Managing habitat for streaked horned larks at Pacific Northwest airports

Airports in the Pacific Northwest present some of the best remaining habitat for the imperiled streaked horned lark. This information sheet gives guidelines to help airport wildlife managers understand how to create or maintain habitat for this rare bird.

Managing wildlife on airports is always a balancing act, but some Pacific Northwest airports have found a happy medium between helping conserve the streaked horned lark and minimizing aircraft bird strike risk.

Why conserve streaked horned larks?

The streaked horned lark was once abundant from northern California through to British Columbia, Canada, but now only breeds in small areas in Oregon and Washington. The most significant cause of its decline has been the loss of habitat: it is estimated that less than 1% of historic native savanna and grassland remains in the range of the streaked horned lark. Airports contain some of the last remaining open areas within its range.

Reflecting its precarious status, US Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed to list the lark as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act. If listing does occur, restrictions may be placed on areas occupied by larks. However, proactive airport managers who are already managing land to protect larks may pursue a conservation plan from the US Fish & Wildlife Service which could exempt the airport from some of the restrictions that listing under the Endangered Species Act would entail.

Lark's preferred habitat

Streaked horned larks are birds of relatively flat, open country. They need some component of exposed ground in all seasons, as they both forage and nest on bare ground. Their ideal habitat structure is mostly bare, flat ground with patches of sparse, short vegetation less than ~15 inches high. Importantly, the habitat should be ready by late March or early April so that birds prospecting for territory can select it. It then needs to remain suitable throughout the breeding season until mid-August so birds are not forced out of their existing territory by unsuitable vegetation.

Streaked horned lark in foreground is dwarfed by military aircraft at McChord Air Force Base. 2008.

Creating lark habitat before the breeding season

Airports often have the flat, open landscape and short vegetation that larks prefer. However, they may not naturally possess bare ground and patchy vegetation. This can be created by:

- application of gravel;
- disking and harrowing;
- burning (with proper permits);
- dragging or scraping the surface;
- herbicide application; or
- mowing

Seasonally wet areas may also constitute appropriate habitat once they have dried out during spring or early summer.

Maintaining lark habitat during the breeding season

In spring and summer, treatments may be required to prevent vegetation growth which renders the habitat unsuitable for streaked horned larks. This can be achieved by:

- application of an appropriate broad-spectrum herbicide (not toxic to birds; avoid Paraquat); or
- mowing at 8-12 inches (minimize mower footprint to avoid bird mortality).

Reducing bird hazard risk

Airport managers may be naturally concerned about creating habitats for birds on airports given that birds can be aircraft hazards. However, the streaked horned lark is a small bird that poses a low risk of aircraft damage. It does flock in winter, but careful choice in the location of the land that is managed for larks can help keep it away from the aircraft flight path. Some airports are able to take advantage of airport-owned land away from the main airport operations—such as adjacent fields—to create lark habitat.

Need more information?

Please contact Hannah Anderson, Center for Natural Lands Management, ph. 360-283-5549 or handerson@cnlm.org.

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