

Smith's Longspur

6 Sep 1996

Five Ridges Prairie, Plymouth Co., IA

*Ann Johnson/Jim Bangma

IBL 67:26; 67:82

Record Number: 96-67

Classification: NA

DOCUMENTATION

Ann Johnson, 532 120th Ave., Norwalk 50211

Jim Bangma, 770 Anderson Ave., 8N, Cliffside Park, NJ 07010

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 67:26

Records Committee: IBL 67:82

VOTE: 3 A-D, 4 NA

NA, If it looked like a Reed Bunting as indicated, I don't think Harris Sparrow or McCown's Longspur were eliminated.

NA, Observation time is admittedly short for a species not expected on this date. Tail and wing pattern not able to be seen well.

A-D, An adult male Smith's Longspur is pretty distinctive and should not be confused with anything else. Although there are no modern records for fall, if this bird was indicative of the norm, they might be quiet and hide quite easily in tall vegetation. The date seems extremely early for migrating longspurs, but do adult males leave the tundra first as shorebirds do? What do we really know about these birds in fall.

NA, The date, habitat, plumage, and behavior are inconsistent with Smith's Longspur. Why not an immature Horned Lark? Ken Brock's comment: "Smith's Longspur:- The description sounds pretty good for an alternate plumage male. However, in addition to the habitat and date problems you mentioned [fall report from Kent to Brock], according to Pyle et al. (ID Guide to N. Am. Passerines) the post breeding molt is complete by August. This agrees with The Birds of N. Am. (#34), which shows that most molting is completed by about August 20, with some remaining into the first week of September. All of this suggests that an early September male should have been almost entirely in basic plumage. These complexities warrant rejecting this fly-by observation of a breeding plumed male.

NA, Date unprecedented in Iowa. Viewing extremely brief. Also males would not be in high plumage at this time--molts Jul-Sep. Somewhat regular in MO in fall, but earliest records in late Oct.

96-67

**DOCUMENTATION FORM
UNUSUAL BIRD SIGHTINGS IN IOWA**

Species: Smith's Longspur (alternate male)

Location: Five Ridges Prairie, Plymouth County, IA

Habitat: Rolling western Iowa prairie with some agriculture

Date: 6 September 1996 **Time:** 7:15 am **Length of observation:** less than one minute

Name and Address: Ann Johnson, 532 120th Avenue, Norwalk, IA 50211
Jim Bangma, 770 Anderson Ave., Apt. 8N, Cliffside Park, NJ 07010

Background: We had been looking at grassland sparrows in the area and were walking up the road checking other species in the hedge rows. A bird came flying in from the west that we both got binoculars on. It flew into the cornfield to our south and we could not relocate it.

Viewing conditions (light, distance, optics): The bird was seen by both observers through 7X42 Zeiss binocs at about 75 feet. The sun was up in the east and we were facing south, so the light was good as it flew in.

Description of bird: The bird in flight was reminiscent of a pipit or Horned Lark but the tail was bit shorter. The face had a distinct black and white pattern, white face with black cap and black triangular pattern on the cheek. The underparts were buffy. White in the tail was evident although pattern was not noted. Bangma observed a bit of white in the wing. The bird made no sound as it flew.

Similar species/discussion: Although the time of observation was fairly short, the facial pattern and buffy underparts were definitely that of an adult male Smith's Longspur. A molting Black-headed Grosbeak would be larger, more plump, and would show a very noticeable white wing flash in flight. Bangma's first reaction, upon seeing the facial pattern, was Reed Bunting, but the buffy underparts eliminate that species. No other bird combines the characteristics we observed.

Previous experience: Both observers have seen Smith's Longspur in breeding plumage in Churchill, Manitoba. Johnson has considerable experience with birds in the spring in southeast Iowa.

References consulted: Nat. Geo guide for confirmation