

Streaked horned lark, Northwest's latest candidate for endangered species list, favors airports, farms and dredge islands.



By [Scott Learn, The Oregonian](#) on November 08, 2012



The streaked horned lark likes open prairie habitat with few trees -- or people. Development has pushed it out of its historic range, and now it's being considered for listing as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. *David Maloney, U.S. Fish and Wildlife*

When you think of creatures on the endangered species list, pristine habitat comes to mind: spotted owls swooping through old-growth forests, salmon straining to reach Idaho's clear waters.

The streaked horned lark is a bird of a different feather.

With its traditional territory mostly destroyed, the Northwest's **latest candidate for a federal listing** has set up shop in some unlikely places.

Willamette Valley grass farms. An artillery range in Washington. Manmade dredge spoil islands in the Columbia River. Loud, lonely spots near airport runways.

Last month, the **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service** proposed listing the lark as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. It includes setting just over 12,000 acres of "critical habitat" in Oregon and Washington, most of it in unorthodox places.

A listing would complicate dredge dumping in the Columbia, airport management and military training. But the service wants to exempt private farming and routine airport operations -- including bird deaths from striking aircraft -- from prohibitions against "incidental take" of listed species.

No one wants to discourage activities that, however inadvertently, created streaked horned lark strongholds, says Cat Brown, a biologist in the service's Oregon office.

"We want to protect airports, agriculture and dredge spoil islands, how weird is that?" Brown says. "I've never had to appreciate the beauty of airports before."

The Southwest Quad at **Portland International Airport** covers 400 acres, bordered to the east by barbed-wire fences and two runways. Access is restricted. Commercial and passenger planes roar just overhead.

Long-term, it's the airport's best real estate for expansion. Short-term, it's a buffer zone managed to keep away geese and other big birds that can clog jet engines during takeoff and landings.

The Port of Portland has laid 15 miles of perforated drainpipe under the sandy soil to prevent ponds that attract waterfowl. Port biologists prowl the area, hazing geese and ducks to keep them out. Workers regularly mow the cheatgrass and till the soil to keep vegetation down and minimize perches for avian predators.

"It turns out that's exactly the niche the streaked horned lark likes," says Dana Green, the port's natural resources manager for aviation.

Only four lark pairs nest at PDX, though breeding success is high there. Any industrial development is decades off, Green says, but the site "represents the growth potential" of the airport.

When the time comes, the port could try to mitigate any damage from development with new habitat. The port and the **Metro regional government** are turning the old St. John's Landfill into lark territory to compensate for development in the port's Rivergate industrial district.

Development could still spark a battle down the line. "We're hoping the designation as critical habitat will keep that site from being developed," says Noah Greenwald, of the **Center for Biological Diversity**. His group and others sued in 2006, forcing an evaluation of the larks and hundreds of other species for listing.



The 400 acres west of the barbed wire fences at Portland International Airport is a prime spot for streaked horned larks -- and development. *Benjamin Brink, The Oregonian*

Streaked horned larks are the most vibrant and yellow subspecies of the horned larks, smallish, making tiny ground nests on the north side of grass bunches. Their song has subtle distinctions from their lark cousins, with a tinkly, ethereal quality. During breeding season, males fly up to 500 feet high in elaborate aerial displays, then stairstep down toward the females, singing along the way.

They prefer open, flat, treeless landscapes of 300 acres or more, with sparse, grassy spots that haven't grown much yet. They don't like people nearby.

In the early 19th century, prairies in western Oregon and Washington were plentiful, with planned burning by tribes that kept trees at bay. Regular flooding of the Columbia scoured beaches and created sandbars, surrounded by hundreds of acres of water to give larks room.

European settlement brought farms and development, more people to beaches, dams and dikes that harnessed the Columbia. Over the last 150 years, native prairies have dropped by 90 to 95 percent, with the prairies of south Puget Sound and western Oregon now part of "one of the rarest ecosystems in the United States," according to the fish and wildlife service.

In its heyday, the streaked horned lark ranged from Oregon's Rogue Valley to British Columbia. That territory has collapsed on both ends, with breeding grounds disappearing from British Columbia, northern Puget Sound, the Oregon coast and the Rogue and Umpqua valleys.

Once common, the lark population has dropped to 1,100 to 1,600, researchers estimate. Washington's population is declining by 40 percent a year.

The Willamette Valley's contingent, perhaps 900 to 1,300 birds, appears relatively stable, largely due to farms, says Hannah Anderson, with the **Center for Natural Lands Management** in Olympia, Wash. Farming can destroy nesting grounds. But it keeps out shopping malls and subdivisions and gives the birds a place to winter.

"If there were not grass seed and Christmas tree farms in the Willamette Valley," Anderson says, "there may not be (streaked horned) larks."

That mix of hazard and opportunity marks most of the lark's present-day territory, making its listing a unique challenge. The listing would make it illegal to deliberately harm the bird, and requires service approval for federal projects -- or federally regulated projects -- that might harm it.

At **Joint Base Lewis-McChord**, near Tacoma, Wash., the larks and other rare species co-exist with off-road combat vehicles, artillery shells, small weapons fire and jet engines that can inhale the birds. The base also provides 12,000 acres of prairie habitat, perhaps the biggest swath left in the region. And fires sparked by artillery keep out lark-repelling vegetation.

Managing rare species costs the base about \$1 million a year, including coordinating training to avoid occupied habitat and setting aside no-touch zones. Since 2006, it has spent another \$500,000 annually to help buy and improve roughly 4,300 acres of off-base prairies.

The base also hosts the Taylor's checkerspot butterfly, also proposed for listing, and the Mazama pocket gopher, likely to be proposed for listing soon.

"We can make this work," says Paul Steucke, the base's environmental division chief. "But it requires us to do a dance."

The **Army Corps of Engineers**, which manages dredge islands in the Columbia, is in a similarly tricky spot. From June to November, corps dredges to keep the Columbia's shipping channel deep enough and remove hazardous shoals. That's right around the lark's breeding season.

At least three times since 2000, the service says, the corps dumped dredge spoils on active lark breeding grounds. Last year, the corps bypassed Brown Island, a key disposal site, to avoid larks, increasing costs.

The listing, scheduled to be final next October, has been in the works for several years, says Jessica Stokke, the corps project manager for dredging operations. The corps is working to avoid nesting sites and create new lark territory, she says.

But coordinating dredging under the listing is "definitely going to be a challenge," Stokke says.

Besides Portland, the listing includes acreage at five airports: Olympia, McMinnville, Salem, Corvallis and Eugene. Corvallis has the largest number of breeding pairs, 85 at last count, along its runways and in grass fields on city-owned land nearby.

The airport changed mowing times to avoid larks, and it doesn't plan to develop the land the larks breed on, says Lisa Scherf, the city's transportation services supervisor. "We're concerned and interested, of course," she says, "but not alarmed."

Brown, of the service, notes the lark is proposed for listing as threatened, not endangered, providing more room to maneuver.

If suitable habitat grows, however strangely situated, the bird can maneuver, too, Brown says.

"They're wanderers. It's unusual in the life history of this little bird for it to stay in one place."