

Passerines are the largest group of birds. They are small to medium sized land birds found worldwide, except on Antarctica. All species have four toes, three pointing forward and one back, well-adapted for perching. Most species are song-birds, with complex musical calls, but there are exceptions (e.g. crows). They show great diversity of form, behaviour and breeding biology.

**SKYLARK** *Alauda arvensis*

Common European introduction

18 cm, 38 g. Dull yellow-buff bird, streaked and spotted brown on upperparts and breast. Adult has a *small crest*, raised when alert. Juvenile yellower and spottier, and lacks crest. In flight, *white outer tail feathers and white trailing edge to broad wings*. Male in territorial flight display (Aug–Jan) soars with whirring wings up to 100 m, and slowly descends, all the time singing a *sustained and vigorous torrent of varied trills and runs*. Call, usually in flight, a liquid 'chirrup'. **Habitat:** Open country, from coast to subalpine. **Breeding:** Sep–Feb. [Sp 286]



**LARKS**

**Alaudidae**

76 species worldwide except South America; 1 has been introduced to New Zealand.

a mix of invertebrates and seeds. Although larks have erectile crown feathers that can form a short crest, their plumage is otherwise drab to provide camouflage on the ground. The territorial song is a beautiful torrent of trills and runs, often delivered while hovering high overhead.

The larks are small songbirds of open country, especially rough grassland and undeveloped tussockland. They have long legs and toes, and an especially long hind toe and claw. Their bill is usually stout, and they feed on

**286. SKYLARK** *Alauda arvensis*

**Plate 67**

**Size:** 18 cm, 38 g  
**Distribution:** Natural breeding range is Europe, North Africa, the Middle East and northern Asia to China; migrating south to India and northern Africa. At least 1000 birds were introduced into New Zealand by Acclimatisation Societies for sentimental reasons, and widely released between 1864 and 1875. They quickly became well established and spread throughout the country.

then lays 2–3–4–5 eggs (23 x 17 mm), greyish white to creamy buff, thickly speckled brown, frequently with a darker zone at the broader end. The nest is a neat grass-lined cup in a small depression in the ground, especially a hoofprint, and often concealed by an overhanging clump of grass, rush or tussock. The female alone incubates for c. 11 days, but both parents feed the nestlings, which leave the nest at 9–10 days old, but do not fly until c. 20 days old. Young breed at 1 year old. Few birds have been banded in New Zealand, but in Europe a Skylark lived at least 8 years.

The Skylark is now very common in all types of open country, such as sand dunes, farmland and tussock grassland, from North Cape to Stewart Island and on offshore islands, and from sea level to subalpine herbfields at 1900 m; it avoids forest and other thick stands of vegetation. They are common on the Chatham Islands and vagrants have reached the Kermadecs, The Snares, Antipodes, Auckland and Campbell Islands. In their natural range, most birds migrate south in winter, but in New Zealand most seem to be sedentary or make local movements to flock at good food sources; however, some northward migration from Farewell Spit has been noted in late autumn.

**Behaviour:** Pairs are strongly territorial during the breeding season, but some form winter flocks, and some migrate within New Zealand. The territorial song of the male, heard mainly in August–January and rarely from mid-February to mid-April, is a vigorous torrent of variable trills and runs, sustained for up to 5 minutes while the bird soars steeply, hovers at 30–100 m facing into the breeze and as it drops slowly earthwards. They occasionally sing from a post or on the ground. The call note is a liquid 'chirrup', often given in flight.

**Population:** Widespread and locally abundant in open country, especially in drier parts east of the Main Divide, in sand-dune country and on the Chathams.

**Feeding:** Diet is mainly seeds of grass, cereals, sedges, clover and various weeds, supplemented with moderate quantities of invertebrates such as beetles, flies, spiders, bugs and larvae of flies, beetles and moths. All food is taken from the ground. Skylarks can cause considerable economic damage to crops by eating sown grain and seeds, and by pulling out or defoliating seedlings of tomatoes, cabbages, wheat and peas.

**Breeding:** Some pairs remain on territory all year and breed together year after year. Other birds, perhaps mainly juveniles, form loose flocks in autumn and winter. Singing by males increases from May, but eggs are not laid until September–January, during which pairs lay 2–3 clutches. The female builds the nest and

**In the hand:** Males have longer wings (105–110–116 mm) than females (95–100–104 mm).

Garrick, A.S. 1981. *NZ J Ecol* 4: 106–114. Hamel, J. 1972. *Notornis* 19: 20–25. Moeed, A. 1975. *Notornis* 22: 135–142. Niethammer, G. 1971. *Jf Orn* 112: 202–206.

**Reading:** Delius, J.D. 1965. *Ibis* 107: 466–492.