

## Lapland Longspur

*Calcarius lapponicus*

The family *Emberizidae* encompasses a variety of widespread species, including longspurs, juncos, sparrows, towhees and Emberizid buntings.

Named for the elongated claw on their hallux (hind toe), Longspurs (*Calcarius* means "spur") are gregarious sparrow-like ground birds of open fields and tundra. They may be difficult to identify as most species display a variety of immature, seasonal and regional plumages. Head and breast color, voice and habitat along with distinctive tail patterns aid in their identification.

Fairly common, the Lapland Longspur breeds on arctic tundra and in open, wet sedge-meadows and scrub habitats. At 16cm, these birds are small and slender, with long, pointed wings, relatively short tails and stout bills. During the breeding season, the male's plumage displays a velvety, black hood, throat and breast, highlighted by a chestnut nape and broad, yellow bill. Bold, yellow eyebrows behind the eyes connect with bright-white lines, extending down the sides of the breast. Together, they form colorful triangles outlining the cheeks (auriculars). Although the belly is white, the flanks are streaked in black. The body, back and wings are also streaked, but in a mixture of rufous, brown and black. A single white, outer feather on each side of the tail is conspicuous in flight. Non-breeding adults and juveniles appear similar. Often, Lapland Longspurs form winter flocks with horned larks, snow buntings, pipits or other longspurs. Look for their darker overall coloring and smaller size to distinguish them within the flock.

Heard only on the breeding grounds, the song of the Lapland Longspur is a gentle, jingling warble, frequently given in short flights. Their husky, rich song is composed of "freew, didi, freer, di, fideew" notes. During the conspicuous flight-song display, the male rises from the ground and glides downward on outstretched wings with his tail spread. When in close proximity to females, males sing close to the ground. Commonly, the call is a husky, whistled "tleew" or a sharp, dry "chich" and "chi-kewoo." On the wing, the call is a dry, mechanical rattle. These birds seem to "throw" their voices and are extremely difficult to locate on the ground, even when calling frequently.

The female assembles the cup-shaped ground nest in just three days! Placed in shallow depressions, the nest is constructed of mosses, grasses and sedges. The nest is lined with finer grasses, hair, plant down and occasionally, feathers. Clutch size varies between 3-7, 21mm, pale greenish-white to greenish-gray eggs, marked in browns and black. Unaided, the female incubates the clutch for 10-14 days. In years of low food abundance, the male is known to feed the incubating female. Hatching occurs in 1-3 days. When the nest is threatened, the female performs a distraction display. With her wings slightly spread and drooped and her tail spread against the ground, she dashes away from the nest. The parents raise the young birds that fledge in another 8-10 days. At fledging, the smallest birds may be left behind. Parents are known to equally divide the

fledglings and separately rear them.

The diet of the Lapland Longspur consists of seeds from grasses, sedges and forbs, insects and spiders. Young birds are fed exclusively insects. By retaining excessive fat, migrant longspurs can survive the unpredictable food-availability and weather conditions of Arctic habitats in spring.

Lapland Longspurs winter in grassy fields and shores across most of the United States and the edge of southern Canada. During the breeding season, flocks of males arrive to the Arctic a few days to two weeks prior to females. They range throughout most of mainland Alaska, northern Canada, coastal Greenland and their associated islands. As successful circumpolar breeders, these longspurs maintain consistently high densities.