

Lark Sparrow nests in DuPage County after 80-year absence

by Melinda Born Chapman



June 22, 2003: At Greene Valley Forest Preserve in DuPage County, nesting sparrows are sprinkled through the fields as are stars and planets in the night sky. And just as a planet shines a little brighter than a star, the sparrow with a glitter of white was a bright flash in a sea of brown and green. I jumped off my bike and tried to find the bird that flushed just ahead, quickly fluttering into the grass once more. Then I noticed another flash of white – wide borders contrasting with a broad black tail. I got one more look as it walked through the short, sparse grass. The dramatic face pattern revealed its secret – it was a Lark Sparrow (*Chondeste grammacus*). Was it near a nest? It was certainly acting elusive. This was a very rare sighting at the end of June in DuPage

*Lark Sparrow in DuPage County.
July 2003. Photo by Jerry Kumery.*

County – and it would remain private for now, in the interest of potential nesting success.

July 18, 2003: Biking through Greene Valley, I am documenting breeding birds for the DuPage Forest Preserve District. The fields are alive with the begging calls of various fledglings. Passing through the area where I saw the Lark Sparrow a month ago, I again see that flash of white, only this time, two young follow the adult bird. A juvenile Brown-headed Cowbird is tagging along too, but I can't discern if it is part of the same brood. The Lark Sparrow is far from secretive now, feeding its noisy fledglings, and I report the sighting. Many DuPage birders see the sparrow family over the course of the next few weeks.

August 2, 2003: I make my last observation of the Lark Sparrow for this season as it sings from a hidden perch.

In colonial times, Lark Sparrow was strictly a western species. Its range expanded east as forests were cleared (Rising 1996). By the early 1900s, the bird started to become more common in the eastern part of the United States. It enjoyed that status for about three more decades, until its population started to decline in the 1930s (Rising 1996).

Scant information is available on the Lark Sparrow's presence in DuPage County. Benjamin T. Gault's county records state that the species was "a local and uncommon summer resident." In spring of 1922, O.M. Schantz flushed a nesting pair near a woodland edge in the then-new Morton Arboretum (pers. comm. E. Walters). I was unable to find any other reference regarding Lark Sparrow breeding status in DuPage County after that date. A few Chicago (Cook County) records exist from the 1920s, with mention that the birds used horsehair to line their nests.

Bohlen (1989) classifies the species as a "locally common summer resident in sand areas; rare summer resident elsewhere in the state." Lark Sparrows have an affinity for sand and poor soils. Kaufman (1996) indicates that the species is declining east of the Mississippi River, and states its habitat preference is open country, bare ground and brushy dry grasslands.

The DuPage County Forest Preserve had recently done some restoration work in the location where the Lark Sparrow settled. Invasive plant species were cleared, resulting in a more open shrub land, featuring prairie-type areas dotted with several lines of trees. A gravel multi-purpose trail was also installed. The Lark Sparrow was sometimes seen foraging on this

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