

# OREGON WHEAT

*An Official Publication of the Oregon Wheat Industry*

**AUGUST 2014**

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*The streaked horned lark:  
Little bird, big landscape*

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# The streaked horned lark in the Willamette Valley: Little bird/ big landscape

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## **A THREATENED SPECIES IN THE WILLAMETTE VALLEY'S AGRICULTURAL LANDS**

Did you know that in October 2013, The US Fish and Wildlife Service added a new bird species to the Federal list of Endangered and Threatened Species, and that almost 80% of the bird's population is found in the Willamette Valley in Oregon? And that the majority of this bird's remaining habitat is found on active agricultural lands? Did you miss hearing about this new listed species? It's the streaked horned lark, a small songbird that could use your help.

## **THE STREAKED HORNED LARK? IS THAT THE SAME THING AS A MEADOWLARK?**

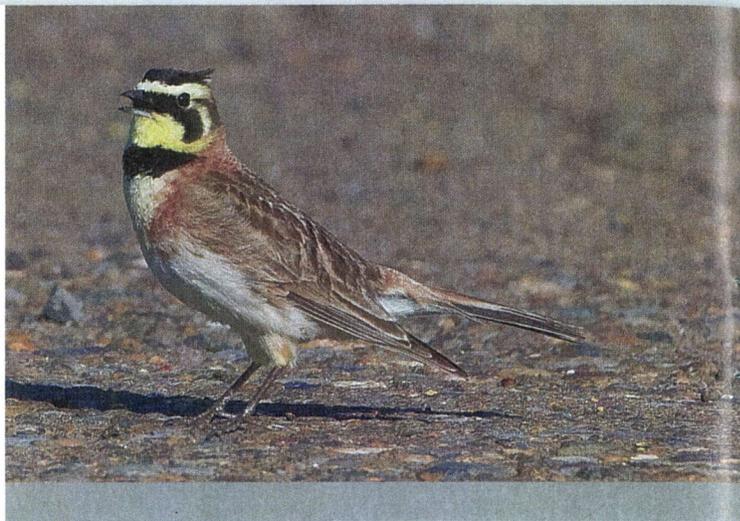
Nope. The streaked horned lark is not related to the better known, larger, and more vocal western meadowlark. The meadowlark (Oregon's state bird) is another native bird found in prairies in the Willamette Valley, but it likes denser vegetation, and will use shrub lands and lush native prairies that are too thickly vegetated for the streaked horned lark.

The streaked horned lark is smaller, not nearly as flashy as the meadowlark, and a lot rarer. It's a subspecies of the wide-ranging horned lark, which is found on prairies, tundra, and lake and ocean shores across the northern hemisphere. The streaked horned lark subspecies is found only in the Pacific Northwest, west of the Cascades in the Willamette Valley, Puget Lowlands, along the lower Columbia River, and at a few sites on the Washington Coast.

## **WHERE ARE THE LARKS?**

Streaked horned larks are year-round residents of the Willamette Valley. They breed and winter in the same habitats. When they're not in the air, they're on the ground. They build their nests on the ground in open fields, and you'll never see a streaked horned lark perched in a tree or shrub. They forage on the ground for insects and seeds. Females build their nests on the ground from mid-April to August, often returning to the same area every year. Recent surveys estimate that there are probably fewer than 2,000 streaked horned larks left today, and about 80% of them live in Oregon's Willamette Valley. The other 20% are found on islands in the Columbia River, on the Puget prairies or on the Washington coast.

A hundred years ago, streaked horned larks were relatively



abundant on native prairies, ocean beaches, and scoured riverbanks and islands in the Columbia and Willamette River floodplains — any place that would have been wide open, flat and with a lot of bare ground. Today, the bird's natural habitats are virtually gone — the prairies have been converted to ag lands and are no longer burned, the Columbia and Willamette Rivers no longer flood every year, the coastal dunes are overrun with dense European beachgrass — so with essentially none of its native habitat left, what's a lark to do? Amazingly, the streaked horned lark has hung on — just barely — by finding habitat on highly modified working lands that seem to mimic its original habitats. In Oregon, these working lands are mainly airports, dredge spoil islands in the Columbia River, and Willamette Valley farm lands.

## **WHY AIRPORTS AND AG LANDS?**

Streaked horned larks have always selected habitat that is wide open, flat, with no trees, and little or no vegetation. Not surprisingly then, streaked horned larks are found at many small airports in the Willamette Valley — planes want the same thing that larks want: flat open ground without the annoyance of tall trees. Larks also use valley bottom agricultural fields, especially where the crop is low-growing and herbaceous. Grass seed fields seem to provide the best habitat, although we've also seen them in young Christmas tree farms and row crop fields. Healthy wheat fields are generally too dense for larks, but underperforming areas of wheat fields (e.g., drown-outs with a bit of bare ground) and the margins of the fields along rural roads can provide good habitat for larks.

## **THE BUREAUCRATIC STUFF**

The streaked horned lark was listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act in October 2013. A special rule that removes the prohibition against "take" in certain circumstances was published as part of the listing action to acknowledge that some land uses (airport maintenance and ag practices) benefit the streaked horned lark by inadvertently creating habitat. Without the actions of agricultural landowners and airport managers, there would be almost no habitat at all for streaked horned larks in the Willamette Valley.

The special rule for agriculture says that routine agricultural activities consistent with state laws on non-federal lands will not be regulated, even if the activity has some adverse effects to the species. Covered activities include:

- Planting, harvesting, rotation, mowing, tilling, discing, burning, and herbicide application to crops;

- Normal transportation activities, and repair and maintenance of unimproved farm roads and graveled margins of rural roads;
- Livestock grazing;
- Hazing of geese or predators; and
- Maintenance of irrigation and drainage systems.

The take-home message here is that normal agricultural activities in the Willamette Valley create habitat for the streaked horned lark, and these activities are not regulated or prohibited under the new listing. This is not to say that ag practices are always good; activities that create habitat can also destroy nests and young larks. The USFWS is trying a novel approach with the streaked horned lark – rather than regulate industries which inadvertently create habitat, by using a special rule we want to provide opportunities to build partnerships with land managers to include conservation actions to keep larks in the picture on working lands.

### RECOVERING THE STREAKED HORNED LARK IN THE WILLAMETTE VALLEY

The streaked horned lark's natural habitat is virtually gone. There are some small remnant and restored native prairie habitats in the Willamette Valley where larks find what they need, including prairie parcels at the US Fish and Wildlife Service's National Wildlife Refuges (Finley, Baskett Slough and Ankeny), but most of the larks left in the Willamette Valley are found on farm lands and at regional airports. Recovering the streaked horned lark will require restoring prairie habitats, sandy islands and beaches for the bird, but in the short-term, ag lands are essential to keeping larks in the picture. As we begin to work to recover healthy populations of the lark in Oregon, we will work with farmers to protect larks in specific habitat areas during the breeding season and to allow the birds to flock up on farm fields in the winter. We are also working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Oregon Farm Bureau to develop programs to assist willing landowners to help larks.

### WHAT CAN INTERESTED FARMERS DO TO HELP STREAKED HORNED LARKS?

Willamette Valley farm lands hold the key to saving the lark. Ag landowners can attract and protect larks on their lands by taking some fairly simple steps:

- *Let it rest in the summer.* Summer fallowing, including use of chemicals, can provide nesting habitat (although tillage during the nesting season can destroy nests);
- *Leave the bald spots alone.* In general, larks don't want to be surrounded by thick or tall vegetation, but they will nest in small bare patches caused by drown-outs within a larger productive field;

- *Harvest early and get out.* If harvest is early enough, and straw baling or flail-chopping is completed, larks may breed in fields after the harvest;
- *Rural road margins are nice.* Larks often nest on mowed or sprayed road margins if left undisturbed during the breeding season.

For more information on managing agricultural lands to benefit streaked horned larks, see the land owner's guide recently developed by Oregon State University. (<http://cascadiaprairieoak.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/StreakedHornedLark-TechnicalNote.pdf>).

The lark is an odd bird among listed species. We're not trying to save the last, best remnants of their native habitats.... Those places are mostly gone. We're trying to find ways to maintain the species on active, agricultural lands, and to do that, we need to engage the landowners, especially farmers, to help protect larks on ag lands in the Willamette Valley.

If you are interested in encouraging larks in your fields, contact us. Our Partners for Fish and Wildlife program (<http://www.fws.gov/oregonfwo/ToolsForLandowners/Partners/Details.asp>) has incentive programs that can help farmers with lark conservation, and we are exploring other creative ways to work with the ag community to give the lark a chance. If you have some ideas for encouraging streaked horned larks on Willamette Valley farmlands, we'd like to hear from you. ♦

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