

Chestnut-collared Longspur (*Calcarius ornatus*)



Scott Somershoe

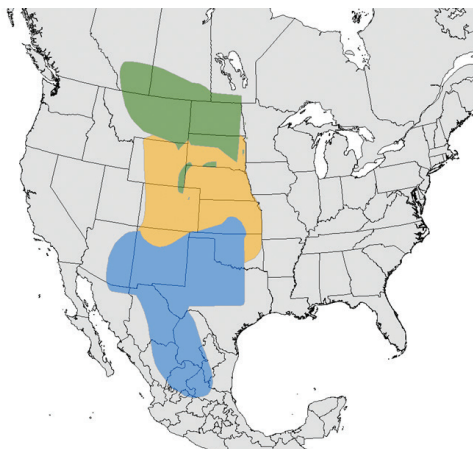


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(Left) Adult breeding plumage male; (Right) Female breeding plumage.

Introduction

This colorful songbird is a native-grassland specialist that prefers grazed grasslands. Where common, they can reach high densities and can easily be the most common bird species seen and heard as they frequently display in flight and sing during the peak in nesting, usually May-early July.



Chestnut-collared Longspur Distribution Map (BirdLife International and NatureServe 2012).

Identification

Chestnut-collared longspurs are relatively small and sparrow-like (length: 6 inches [15 cm], wing span: 11 inches [28 cm], weight: 0.8-0.9 oz [22-26 g]). They have white outer tail feathers with a triangle of black feathers at the center of the tail. Prominent chestnut-colored collar and black chest and belly is only present on males in breeding plumage. Some females exhibit slightly more muted chestnut collar in breeding plumage.

Adult Breeding Plumage

Male: Chestnut-colored nape and black chest and belly. Black eye stripe and variable amount of black on the crown. Variable amounts of white on face and throat with cream color on cheeks and throat.



Chestnut-collared Longspur, male (winter plumage).



Chestnut-collared Longspur nest.

Female: grayish buff with dusky streaks on back and sides; sometimes with dull, obscure chestnut collar and dark feathers on breast and belly, sometimes similar to male. Both have distinctive triangular (“whale tail”) pattern on tail.

Adult winter plumage: Adults have a light-brown and cream colored body with the diagnostic white outer tail feathers with a triangle of black feathers and completely black feathers at the center of the tail.

Immature birds: Similar to winter plumage adults.

Breeding Biology

Flight display: Male flies up and has a distinct undulating, up and down and more horizontal flight display. The species flight display is distinguished from the McCown’s Longspur which flies up on an angle and then holds wings out while it slowly drops downward.

Reproduction: Typically arrive on breeding grounds in mid- to late April and attempt nesting from May-July. Breed in pairs, but extra-pair matings do occur. Both parents are needed to successfully raise young.

Nest: The nest is placed on the ground in a tea cup sized shallow, often scraped out, depression about 3-4 inches deep.

Clutch Size and Incubation: Typically 4 eggs and incubation lasting about 11 days, starting with laying of next to last egg.

Nestlings: Young longspurs are altricial, thus are featherless and unable to open their eyes and are unable to care for themselves. Both males and females feed young birds with the majority of food items brought to the nest being grasshoppers, beetles, and moths and butterflies. Young leave the nest, often by walking out or with short weak flight, at an average of 8-12 days.



Chestnut-collared Longspur habitat.

Diet: Mostly seeds outside of breeding. During breeding season, eat primarily insects, especially grasshoppers and small caterpillars and moths.

Fun Fact: First collected by Townsend along the Platte River in Nebraska, where they no longer occur as a breeding species.

Habitat

Breeding: Typical breeding habitat is arid short- to mixed-grass prairie with flat to rolling topography, vegetation height <7.5-12 inches), and minimal litter accumulation. They will also use grazed, burned, or mowed tallgrass prairie.

Migration: Species has been observed in crop fields and shortgrass prairie habitats, similar to those that they use during the breeding and winter seasons.

Winter habitat: Winters primarily in the southern Great Plains and Chihuahuan Desert of southwestern U.S. and northern Mexico. Frequents short-grass prairie and desert grasslands with primarily low grasses and forbs, with most vegetation <20 inches high, but has also been observed using taller grasses. Negative association with shrub cover; >75% of individuals observed in areas with <1% shrub cover in desert grasslands of Arizona and New Mexico.



Typical longspur breeding habitat. Note cattle in the background.

Management Recommendations

Chestnut-collared Longspurs prefer shortgrass or moderately grazed mixed-grass prairie with grass on average 6 inches tall with a mix of bare ground and club mosses. In drier areas or in dry years, they seek out wet meadows, while in wetter locales they prefer slightly higher and drier areas. They require disturbance to maintain shorter grass and low shrub density. They avoid idle pastures, especially with tame grass species. A twice-over grazing rotation may benefit this species.