

First record of Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra* for Oman

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On 6 February 2015 while visiting Sun Farm in Sohar, northern Oman, JA and AG had been watching several large groups of Bimaculated Larks *Melanocorypha bimaculata* (total 350+ birds) and 200+ Greater Short-toed Larks *Calandrella brachydactyla* feeding on grass and weed seeds on bare sandy ground with scattered short scrubby vegetation. At c09.30 h a large *bimaculata*-like lark was noticed on open ground adjacent to a former pivot field in the company of c80 *bimaculata*. JA got out of the car and approached. As he did so the large bird and another of similar size close by flew up together with the flock of *bimaculata*. JA was able to track the first bird. In flight it was conspicuously larger than the *bimaculata* and he was able to clearly see a white trailing edge to the secondaries and a conspicuously blackish underwing (by comparison with the brown/grey underwing of *bimaculata*). As it turned it did not show the white/pale tip to the tail typical of *bimaculata*. JA was 100% certain of the identification of the first bird as Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra* and at the time considered it likely that the second bird was the same. Unfortunately it was not possible to locate the birds again that morning. On 13 February 2015 at 08.30 h JA and AG were again checking larks along the edge of the top field, when they found a small group of Bimaculated Larks feeding on seeds in very short sparse dry grass with 2 larger *bimaculata*-like larks. Suspecting these were Calandra Larks, they drove closer. On the ground one was clearly larger and greyer on the mantle than the nearby browner *bimaculata* and seemed longer legged. When turned away from the observers, with head down, rump raised, the white edges to the tail were clearly visible. As the flock flew, one was immediately identified as a Calandra Lark



Plate 1. Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra* Sun Farm, Sohar, Oman, 20 February 2015. © Hanne & Jens Eriksen



Plate 2. Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra* Sun Farm, Sohar, Oman, 20 February 2015. © Hanne & Jens Eriksen



Plate 3. Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra* Sun Farm, Sohar, Oman, 20 February 2015. © Hanne & Jens Eriksen

by the white trailing edge to the wing, black/blackish underwing and white sides to the tail. JA and AG were later able to get even better views of both larger birds together in flight, confirming that both were Calandra Larks. No call was heard.

On 20 February 2015, one Calandra Lark was observed on the top field by JA and AG and two were photographed by Jens and Hanne Eriksen (Plates 1–4, Plate 5 shows one of the numerous Bimaculated Larks seen on the same day). The following day, four Calandra Larks were found in short grass adjacent to the top field, in the company of a group of 250+ Bimaculated Larks, 50+ Greater Short-toed Larks and numerous Black-crowned Sparrow-Larks *Eremopterix nigriceps*. All four were well seen both on the ground and in flight. This was the last date the species was found.

Jennings (2010) noted Calandra Lark “is a rare winter visitor to the Arabian Gulf region, with records from Kuwait, the eastern province Bahrain and the UAE and possibly Qatar” and that it often occurs alongside other lark species. Porter & Aspinall (2010) described its habitat as “open cultivated plains, grass and cereal fields, steppe and wastelands” and its status as “vagrant Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, UAE.” There have been no previous records of Calandra Lark in Oman, but there are eight accepted records



Plate 4. Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra* Sun Farm, Sohar, Oman, 20 February 2015. © Hanne & Jens Eriksen



Plate 5. Bimaculated Lark *Melanocorypha bimaculata* Sun Farm, Sohar, Sultanate of Oman, 20 February 2015. © Hanne & Jens Eriksen

for the United Arab Emirates, October–April (Pedersen & Aspinall 2015) so the species was considered likely for Oman. The dry derelict Sun Farm, Sohar, may seem an unattractive location for most species now, but it seems to provide suitable peaceful feeding on seeds from weeds and dry grass and a sufficient supply of water for several lark species. It is interesting to note that Bimaculated Larks, which are regular winter visitors to Sun Farm, were present in winter 2014/2015 in rather high numbers, rising to 350+ in February 2015. Given such high numbers of a closely allied species, it is perhaps not surprising that February 2015 should also provide Oman's first record of Calandra Lark, a record accepted by the Oman Bird Records Committee.

JE adds that Calandra Lark can be difficult to separate from Bimaculated Lark though there are obvious differences if seen well. Calandra is c20% larger than Bimaculated, obvious if seen together. Calandra is greyer overall with less bold face markings. The black spots on the sides of the breast are larger in Calandra and it has black streaking between the spots and on the upper breast. Calandra has a white trailing edge to the secondaries if seen well in flight. Bimaculated are missing this feature. Calandra also has darker underwings. Calandra has white sides to the tail whereas Bimaculated has a thin white band at the tip of the tail.

REFERENCES

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