

McCown's Longspur (*Rhynchophanes mccownii*)



Scott Somershoe

Male McCown's Longspur.

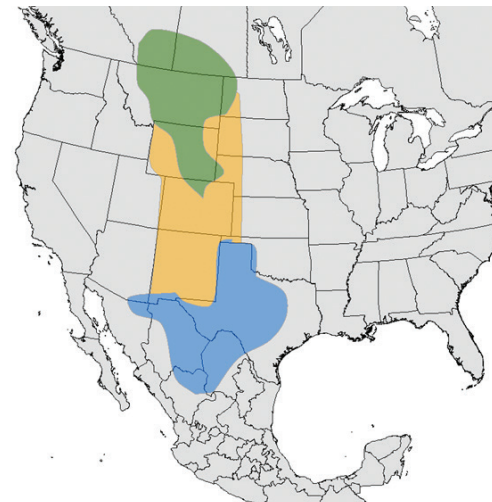


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McCown's Longspur immature female.

Introduction

McCown's Longspur is a grassland specialist that breeds in shortgrass and mixed grass prairie of the northern Great Plains from northern Colorado, north through eastern Wyoming and Montana, and into southern Alberta and Saskatchewan. This species prefers more heavily grazed prairie with extensive bare ground. They often nest in actively grazed pasture with short standing grass. Although locally common to abundant, McCown's Longspur has experienced an overall population decline of approximately 94% since the late 1960's.



McCown's Longspur Distribution Map (BirdLife International and NatureServe 2012).

Identification

McCown's Longspur is a sparrow-sized bird (length 6 inches [15 cm], wing span: 11 inches [28 cm], weight: 0.8-0.9 oz [22-26 g]) with a stout bill and a distinctive white tail marked by a black "T" (black center and tip) which is noticeable in flight when its tail is fanned.



Kevin Barnes

McCown's Longspur

Adult breeding plumage: Adult breeding males and females differ in plumage. A breeding male McCown's Longspur (below, left) is gray with a black bill, crown, malar stripe (stripe below the bill), and upper breast, and with blackish wash on lower breast and belly. The chestnut patch on the shoulder is distinct for this longspur. Breeding female is gray, lacking black plumage of male, have a pale bill, and back and wing feathers are tinged rusty.

Immature and juvenile birds: Immature males are similar to non-breeding adults. Young females, in their 1st winter, are similar to non-breeding adults and have unstreaked

underparts, with breast slightly darker than belly and the bill is pinkish. Juveniles, birds that recently fledged from the nest, are more uniformly sandy in appearance, with streaked upper breast and white belly, but this plumage is held only briefly in late summer when they molt into the aforementioned immature plumage.

Fun Fact: The female is a "tight sitter" during incubation and usually does not flush from the nest unless she is in danger of being stepped on.

Notes: Local abundance of McCown's Longspurs can vary dramatically between years where they may be common to abundant one year, absent

the next year, and common the next year.

Breeding Biology

Flight display: Male flies up about 30-40 ft, holds both wings outstretched, spreads out its white tail feathers, and floats downward while singing a soft tinkling song. Males will occasionally teeter on the descent, but rarely flap their wings. Male may alight on ground following display, but more typically rises up again and repeats the display.

Reproduction: McCown's Longspurs begin courtship and territory establishment shortly after arrival on the breeding grounds between late March (Colorado) and early May (southern Canada). Pairs form quickly, but nesting is often delayed until May.

Nest: The nest is placed in a shallow depression in the ground and lined with grasses. McCown's Longspurs may place nests beside bunch grasses, cactus, shrubs, or cow pies; however some nests are placed in the open away from a vertical structure.

Clutch Size and Incubation: Typically 3-4 eggs with incubation lasting on average 12 days, starting with the laying of last egg. Only females

incubate the eggs. Approximately 50% of females attempt to raise a second brood of young each year.

Nestlings: Young longspurs are featherless and unable to open their eyes or care for themselves. Both males and females feed young birds with grasshoppers, beetles, and moths and butterflies. Young leave the nest at an average of 9-10 days old. Parents tend to the young for about three weeks before the young are independent.

Diet: Adults primarily consume seeds during the breeding season, while feeding insects to the young.

Habitat

Breeding: McCown's Longspur breeds in short-grass and mixed-grass prairie with open, arid, sandy soil with sparse vegetative cover. Nesting areas can be relatively bare, with as much as 50% exposed soils and an average vegetation height of only 2.5 inches (6.4 cm). Dominant vegetation consists of short-grasses like blue grama and buffalograss, which are interspersed with cacti and other grasses and forbs. They rarely use idled or deferred grassland. Generally, they prefer heavy and summer grazing over light or winter grazed pasture.



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McCown's Longspur habitat.

Migration: Little is known about habitat use in migration, but they use plowed crop fields and short-grass prairie habitats.

Winter: Winter habitat is similar to breeding habitat and consists of open, short grass prairie, heavily grazed pastures, plowed fields, desert grasslands, dry lake beds, and playas (shallow prairie wetlands).

Management Recommendations

McCown's Longspurs prefer areas of little litter and short, sparse vegetation with little forb cover and extensive areas of bare ground. Recommended management could include implementing timely cattle rotations and allowing for adequate

resting periods for grass regrowth. Pasture that is already sparse and short from grazing, especially during drier periods, should not be overgrazed. In contrast, pastures that have vegetation taller than preferred for nesting by McCown's Longspur could be grazed more intensively to encourage use, particularly in years with above average precipitation. Appropriately implemented prescribed fire may also be beneficial to the species.