

## The Song of the (Horned) Lark!

### President's Message February 2018



*Adult male Horned Lark*

Although not every year brings abundant wildflowers to our desert parks they reliably provide foraging and nesting habitat for native birds in the Antelope Valley. So important is the Antelope Valley for native birds that the Audubon Society has designated it as a "Globally Important Bird Area," one of only 424 worldwide. This IBA, **the Antelope Valley Important Bird Area** provides breeding, foraging and nesting habitat for Swainson's hawk, golden and bald eagles, burrowing owls, LeConte's thrasher, tricolored blackbirds and many other sensitive species.

Within the Antelope Valley IBA, state parks provide some of the few areas where these species can continue to find protected natural open space now and in the future. More than 150 different species of native birds have been documented at the three state parks in the vicinity of Lancaster and Palmdale over the last 10 years. Citizen scientists who collaborate with experts through the website eBird.org have documented 55 species at Ripley Desert Woodland, 56 at the Poppy Reserve and 68 at Saddleback Butte State Park.\* One of these citizen scientists is long time Poppy Reserve volunteer Vern Benhart who has identified eight different species at the Reserve as recently as December, 2017 including northern harrier, tree swallow and western bluebird.



*Nesting female and young*

For the casual visitor, one of easiest Poppy Reserve species to find is the fascinating horned lark. While walking the trails in the morning, have you heard a high pitched tinkling call? You may be listening to the mating call of a male horned lark “advertising” his breeding territory. Although flower watchers are most happy with fields crowded with colorful blooms, the horned lark prefers open brown fields where the female’s camouflaged coloring is most effective. At the Poppy Reserve, horned larks often are seen “walking” on the trails; unlike most other birds, they actually do “walk” and do not hop!

Horned larks, 7 - 8 inches tall and sparrow-like, are the only true larks native to North America. They are mostly brown. Males have a yellow face and black “mask” topped by tiny black “horns” that are actually tufts of feathers. Females are less colorful with a pale yellow wash on the throat and lack the male’s black mask or horns. Their scientific name is *Eremophila alpestris*. The genus name *Eremophila* is Latin for “desert-loving” and is an apt description of this bird’s preference for open ground. They eat mostly seeds but also hunt insects to feed to their young.

Horned Larks are monogamous for one season. The male establishes his territory in January-February. He attracts the female by perching on fence posts and bushes to sing his mating call. In display, the male takes off into the air, rising to about 300-800 feet; he circles and sings his high-pitched tinkling song. After his song is finished, he closes his wings, and dives head first towards the ground. Just before reaching the ground, he opens his wings and pulls out of the dive!

Females also exhibit fascinating breeding behavior. Females nest on the ground and indulge in extensive “decorating” when constructing a home for their anticipated offspring. According to “All About Birds” ([www.allaboutbirds.org](http://www.allaboutbirds.org)) female horned larks “often collect ‘pavings’—pebbles, clods, corncobs, dung—which they place beside their nests, covering soil excavated from the nest cavity. The ‘paved’ area resembles a sort of walkway, though the birds don’t seem to use it that way. While nobody fully understands the function of these pavings, they may help prevent collected nesting material from blowing away while the nest is under construction.” Females produce 3 to 4 eggs and both parents help to feed the hatchlings. Horned larks migrate but return to their birthplace every spring to mate; a behavior called “philopatric.”

Happy flower and bird watching!

\*Source: eBird, [www.ebird.org](http://www.ebird.org), sponsored by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology

More useful links:

<https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/horned-lark>

<https://www.audubon.org/news/how-use-ebird>

<https://www.audubon.org/important-bird-areas/state/california>