

# Lark Sparrow

**SCIENTIFIC NAME:** *Chondestes grammacus*. Its name is derived from the Greek words *chondros* meaning “grain,” and *edestes* meaning “eater.” *Grammacus* is Greek for “line” or “lined,” alluding to the stripes on its face and back. Its English name refers to the bird’s melodious lark-like song.

**DESCRIPTION:** One of the largest sparrows, lark sparrows are about 6.5 inches long and have an 11-inch wingspan. They weigh close to an ounce. Males and females look almost alike. Adults are striped black, with a boldly patterned face alternating chestnut, black and white. These birds have whitish and unmarked underparts, with a single dark spot in the center of the breast. Their long, rounded tails are dark brown or black with bright white corners. The striking facial pattern, distinctive tail and bubbling song make the lark sparrow one of the easiest of Arizona’s sparrows to identify.

**DISTRIBUTION:** Regular spring and fall migrants throughout their core range, lark sparrows generally occur west of the Mississippi River. They breed primarily in western and central North America from southern Saskatchewan south to north-central Mexico. Their winter range extends well into south-central Mexico. In Arizona, they are common and widespread summer residents north of the Mogollon Rim. Appropriate habitats in southeastern Arizona also host significant year-round populations.

**HABITAT:** These birds prefer open areas with scattered small trees and low shrubs. In Arizona, lark sparrows commonly breed in shrub-steppe, mesquite grasslands and pinyon-juniper woodland edges. Their favored southeastern Arizona areas are semiarid grasslands with scattered mesquite,

acacia and yucca. Except during migration and winter, these sparrows primarily are absent from Arizona’s Sonoran and Mohave deserts in the south and west, and from coniferous forests and dense woodlands statewide.



**BIOLOGY:** Lark sparrows eat mostly seeds (grasses and weeds), and insects such as grasshoppers and crickets. More insects than seeds are eaten during the summer, as the breeding season progresses. Small, loose flocks forage on the ground, searching for food in leaf litter, grasses and forbs.

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Migrating birds begin arriving in their Arizona breeding grounds by late March or early April. Males initiate courtship using a distinctive turkey-like dance. Both males and females appear to select the nest

location, but only females build nests. Composed of grass, bark fibers and other plant material, nests typically are placed on the ground near the base of low shrubs. Females generally lay about four eggs and incubate them alone for 11 or 12 days. Nestlings, fed an exclusive diet of insects by both parents, are ready to leave the nest by 12 days. Eggs and nestlings are particularly vulnerable to predation by mammals and snakes. The loggerhead shrike, more commonly known as the “butcher bird,” also has been observed chasing young birds.

**STATUS:** Lark sparrows are more common and widespread in Arizona than previously thought. Their numbers appear to be declining in the eastern United States, while populations in the West have remained stable or even increased. Western populations may benefit from juniper, mesquite and other woody plants encroaching into open grasslands as a result of inappropriate grazing practices and fire suppression.

**MANAGEMENT NEEDS:** Partly because this sparrow appears to do well in disturbed habitats, no specific threats have been identified in its breeding range. Conservation efforts targeted at other sparrows prioritized in the Arizona Partners in Flight Bird Conservation Plan may also benefit the lark sparrow. Much of our knowledge regarding this sparrow’s natural history and ecology is anecdotal. Detailed studies are needed to better quantify various aspects of its life history. 🐦

■ Biologist Edwin Juarez coordinates the Arizona Bird Conservation Initiative, a partnership of agencies and organizations working to conserve Arizona’s birds and their habitats. He first became drawn to birds while growing up on a rural farm in El Salvador.