

## Longspurs in Saskatchewan



Sketch by F. W. Lahrman

CHESTNUT-COLLARED LONGSPUR

## Observations of Longspurs at Bladworth

by P. L. Beckie, Bladworth, Sask.

We have in Canada four members of the sparrow family that form an interesting group and are not too well known. It isn't because of their scarcity that they are unfamiliar, but because of their drab coloration, their unassuming manner, and, probably most of all, because they nest in areas visited only occasionally by man. These are the longspurs, so named because of an unusually long hind claw.

Here in our area the Chestnut-collared Longspur comes to nest. The Lapland and the Smith's pass through on their way to the Arctic tundras. The Lapland is often seen in immense flocks, which are nearly invisible when they stop to feed on summer-fallow fields. The McCown's nest on the dry prairies, but as yet I have not found a pair nesting in this area.

Before all of winter's snow has left us these harbingers of spring joyfully wing their way north. The longspur's flight is undulating, and it is cheered by the continuous tinkling of calls. Early in April waves of these birds begin crossing our prairies. Dates of arrival that I have for the Lapland are April 7, 1949; April 15, 1950; April 14, 1952; March 31, 1953; April 4, 1954; April 1, 1955; April 15, 1956; April 5, 1957. Some last seen dates are Oct. 8, 1950; Oct. 18, 1953;

Oct 8, 1954. The amount of weed seeds destroyed by the great numbers of longspurs during this comparatively long season must make this family beneficial to agriculture.

The Chestnut-collared Longspur, so named because of its actual coloration, is the longspur I am most familiar with. This is a typical bird of the treeless prairies. Its song seems to impart even more loneliness, if that could be so, to the surroundings it inhabits. The song may be given from the top of a weed, or in a more dramatic manner in the air by the courting male. One of early spring's most pleasant sounds or sights is the aerial song of the male Chestnut-collared Longspur. With bubbling enthusiasm, the male rises in flight, attaining a height of about 30 feet; then with wings held in a V above his back, he lets flow his love song as he drops to earth.

Some first seen dates for the Chestnut-collared are April 22, 1950; April 29, 1955; April 29, 1957. This member of the longspurs seems to be holding its own, being still present in good numbers considering the menace of trampling livestock, and prairie lands being put under cultivation.

Although I often see the McCown's in migration, it does not pass through here in numbers anywhere near com-



parable to the Lapland, and I have no records of resident birds for this area. I have seen McCown's on April 7, 1947, April 16, 1948, May 1, 1955.

I believe that the Smith's is only a rare migrant here, but may be more plentiful than I know, because of the difficulty in identifying flying migrating birds.

Note: To my amazement, the day I wrote this, yesterday March 28, I thought I heard flocks of longspurs passing over. I didn't believe my ears. Today I heard another flock pass over, and the birds weren't Snow Buntings. So that's an early date for me—March 28 and 29, 1958.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Since Lawrence Beckie was surprised to record Lapland Longspur flights on March 28 this year, we think that

he would be interested in some observations of Boswell Belcher at Dilke. He distinguishes between his first spring observations of one or more individual birds, usually noted on the ground early in the season (e.g. March 15, 1953, March 9, 1954), and the large flocks seen later. His dates for the first mass flights observed are April 10, 1954, April 1, 1955, April 12, 1956, April 4, 1957, March 28, 1958. I am interested in the early records of individual birds because we noted one stray Lapland Longspur on February 12 this year (apparently with Horned Larks) in a field just north of Regina. It appears that some Lapland Longspurs remain in southwestern Saskatchewan all winter. The Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History has on record a statement made by C. F. Holmes of Dollard (March 9, 1937) to the effect that Lapland Longspurs are seen about all winter. This seems to be borne out by the remarks of S. A. Mann at Skull Creek who told us this spring that he has the impression that Lapland Longspurs may be seen in that area in every month of the year, with the exception possibly of December. "I think," Mr. Mann adds, "that would also go for Smith's Longspurs as well, for they nearly always appeared to feed together."

## Resident Longspurs in Lucky Lake Area

by Frank Roy, Saskatoon

What has happened to our resident longspurs? The Chestnut-collared Longspur was an abundant bird in the Lucky Lake-Birsay region from the year 1937 to 1944. As many as 15 pairs used to nest in a fifty-acre pasture on our farm. By 1945, not more than seven or eight pairs nested in the same area. In 1946 five pairs remained. In 1947, not a single bird nested in the pasture (which, by the way, had been reduced to 20 acres in extent). Since that date, the Chestnut-collared Longspur has become progressively more scarce, even in the extensive tracts of pasture west and south of Lucky Lake and Beechy.

Last summer I did not record a single longspur on the trip from Saskatoon to Cypress Hills Provincial Park, June 14-16, even though we passed through miles of suitable prairie habitat. The Chestnut-collared Longspur was not recorded by any member of the Natural History Society in the course of our summer meeting, although, W. Earl Godfrey (1950, *Birds of the Cypress Hills and Flotten Lake Regions, Saskatchewan*. Bulletin No. 120. Nat Mus. of Can.) termed it "abundant on the plains surrounding the Cypress Hills," in June, 1948. Godfrey, it must be noted, did not see the bird in the

higher hills, but members' observations were taken from the town of Maple Creek south to the Park Taverner, in 1921 recorded the bird as "very common" on the prairie south of Cypress Lake; we failed to uncover a single bird in the same area.

The McCown's Longspur was never a common bird in the Birsay-Lucky Lake area. It seemed to frequent cultivated fields more than its chestnut-collared cousin, and it was inclined to be colonial. In the area south and west of Beechy, much of which is grazing land, the McCown's was quite common as recently as 1948. In the Matador Ranch country it outnumbered the Chestnut-collared Longspur; eight to ten singing males could be noted on a mile's walk across the prairie.

In recent years, the McCown's Longspur seems to have suffered a fate similar to that of the Chestnut-collared. On a trip through the Matador country, August 5, 1955, only one bird was noted. Admittedly, longspurs nest early and have already begun to flock by the first of August. Again, last June, while travelling on Number 4 Highway from Rose town to Swift Current, a careful check of suitable habitat north and