out her return to the nest. Distraction displays occur when a female is flushed from a nest repeatedly or at close quarters. The young are flightless for a 3- to 4-day period after leaving the nest, which may be the best time for confirming breeding.

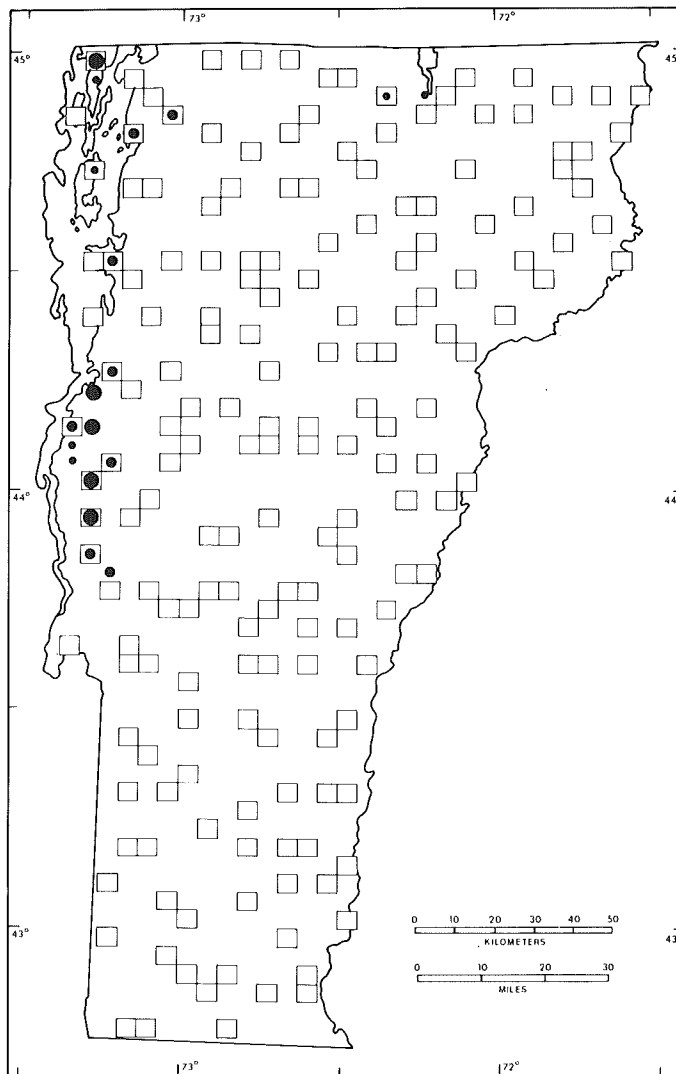
Horned Larks occur in Vermont in two well-marked geographic forms: the Arctic-breeding Northern Horned Lark (*E. a. alpestris*), which is a transient and winter visitor, and the paler, partly sedentary Prairie Horned Lark (*E. a. praticola*), which breeds in Vermont, arriving in force to set up territories in mid to late February. Egg dates for 4 nests from Vermont range from



April 7 to April 30. Fledglings have been sighted as late as July, indicating that June and July clutches are laid. Three nestling records for Vermont are dated between April 17 and May 6, and dependent young have been reported on seven dates from May 14 to July 25. Eggs number from 2 to 7, but clutches of 3 and 4 are most frequent.

The Horned Lark is a recent colonist in the East. The ancestral distribution of *praticola* probably included much of the eastern Great Plains, east to Wisconsin and Illinois (Hurley and Franks 1976). The Horned Lark's expansion into eastern North America was apparently in response to the appearance of suitable habitat—cropland and pastureland. The species was first noted nesting in New York State in 1875, and was breeding in eastern sectors of that state by the 1880s (Bull 1974). Forbush (1927) indicated that the first breeding known for New England was in Cornwall, Vermont, in June 1889. Subsequent Vermont areas colonized included Ryegate in 1900 (Brock 1907), Rutland and Poultney in 1905 (Ross 1906b), and Bennington in 1906 (L. H. Ross, Field notes).

Early in the twentieth century the Horned Lark was distributed over much of Vermont. The decline of agriculture and the accompanying reforestation of Vermont has severely contracted the species' breeding distribution. The Horned Lark is presently



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 12 (7%)

Possible breeding: 2 (17% of total)

Probable breeding: 7 (58% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 3 (25% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	11	35	92
Green Mountains	1	2	8
North Central	0	0	0
Northeast Highlands	0	0	0
East Central	0	0	0
Taconic Mountains	0	0	0
Eastern Foothills	0	0	0

largely confined to the Champlain Lowlands. Almost all the priority blocks in which the species occurs are within the Champlain Lowlands, which contains large areas devoted to agriculture. The single priority block in which the species occurs outside of this region is in northern Orleans County, where there are also extensive dairy farms. The topography of the inhabited blocks indicates a preference for flat areas. The species' distribution also shows a striking correlation with the major drainage systems of the southern Champlain Valley, such as the Lemon Fair and Dead Creek.

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