

Skylark *Alauda arvensis* Imitates Parrots

The Skylark *Alauda arvensis* is inconspicuous when it is standing among grass in farmland, cropland or on roadsides. However, when fluttering and hovering up to 20 m above the ground while performing song-flights it is very conspicuous. Loud and melodious, the song usually consists of a lengthy, repetitive sequence of trilling and warbling, interspersed with occasional 'chirrup', and may be sustained for many minutes. There is much individual variation in the composition of these songs, and some Skylarks are also known to insert mimicry of other birds into their songs. In south-eastern England, it has been noted that 'the majority of Sky-Larks (sic) begin their song with an imitation' (Ticehurst 1909). In its natural range in Eurasia and North Africa, the Skylark is known to mimic other birds and animals, including other larks (Alaudidae), the Marsh Warbler *Acrocephalus palustris* and Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*, and waders, particularly the Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* and Common Redshank *Tringa totanus*, as well as the Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* (Ticehurst 1909, Witherby et al. 1938, Cramp 1988).

The conspicuousness of the Skylark's song-flight in Australasia is confirmed in various regional bird reports and other annotated lists, where many references to the species mention its song. However, it appears that mimicry by the Skylark is virtually unrecorded here. In New Zealand, Skylarks have been heard mimicking the 'pink' call of the Double-banded Plover *Charadrius bicinctus*, inserted at the conclusion of repeated chirruping, though not during display flights, but when perched on the ground (Anon. 1953, Booth 1984). In Victoria, Skylarks are said to perform 'mild examples of mimicry' (Chisholm 1965), though there appear to be no published details of such behaviour.

Around Torquay, Victoria, Skylarks are abundant in open, grassy paddocks and coastal sand-dunes vegetated with Marram Grass *Ammophila arenaria*, and can be regularly heard singing, especially during sunny weather. On 6 October 1996 I heard a Skylark singing as it hovered above the ground during a song-flight. Though the song of this bird consisted mainly of trilling and warbling, it occasionally included credible imitations of a 'screeching' Galah *Cacatua roseicapilla* and the 'tinkling' contact call of the Blue-winged Parrot *Neophema chrysostoma* in its song. Both species of parrots are quite common in the surrounding farmland: Galahs are resident and Blue-winged Parrots, although seasonal, have been recorded in flocks of up to c. 300 in nearby paddocks. Elsewhere in southern Victoria, Skylarks have also been heard mimicking Masked Lapwings *Vanellus miles* (J.R. Starks pers. comm.)

Skylarks are said to have been introduced into Australia by settlers who craved the nostalgic effect of hearing their familiar song. When the species was introduced to Newfoundland, Canada, the inhabitants are said to have 'rejoiced' and 'made parties to go and hear its lovely song' (Moncrieff 1931). It seems ironic, then, that some of these birds, whose songs were thought to be superior to those of native birds, now include the calls of native birds in their repertoire.

References

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