



## Longbilled Lark

### Langbeklewerik

*Certhilauda curvirostris*

This resident species, near-endemic to southern Africa, was recorded over large parts of central South Africa, in Lesotho, and in southern and western Namibia. Its range extends through the arid western regions as far north as Benguela, Angola. It is a rare visitor to Swaziland (Parker 1994) and it does not occur in Botswana or Zimbabwe. Atlas records show that it is most abundant in the Nama Karoo of South Africa. Outside this core area, records tend to be more scattered and at lower reporting rates.

This large, variable lark is relatively distinctive and is unlikely to be confused with other species over most of its range. It can be confused with the Shortclawed Lark *C. chuana*, but records were vetted to eliminate this potential problem. Both call and display are good field characters. Male Longbilled Larks call repeatedly from a prominent perch or rise 10–15 m almost vertically, closing their wings just before the top of the climb, call, then drop, opening their wings just before reaching the ground. They are usually seen singly or in pairs.

Several distinctive populations have non-overlapping ranges and may be separate species. The large, grey-backed form along the west coast is isolated from red-backed Karoo birds by the Namaqualand escarpment where there are few records. Atlas records also show a gap between populations in northern Namibia and those in central and southern Namibia, which corresponds with a large genetic difference (P.G. Ryan unpubl. data).

**Habitat:** It occurs in a wide range of open habitats, both on hill slopes and on plains. It is frequent to common in sparse, arid, dwarf shrublands in the Karoo, thinly vegetated rocky ridges and stony hills, and on sparsely vegetated dune grasslands, both inland and along the west coast. It is also fairly common on the planted pastures and

cereal croplands in the fynbos biome of the southwestern Cape Province. In grassland areas it favours hill slopes, particularly where hard, wiry grasses occur, such as the veld types classified as *Themeda–Festuca* Alpine Grassland and Karroid *Merxmuellera disticha* Mountain Veld (Acocks 1953), and other montane grasslands where few other larks occur. The vegetation analysis clearly shows high reporting rates in the Karoo biome compared with other vegetation types.

**Movements:** The models show little change in reporting rates for this resident species. Calling and display flights are not restricted to the breeding season which, together with the bird's distinctive appearance, tend to give consistent reporting rates throughout the year.

**Breeding:** Atlas data were generally from spring and summer, with a few records in autumn. Maclean (1993b) showed that the breeding season is unusually extended, with breeding earlier in the year in the winter-rainfall and between-seasons-rainfall areas, and later in the summer-rainfall areas. This is supported by published data showing that egg-laying in the western Cape Province spans August–October (Winterbottom 1968a) but is later (November) in the Transvaal (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b).

**Interspecific relationships:** It overlaps in habitat with several other lark species over most of its range, but it does not appear to associate or interact competitively with them. It is allopatric with the Shortclawed Lark which is currently recognized as its closest relative (Herremans *et al.* 1994c).

**Historical distribution and conservation:** There is no evidence of any reduction or change in distribution, except in the southwestern Cape Province where agriculture may have allowed it to increase in numbers. The Longbilled Lark is not considered to be threatened by current land-use practices. However, it is *inter alia* a Karoo and montane grassland species, and both these vegetation types lack adequate protection (Hilton-Taylor & Le Roux 1989; Siegfried 1989). If the present Longbilled Lark subspecies complex does represent more than one species, as suggested by Herremans *et al.* (1994c), then the species complex may not be conserved adequately.

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Recorded in 1075 grid cells, 23.7%  
Total number of records: 5422  
Mean reporting rate for range: 8.9%



