

Lark Bunting *Calamospiza melanocorys*

Though the Lark Bunting migrates southwest from the northwestern Great Plains to winter commonly in Baja California, it is rare in Alta California. Historically, records for San Diego County were concentrated along the coast in the fall, though there were also several winter and spring records, some of the latter of flocks. The more uniform coverage of the county achieved by field work for this atlas, however, suggests the Lark Bunting's primary role here is as a rare spring migrant through the Anza–Borrego Desert.

Migration: In fall, the Lark Bunting is reported in San Diego County less than annually, with no more than three birds together. Aside from one in Mason Valley (M23) 13 September 1913 (SDNHM 1851) and one at Lake Henshaw (G17) 18 November 1978 (P. Unitt), all have been in the coastal lowland, most in the Tijuana River valley. Fall dates are 6 September and later, except for 22 July 1996, when an exceptionally early migrant was at Chula Vista (U10; D. and M. Vanier, NASFN 50:998, 1996).

In spring the Lark Bunting is notably sporadic, occasionally occurring in small flocks. It is most likely in the



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Anza–Borrego Desert after wet winters, as illustrated in 1983 and 1998. In the latter year, one was near Seventeen Palm Springs (F29) 4 April (C. Hagen), 10 were near Five Palms Spring (G29) 11 April (G. Rebstock, K. Forney), 10 were near the Volcanic Hills (Q29) 25 April (R. Thériault), and five were near the Borrego Air Ranch (H27) 27 April (M. L. Gabel). The Lark Bunting has occurred in the desert in normal to dry years, too, for example, one or two at Agua Caliente Springs (M26) 4 April–1 May 1990 (R. Thériault, AB 44:498, 1990) and one at the north end of Clark Valley (C25) 7 May 2001 (D. C. Seals). Desert

records extend from 30 March (1999, one at Ocotillo Wells, I29, P. Unitt) to 9 May (1983, one in Earthquake Valley, K23, R. L. McKernan, AB 37:914, 1983).

There are also a few spring records for the coastal slope, clumped in a few wet years, especially 1884 and 1978, following the wettest and third wettest winters in San Diego County history. In the former year, the birds were seen in flocks at Campo (U23) and National City (T10). On 25 May, from National City, Holterhoff (1884) wrote, "they are everywhere abundant on the mesas, and apparently breeding." No proof of breeding followed, however. The Lark Bunting has been confirmed nesting in California only in the Lanfair Valley of the Mojave Desert in spring 1978 (AB 32:1210, 1978). The only spring Lark

Bunting on the coastal slope during the atlas period was in Proctor Valley (T14) 29 April 1998 (P. Unitt). With 1884 excluded, spring records for the coastal slope extend from 4 April (1977, Campo, AB 31:1049, 1977) to 20 May (1978, Horno area, Camp Pendleton, D3, A. Fries).

Winter: There are 10 winter records of the Lark Bunting in San Diego County, all of one or two individuals and all from the coastal lowland. Since Unitt (1984) listed eight, the only ones have been at Chula Vista 5–24 March 1989 (R. Reinke, AB 43:368, 1989) and about 0.5 mile northwest of the mouth of Las Flores Creek (E3) 16 February 1998 (R. and S. L. Breisch).