Horned Lark

Eremophila alpestris

Federal Listing	N/A
State Listing	SC
Global Rank	G5
State Rank	S3
Regional Status	High

Photo by Pamela Hunt

Justification (Reason for Concern in NH)

Populations of most grassland birds are in strong decline, both in the Northeast and sometimes across larger portions of their continental ranges. For this reason, most species were included in the Northeast list of SGCN, with those that occur regularly in NH retained for the NH WAP revision. Based on BBS data (Sauer et al. 2014), Horned Lark populations in the Northeast have declined at 1.64% annually since 1966 (non-significant decline of 1.19%/year from 2003-2013). Because of the species' overall rarity in the region, BBS data on smaller scales (e.g., NH) are less accurate, although the species also shows a significant annual decline of 12.01% in BCR 14. Populations appear stable in BCR 30. There have also been declines of 30-40% based on repeated Breeding Bird Atlases in the northeast (McGowan and Corwin 2008, Renfrew 2013, MassAudubon 2014). Horned Larks were never common in New Hampshire, but have declined since the 1960s and are now found entirely at airports in the southern part of the state.

Distribution

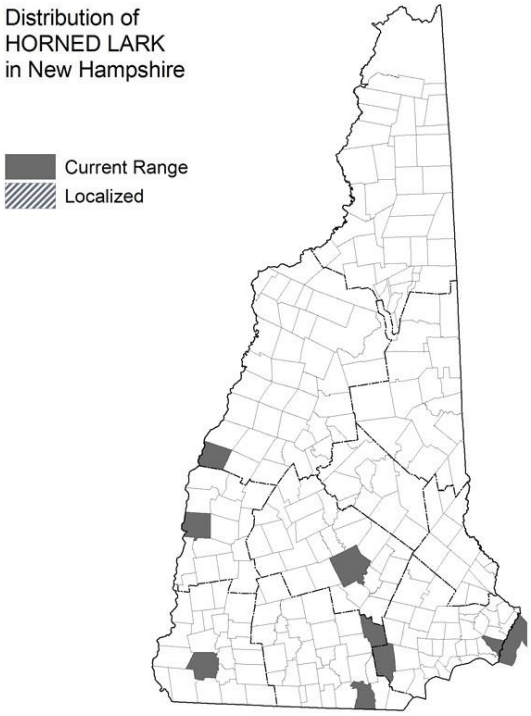
Occurs across the northern hemisphere in appropriate habitat. In North America breeds in non-forested areas from central Mexico north to the Arctic Ocean and winters in open habitats in the southern half of this range. Horned Larks colonized New Hampshire following clearing of forests in the 1800s, and were at one point locally common north of the White Mountains (Foss 1994). But by the late 1990s the species had disappeared from almost all of its former range in the state, a distribution that remains largely unchanged. Current sites are all airports, with records from Claremont, Keene, Nashua, Manchester, Concord, and Pease since 2005. Horned Larks formerly nested in dunes at Hampton and Seabrook, but have not been reported from this area during the breeding season since at least 1998. A singing bird in April 2012 however, suggests that breeding attempts may still occasionally occur. In addition to limited breeding, Horned Larks are a common migrant and wintering species in the state, with highest densities in the Connecticut and Merrimack River valleys and in the Seacoast region.

Habitat

The Horned Lark breeds in sparsely-vegetated open lands including arctic and alpine tundra, native grasslands, dunes, and airports (Beason 1995). During the non-breeding season, it also occurs in agricultural fields, feedlots, and other open habitats that provide foraging opportunities (Beason 1995).

NH Wildlife Action Plan Habitats

- Grasslands
- Dunes



Distribution Map

Current Species and Habitat Condition in New Hampshire

No data for New Hampshire. See also Justification.

Population Management Status

Management is not currently in place for this species.

Regulatory Protection (for explanations, see Appendix I)

- Migratory Bird Treaty Act (1918)

Quality of Habitat

No information

Habitat Protection Status

Historical sites in the Hampton/Seabrook dunes are partially protected. Airport sites are not protected in the conventional sense.

Habitat Management Status

Habitat management has not been implemented specifically for this species.

Threats to this Species or Habitat in NH

Threat rankings were calculated by groups of taxonomic or habitat experts using a multistep process (details in Chapter 4). Each threat was ranked for these factors: Spatial Extent, Severity, Immediacy, Certainty, and Reversibility (ability to address the threat). These combined scores produced one overall threat score. Only threats that received a "medium" or "high" score have accompanying text in this profile. Threats that have a low spatial extent, are unlikely to occur in the next ten years, or there is uncertainty in the data will be ranked lower due to these factors.

Habitat conversion and impacts from airport construction (Threat Rank: High)

Expansion of runways or addition of new infrastructure (e.g., hangers) has the potential to remove suitable grassland habitat at the only known sites for this species in the state.

Habitat degradation and disturbance from airport runway maintenance (Threat Rank: Medium)

This threat is separate from both mowing and construction, and pertains to human activity associated with existing infrastructure. Such activity includes paving, light installation, and other things that might result in vehicles and other equipment being parked off-runway in potential lark habitat.

Habitat degradation and conversion from a lack of field maintenance and associated succession (Threat Rank: Medium)

In the absence of periodic mowing, grassland sites revert to shrublands and eventually to forest. However, since most sites for Horned Larks in New Hampshire are airports, this is not in reality a significant threat to the species.

List of Lower Ranking Threats:

Disturbance from agricultural contaminants

Actions to benefit this Species or Habitat in NH

Grassland bird monitoring

Objective:
Monitor trends for rare grassland birds in NH.

General Strategy:
Periodic surveys of key areas for grassland birds (e.g., focal areas, see grasslands habitat profile) are needed to assess trends in distribution and abundance because broad-scale surveys like the BBS fail to capture these species in sufficient numbers. Surveys need not be annual, but should employ consistent methodology among years. For Horned Lark, such surveys should also include sites in the Hampton and Seabrook dunes. See also the grassland and dunes habitat profiles for more detail on broad actions that may benefit Horned Larks.

Political Location:
Statewide

Watershed Location:
Statewide

References, Data Sources and Authors

Data Sources

Trend data from Breeding Bird Survey (Sauer et al. 2014, above).
NH distribution data from NHBR/NH eBird

Data Quality

In the absence of systematic surveys, data on Horned Lark distribution in New Hampshire is largely limited to anecdotal accounts from birders. The early breeding season (starting April-May) may also limit the number of reports since birders are often not visiting lark nesting areas at this time of year.

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2005 Authors:

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Literature

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