

Status and Occurrence of Eurasian Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) in British Columbia.

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Introduction and Distribution

The Eurasian Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) is a small passerine that is found breeding throughout the Old World from the British Isles, Scandinavia, and northern Siberia south to northwestern Africa, the Mediterranean region, Middle East, Central Asia, northern China, Korea, and Japan (Dement'ev and Gladkov 1954b, Ali and Ripley 1987, Cramp and Simmons 1988, Brazil 2009, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009).

There are 13 subspecies of Eurasian Skylark (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Clements *et al.* 2017) This paper will focus on only the nominate subspecies group (*Alauda arvensis arvensis*) that has been introduced in North America and naturally occurs throughout Europe and the subspecies of Eurasian Skylark (*Alauda arvensis pekinensis*) found in northeastern Siberia to the Sea of Okhotsk, the Kamchatka Peninsula, and on the Kuril Islands and winters south to Japan, Korea, and northeastern China (Brazil 2009). It is this subspecies that turns up along the west coast of North America from Alaska to California as a vagrant (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Clements *et al.* 2017).

The nominate subspecies of Eurasian Skylark (*Alauda arvensis arvensis*) was introduced and is a resident species on the Hawaiian Islands, Australia, and in New Zealand (Cramp and Simmons 1988, Higgins *et al.* 2006, Pyle and Pyle 2017). Birds introduced in Victoria, British Columbia, in Canada and locations in the South Pacific are non-migratory, but during periods of cold weather, they seek milder areas locally by dispersal rather than by true migration (Campbell *et al.* 1997a).

Eurasian Skylarks of the subspecies group (*A. arvensis* *sps.*) are highly migratory in the northern and eastern parts of their breeding range, but in the southern ranges can also be sedentary, except for local movements, depending on the subspecies (Stolt 1980, Cramp and Simmons 1988, Jonsson 1992, Clements *et al.* 2017). Eurasian Skylarks found in both Great Britain and Ireland are mainly resident (Jonsson 1992).

The Eurasian Skylark was introduced to North America by European settlers in the 19th Century (Campbell *et al.* 1997a). This species was introduced unsuccessfully in North America at Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1851; off Wilmington, Delaware, in 1853; Brooklyn, New York, in 1871 or 1874; Oregon in 1889 or 1892; San Jose, California, in 1896; Santa Cruz, California, in 1908; also Montreal, Quebec; Cambridge, Massachusetts; Detroit, Michigan; Centreville and St. Louis, Missouri; and in New Jersey (Grinnell and Miller 1944, Bull 1974, Campbell *et al.* 1997a). After many unsuccessful introductions in North America, the Eurasian Skylark from Great Britain was successfully released in 1903 into agricultural areas in the Fraser River delta and on southern

Vancouver Island, British Columbia (Campbell *et al.* 1997a). The mainland population failed, but after additional introductions on southern Vancouver Island, the species became firmly established throughout Victoria and the Saanich Peninsula during the 1940s (Campbell *et al.* 1997b). Populations increased to fill available habitat during the 1950s and 1960s and reached an all-time high of about 1,000 birds (Campbell *et al.* 1997a). The Eurasian Skylark extended its range northward on Vancouver Island, east to the Canadian Gulf Islands, and south to the San Juan Islands in Washington (Bruce 1951, Campbell *et al.* 1997a, Wahl *et al.* 2005). A small colony became established in Cowichan Bay north of Victoria in 1970, and persisted until 1992 (Campbell *et al.* 1997a). The Eurasian Skylark also bred successfully, but locally on the San Juan Island, in Washington State, which is 18 km east of the Saanich Peninsula, an area bounded by South Beach and Pickett's Lane (Lewis and Sharpe 1987). Between the early 1970's and 1988, there were 12-60 pairs estimated in American Camp area on the south end of the San Juan Island (Wahl *et al.* 2005). Though the habitat was successfully maintained for Eurasian Skylark, this population was affected due to huge numbers of European Rabbits on the Island and has now become extirpated since the late 1990's (Weisbrod and Stevens 1974, Wahl *et al.* 2005).

As urbanization on Vancouver Island and San Juan Island constricted suitable habitat during the 1980s, populations declined and by the mid-1990s had decreased to about 100 birds (Campbell *et al.* 1997a). These decreases are a result of loss of agricultural habitats to urban development, mowing activities on the breeding grounds, and increased agricultural harvests seasonally (Campbell *et al.* 1997a). In the Hawaiian Archipelago, the Eurasian Skylark is well established and numbers at least 10,000 (Scott *et al.* 1986) but is now uncommon on Oahu Island (Hawai'i Audubon Society 1993) and apparently extirpated on Kauai'i Island (Caum 1933, Berger 1981, Scott *et al.* 1986, Campbell *et al.* 1997a), however still present on nearby Ni'i'hau Island (D. Cecile pers. Comm. 2016)

The Eurasian Skylark breeds in open habitats such as fallow fields, pasture, and some low agricultural crops with horizon not obscured by tall trees, hedgerows, cliffs, hills, or buildings (Campbell *et al.* 1997a). This species prefers to nest in dry, managed open spaces such as short to moderately high grass fields or fields that have been cultivated before initiation of breeding season and with short cover of grass (Campbell *et al.* 1997b). The Eurasian Skylark avoids areas with isolated trees, hedges, shrubs, and gravel patches, as well as extensive sandy areas (Campbell *et al.* 1997a). They may occupy the same area for many years (Campbell *et al.* 1997a). Adults feed mainly on weed seeds and grain, while nestlings are raised initially on a diet of mostly beetles (Campbell *et al.* 1997a). Specific nesting habitats on Saanich Peninsula, Vancouver I., BC, include airports and agricultural lands with hay or weedy fields kept fairly short with infrequent direct human interference and almost no contact with domestic animals (Campbell *et al.* 1997a).

In Hawaiian Islands, the Eurasian Skylark can occur from sea level to 3,000 m (Scott *et al.* 1986). Most common in dry open scrub, savanna, and woodland; also found in pastures and mesic habitats (Scott *et al.* 1986). Generally nests under scattered ground cover (Berger 1981)

In Great Britain, most commonly breeds in open environments that are well covered with grasses, cereal crops, or low green herbage (Cramp and Simmons 1988).

The Eurasian Skylark choose slightly different habitat in the winter from the breeding season. This species prefers to spend the winter months using open country such as beaches, pastures, short-grass fields, cultivated land, golf courses, playing fields, and airfields (Campbell *et al.* 1997b). During winters with heavy snowfall, aggregates in grain or stubble fields, un-harvested vegetable fields such as broccoli and cabbage, daffodil fields, weedy fields, wide weedy and grassy lanes between low (2 m) coniferous tree seed farms, and occasionally in barnyards and under backyard feeders (Campbell *et al.* 1997a). The Eurasian Skylark avoids wet ground (Campbell *et al.* 1997a).

In Great Britain, inhabits active farmland and managed open spaces such as golf courses, airfields, playing fields, upland rough pastures, sand dunes, salt marshes, and moorland (Cramp and Simmons 1988).

In Alaska, the Eurasian Skylark is a rare spring and fall migrant and casual summer visitor and probable breeder in the Western Aleutian Islands (West 2008). This species is a very rare spring and fall migrant and casual summer visitor to the Pribilof Islands (West 2008). A pair of Eurasian Skylark was found breeding on St. Paul Island in the summer of 1995 (Baicich *et al.* 1996). This species is a casual migrant in the spring and fall at Gambell and the Central Aleutian Islands (West 2008). All 6 Eurasian Skylarks collected in Alaska have been identified as the Asian subspecies (*Alauda arvensis pekinensis*)(Gibson and Kessel 1997).

Along the west coast south of Alaska, the Skylark is a vagrant species away from the small population found in the Victoria, British Columbia region. Birds that have turned up as accidental migrants and wintering vagrants along the west coast belong to the Eurasian Skylark subspecies (*Alauda arvensis pekinensis*) (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). In California, there is only a single accepted record by the California Bird Records Committee of a returning wintering bird found at Pt. Reyes National Seashore, in Marin County, from the years 1978 – 1985 (Morlan and Erickson 1983, Hamilton *et al.* 2007). In Oregon, there is only a recent well-photographed record of Eurasian Skylark that has not been reviewed by the Oregon Bird Records Committee, but should pass due to the overwhelming evidence. The bird was found at South Beach State Park and vicinity, in

Lincoln County, and was seen November 16-17, 2017 (E-bird 2018). In Washington State, outside of the now extirpated San Juan population, there are only 2 records (Wahl *et al.* 2005, E-bird 2018). The first record involved 2 birds photographed north of Sequim, in Clallam County December 21-22, 1998 (Wahl *et al.* 2005). This record is believed to have involved the Asiatic subspecies (Wahl *et al.* 2005). There is also a recently photographed record from Hobuck Beach, Clallam County on November 10, 2017 (E-bird 2018). In British Columbia, there are only 6 records of Eurasian Skylarks found away from the Victoria to Saanich population that would qualify as true vagrants from Asia (See Table 1 and 2, Tootchin *et al.* 2014). This includes a Eurasian Skylark found by Wayne Weber at 33A Ave. and 41B St., at Brunswick Point, near Ladner, February 11, 1975 (Weber 1977b). This record occurred during an era when the Eurasian Skylark population on the southern tip of Vancouver was at its highest numbers and could have represented a bird from either the introduced group or from Asia (J. Fenneman Pers. Comm.). It is shown in Table 2 as it represents one of a very few records well away from the introduced population.

There are also naturally occurring vagrants of the Asiatic subspecies (*Alauda arvensis pekinensis*) collected on Green Island, on Kure Atoll, October 7, 1963 (Clapp and Woodward 1968, Woodward 1972). This bird had apparently been accompanied by another individual the previous week (Clapp and Woodward 1968, Woodward 1972). A more recent bird was photographed on the same island November 4-12, 2014 (Pyle and Pyle 2017). Eurasian Skylarks originally thought to belong to the nominate subspecies (*Alauda arvensis arvensis*) found on Midway Atoll December 6, 1961, and November 30, 1963, (Fisher 1965) are now believed to be of the subspecies (*Alauda arvensis pekinensis*) (Pyle and Pyle 2017).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Eurasian Skylark is covered in all standard North American field guides. This is a small species measuring 18 cm, with a wingspan of 33 cm, and weighing 40 grams (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). In natural range, exhibits strongly clinal, but comparatively slight variation in plumage colouration and size from center in southwestern Asia, in eastern Iran and Turkestan; size generally decreases and colour saturation increases to west and east (Vaurie 1959a, Cramp and Simmons 1988). Clines not regular, however; some populations southwest of this center have long wings, and populations in extreme eastern Asia have the longest wings and the richest colouration such as the subspecies (*Alauda arvensis pekinensis*) (Vaurie 1959a, Cramp and Simmons 1988). There is a cline of decreasing size north to south in Western Europe and eastern Asia (Vaurie 1959a, Cramp and Simmons 1988). No trends in bill size and shape, except that northwestern African populations have proportionately the heaviest and longest bills (Vaurie 1959a, Cramp and Simmons 1988).

There is a wide range of individual variation making sub-specific diagnosis difficult without a comparative series (Lees and Ball 2011, Howell *et al.* 2014). Characters that are used to differentiate subspecies include wing length, plumage colouration, thickness and taper of bill, length of hind claw, crest profile, length of secondaries (including those called tertials), and comparative lengths of primaries (Meinertzhagen 1951a, Dement'ev and Gladkov 1954, Bannerman 1953, Vaurie 1959a, Peters 1960a, Harrison 1966, Cramp and Simmons 1988).

There is no geographic variation for introduced populations of the nominate subspecies (*Alauda arvensis arvensis*) in North America (Vaurie 1959a, Cramp and Simmons 1988).

The following identification information on Eurasian Skylark is taken from Jonsson (1992), Brazil (2009), Mullarney and Zetterstrom (2009), and Dunn and Alderfer (2011) unless otherwise stated.

The nominate *arvensis* is a comparatively dark brown race, with upper breast rufous buff (Vaurie 1959a). Adult birds are robust and pot-bellied, often raises crown feathers into a small crest. The bill is relatively short and fairly stout. The upper mandible is gray, the lower mandible is horn coloured. The eyes are black. The legs are a dull gray-pink. Crown finely streaked blackish. Face appears gentle, with broad whitish supercilium and brown ear-coverts patch. Mantle and coverts have dark centered gray-brown feathers, and dark flight feathers broadly fringed rusty-brown (appear paler when worn). Under-parts have band of short, fine black streaks across the upper breast, neck-sides contrasting with white belly with hardly any streaking on the flanks. The tail is short and is dark brown with paler central and white outer tail feathers. Plumage tones vary, usually warm-buff brown, but some individuals are paler gray-buff. Birds freshly moulted in the fall have a rich brownish-red tone above. Adults have a complete moult including tail and flight feathers in the late summer. In flight, the upperwing shows a distinct whitish band along trailing edge of wing. The under-wing is gray-brown.

Overall all Skylarks share the plumage markings mentioned above. There are some slight differences for the Asian subspecies (*Alauda arvensis pekinensis*). This is a strongly marked race, with rich brown and black markings, including russet hue on upper back and orange buff background on breast; longest average wing among Eurasian Skylarks [up to 124 mm or 12.4 cm] (Vaurie 1959a). Has less contrasting under-parts and streaks extending well onto the flanks. At rest the primary projection beyond the tertials is long.

This species gets its names from the manner with which it sings. The song is given as the bird rises up high in the hovering and singing continuously a spectacular varied warble of high, liquid, rolling notes in a long series. Sometimes Eurasian Skylarks will sing from a perch, but mostly they

sing from up high in flight (Brazil 2009). Flight call is a low, rolling chortle “*drirdrik*” (Sibley 2000); also gives a “*chriiup*” or “*trruwee*”.

The Eurasian Skylark is an obvious species that should be easily distinguished from Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris*), Lapland Longspur (*Calcarius lapponicus*), or American Pipit (*Anthus rubescens*) which use the same habitat during migration and the winter season.

Occurrence and Documentation

The Eurasian Skylark is mostly found as an introduced species in a small area on the southern tip of Vancouver Island (Campbell *et al.* 1997b). It has also been found as a vagrant migrant species along the west coast of British Columbia and possibly in the Vancouver area. There are 2 subspecies involved with these occurrences.

The nominate subspecies (*Alauda arvensis arvensis*) was at first unsuccessfully introduced near Vancouver in 1903 (again in 1977), and at Comox, 210 km north of Victoria, Vancouver Island, in fall of 1953 (Scheffer 1955). Latter introductions persisted until Jun 1957 (Anonymous 1903a, Campbell *et al.* 1997b). After 1940s, when this species had become firmly established in vicinity of Victoria and Saanich Peninsula, on southern Vancouver Island, single birds reported in 1959 on Saltspring Island and in 1961 on Pender Island in Canadian Gulf Islands (Campbell *et al.* 1997b), and then spread in 1960 to the San Juan Island, (Bruce 1951) with birds in this area since 1970, but the population declined and is now extirpated (Wahl and Wilson 1971, Lewis and Sharpe 1987). Small breeding population present in vicinity of Cowichan Bay, 60 km north of Victoria, since at least 1966 (Sprot 1937, Davidson 1966, Chambers 1969), and persisted until early 1990s (Campbell *et al.* 1997b). Populations throughout Greater Victoria and the Saanich Peninsula declined from an all-time high of about 1,000 birds in the 1960s to about 100 birds in the mid-1990s with the range today is restricted to 4 locations all found in the Saanich region. (Campbell *et al.* 1997a).

The Asian subspecies (*Alauda arvensis pekinensis*) is an accidental vagrant in British Columbia with only 5 records (See Table 1 and 2) and 4 other records from Washington State to California. Eurasian Skylark records along the west coast south of Alaska have come from the fall migration period with the dates ranging from October into November and birds found in December with a single returning bird successfully wintering in California (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Wahl *et al.* 2005, Toochin *et al.* 2014, E-bird 2018). Almost all have come from outer coastal locations. It is important to note that of the 2 subspecies the differences are subtle and hard to assess in the field (Lees and Ball 2011, Howell *et al.* 2014). We put forth these records as Asiatic in origin based on the location the bird was found and also the characteristics the bird shows in photographs. The first record was found by Mike Bentley, and was seen and photographed by others at the Sandspit Airport, in Haida Gwaii from November 20-21, 1991 (Siddle 1992,

Campbell *et al.* 1997b). The bird was likely an adult as it was singing and watched “skylarking” high in the air as well as on the ground (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.). The second record was of a likely adult found and photographed by Tony Greenfield at the Port McNeil Airport, on the north end of Vancouver Island from November 14-15, 1995 (Bowling 1996a, Bain and Holder 1995f, Campbell *et al.* 1997b). The third record was found and photographed by Ted Ardley and Rick Shortinghuis at the helipad near the beach at Jordan River on October 28, 2004 (Cecile 2005a, Toochin *et al.* 2014). This bird occurred during the same fall as a Gray Wagtail at Carmanah Lighthouse further up the west coast, a McKay’s Bunting at Iona Island Regional Park in Richmond, and another Eurasian Skylark found near Vancouver and all species were likely the result of large storm systems that originated from Asia (Etzkorn and Etzkorn 2004, Toochin *et al.* 2014, Toochin 2015h, M. Meredith Pers. Comm.). Given the fact that this species has a very small declining population in the Saanich area near Victoria, and that these birds do not migrate or move large distances, it is very likely this bird is in fact an Asian vagrant (P. Levesque Pers. Comm.). Across the Juan de Fuca Strait in Washington State, 2 birds were found photographed in the winter at Sequim, and were thought to represent the Asian subspecies (Wahl *et al.* 2005). The fourth record was an adult found by Brian Scott and seen and photographed by others at the mouth of the Serpentine River, near Boundary Bay, in South Surrey from January 10-13, 2005 (Cecile 2005b, Toochin *et al.* 2014). This bird was wintering with a small flock of American Pipits along the grassy-weedy shoreline of the river (R. Toochin Pers. Comm.). The fifth record was a singing and “skylarking” adult found by Rick Toochin and Mitch Meredith outside Masset at Skonun Point, on Haida Gwaii, on October 10, 2014 (R. Toochin Pers. Comm.). The bird was alone and was likely brought to the islands from the series of fast moving heavy northwesterly storms that hit the region during that time (M. Meredith Pers. Comm.). This subspecies of Eurasian Skylark should be looked for again in the future either as birds present on their own or mixed into flocks of American Pipit, Horned Lark, Lapland Longspur, and even Snow Bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) (Morlan and Erickson 1983).



Figure 1: Eurasian Skylark found at Serpentine River mouth on January 11, 2005.
Photo © Rick Toochin.



Figure 2: Eurasian Skylark found at Serpentine River mouth on January 11, 2005.
Photo © Randy Findlay.



Figure 3: Eurasian Skylark found at Serpentine River mouth on January 11, 2005.
Photo © Randy Findlay.



Figure 4: Eurasian Skylark found at Serpentine River mouth on January 11, 2005.
Photo © Randy Findlay.

Table 1: Records of Eurasian Skylark (*Alauda a. pekinensis*) for British Columbia:

- 1.(1) adult November 20-21, 1991: Mike Bentley, mobs (photo) Sandspit Airport, Haida Gwaii (Siddle 1992a, Campbell *et al.* 1997b)
- 2.(1) adult November 14-15, 1995: Tony Greenfield (photo) Port McNeil Airport (Bowling 1996a, Bain and Holder 1995f, Campbell *et al.* 1997b)
- 3.(1) adult October 28, 2004: Ted Ardley, Rick Shortinghuis (photo) Jordan River (Cecile 2005a, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 4.(1) adult January 10-13, 2005: Brian Scott, mobs (photo) near mouth of Serpentine River, South Surrey (Cecile 2005b, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 5.(1) adult October 10, 2014: Rick Toochin, Mitch Meredith: Skonun Point, Haida Gwaii (R. Toochin Pers. Comm.)

Table 2: Records of Eurasian Skylark where subspecies not known for British Columbia:

- 1.(1) adult February 11, 1975: Wayne Weber: Brunswick Point, 33A Ave. & 41B St., Ladner (Weber 1977)

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