

McCOWN'S LONGSPUR NEAR LAKE DAUPHIN, MANITOBA

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In the early evening of 22 May 1980, I was driving east from Highway 20 between sections 4 and 9-29-18-W1 and about 1.8 km north of the north end of Lake Dauphin, when a flock of small birds flew up from a ditch containing standing water. Suspecting that they were longspurs and would return, I stopped to identify them. Soon they came streaming back and approximately 40 Lapland Longspurs, about equal numbers of both sexes, lit at the water's edge to drink. From 12 to 16 m away, I closely observed these birds with the use of 7X binoculars and a 20X spotting scope from the front seat of my car. Viewing was excellent in bright sunlight that day.

After watching flocks come and go for about 15 minutes and with no birds at the water, a single bird flew in, lit and proceeded toward the water to drink. Immediately I recognized it as being different from the others. Although it was observed for only about 25 seconds and mainly in side view, most of the diagnostic traits of its species were seen. Its size, shape and manner of walking toward the water seemed identical to that of the Lapland Longspurs. The most striking feature of the bird was its general grey to very light grey coloration with a small but very prominent rich, rusty patch restricted to the shoulder of the folded wing. I knew instantly that it was a species I had never seen before in over 12 years of quite intensive birding.

The grey, which contrasted markedly with the buffy color of the female Lapland Longspur, was richest on the

head, nape and back of the neck. This gave way ventrally to a lighter grey on the sides of the upper breast to a near white on the abdomen. The wings, especially the primaries were darker, as was the back. The bird had a distinct black crown and a faint horizontal strip across the upper breast. The legs were dark and the bill was grey-black.

Realizing the importance of observing the pattern of white in the tails of longspurs, I attempted to note that trait, but in side view I could not identify any pattern, although white in the tail was evident. When the bird took off, I was unable to see the tail pattern because the bird remained in side view as it passed in front of the car. I had been observing from the passenger's front seat window and not only did I have to switch from spotting scope to binoculars, but I also had to slide across the seat and get the binoculars on the bird from the driver's window. When I did get focused on the bird it was flying directly away at such an angle that I was unable to see a tail pattern. However from the traits observed, there was no question that it was a McCown's Longspur.

Herbert Krause includes Whitewater Lake in southwestern Manitoba in the breeding range of McCown's Longspur.¹ Godfrey shows its Canadian breeding range to be southeastern Alberta and southern Saskatchewan. He gives no breeding records for Manitoba, but does note that it has been identified in migration at Whitewater Lake. Knapton found this species in extreme southwestern Manitoba and gave

Table 1. WEATHER INFORMATION MAY 19 TO MAY 22, 1980 AT DAUPHIN, MAN.

Date	Temperature (high, C)	Wind Direction	Wind Speed
May 22	39°	S-SW	8 KM/H gusting to 65 KM/H
May 21	37°	SW-W	Variable, Calm to 56 KM/H
May 20	31°	SW	18 KM/H gusting to 56 KM/H
May 19	32°	SW	18 KM/H gusting to 56 KM/H

its status there as a casual spring migrant. He and John Murray identified a male McCown's Longspur among Chestnut-collared 5 km west of Lyleton, Manitoba, on 10 May 1974.⁴ A Manitoba Department of Mines, Natural Resources and Environment pamphlet gives no records for the Delta Marsh at the south end of Lake Manitoba and it is the only longspur not listed for southeastern Manitoba.^{5 2}

Explanations for the occurrence of this bird far northeast of its known breeding range and migration route were sought. Weather information obtained from the Dauphin weather office is given in Table 1.

The wind direction from the south and southwest on 22 May and from the southwest or west the 3 days prior to 22 May, may have been a factor in the disorientation of the bird. Volcanic ash in the air emanating from Mount St. Helens in southwestern Washington state may also have been an influence. However, the McCown's Longspur is, evidently, a great wanderer in dry springs. Roberts states that it visited western Minnesota only in dry seasons, when very dry it was most abundant, and in wet seasons was entirely absent".⁶ In North Dakota, Dr. and Mrs. Gammell also found this

longspur to occur in that state mainly in dry years.¹ The spring of 1980 was probably the driest ever on the Canadian prairies, including Manitoba. Between 22 March and 22 May, the date the bird was seen, a total of 0.3 mm of precipitation was recorded at the Dauphin weather office. Perhaps the bird seen on 22 May 1980 was a wandering bird as well as an obviously disorientated one.

¹BENT, A. C. 1968. Life histories of North American cardinals, grosbeaks, buntings, towhees, finches, sparrows and allies. Part 3. Dover, New York.

²CLEVELAND, N. J. ed. 1980. Birder's guide to southeastern Manitoba. Eco Series No. 1. Manitoba Naturalists Society, Winnipeg. 58 pp.

³GODFREY, W. E. 1966. The birds of Canada. Natl. Mus. Canada Bull. 203, Ottawa. 428 pp.

⁴KNAPTON, R. W. 1979. Birds of the Gainsborough-Lyleton Region. Spec. Publ. 10, Sask. Natural History Soc., Regina. 72 pp.

⁵Manitoba Department of Mines, Natural Resources and Environment. 1979. Birds of the Delta Marsh. Pamphlet.

⁶ROBERTS, T. S. 1932. The birds of Minnesota. Vol. 2.