

## The Black Lark on Anglesey in June 2003 The first record for Britain and Ireland

By Lee G R Evans



Plate 1: Black Lark, South Stack RSPB, Anglesey, June 2003 (Mike Malpass)

At about 10.00am on Sunday 1st June 2003, one of the voluntary helpers at the RSPB observation tower at South Stack RSPB, **ANGLESEY**, stumbled upon a bird that he was unable to identify. It was feeding on the recently burnt area of gorse immediately above the clifftop and was all black in plumage with a contrasting pale bill. After flicking through the Collins Field Guide, the observer felt confident that the bird was a **BLACK LARK** *Melanocorypha yeltoniensis* and went back to the tower to inform other interested parties. The bird was seen by a few other naturalists during the course of the morning and early afternoon but none realised the significance of the sighting. The bird was showing well feeding amongst the newly sprouting plants in the charcoal-scorched heather.

Eventually rumours filtered through of the bird's presence and Ken Croft was alerted. He raced over from neighbouring Holyhead and at 4.30pm confirmed the bird's identity. Indeed, the bird was a BLACK LARK – the first ever to have been recorded in Britain and Ireland. Alan Davies (of *Birdline Wales*) was also contacted and he too connected with the bird at 5.50pm. Although the weather had been fine and bright all afternoon, heavy cloud came in off the Irish Sea at about 6.00pm and conditions quickly deteriorated.

Alan broadcast the news to the nation via his birdline and also contacted direct eminent figures on the North West birding scene and in Wales. Consequently, birders from Ceredigion, Conwy, Denbighshire, Cheshire, Wirral and Lancashire jumped in their cars immediately and made their way towards the Menai Bridge and Anglesey. By 8.00pm, some 30 birders had gathered at the site, including Gary Bellingham, John Gregory, Richard Bonser, Jonathan Williams, Pete Antropus, Steve Williams, Ian Evans, Steve Young, Barry Barnacal, Allan Conlin, Dave King and Roger

Wilkinson. The bird was still showing but the conditions were abysmal. It was torrential rain and birders stood getting absolutely soaked. For no apparent reason, the bird flew up at 8.18pm and disappeared from view. It had presumably gone to roost. More and more people arrived but despite searching in heavy rain, no further sightings were had by dark. A lucky 30 birders had connected!



Plate 2: Black Lark, South Stack RSPB, Anglesey, June 2003 (Mike Malpass)

As darkness fell, birders from all over the UK were contemplating the fate of the bird. Would it still be around, had it gone to roost, had it died in the atrocious conditions? Nevertheless, birders from as far afield as North Uist (LGRE and others on a Scottish tour), Aberdeenshire, Dunbarton, Northumberland, Yorkshire, Norfolk, Suffolk, East Kent, Sussex, Dorset, Devon and Cornwall were on their way and attempting to arrive on site by dawn.

Monday 2nd June dawned grey and murky, with a cool westerly wind. It was just about birding daylight by 4.25am and within half an hour a phenomenal 700 birders had gathered. The RSPB car parks had soon filled to capacity leaving birders to resort to parking on the access road and by far this had quickly become the biggest twitch of the year. Alan Davies and the South Stack warden sensibly roped the area off and attempted to locate the bird. Careful scanning of the recently burnt area between the first car park and the cliff eventually revealed the presence of the bird and at 5.12am Alan Davies came racing back towards the crowd to attempt an organised approach. Despite some anticipated immediate problems, the huge crowd of birders soon sorted themselves out and orderly created a wide arc around the bird. It was feeding happily in the vicinity of the two coastal footpaths and showed well intermittently as it fed amongst the vegetation. It was like a piece of moving charcoal and could be quite easily picked up with the naked eye. Its black plumage contrasted heavily with the bright array of grasses, Squill, Bird's Foot Trefoil and Lousewort. The assembled ranks of birders (among them the highest-listing birders in the land) were delighted and watched in awe as the bird fed to within 75 yards.



This was the sight at South Stack, Anglesey, from 4.30-7.00am on Monday 2nd June. Around 700 birders were massed on the burnt-out area of heather and gorse between the first car park and the cliff-face – by far the biggest twitch of 2003. A further 400 birders arrived between 7.00am and midday and another 400 between then and 8.00pm. Alan Clewes obtained the photographs above.



Plates 3-4: Black Lark, South Stack RSPB, Anglesey, June 2003 (Rob Wardle)

As the morning went on the crowd numbers generally dwindled and the weather improved. The light conditions got a lot better and birders were able to approach the lark to within 50 yards. Consequently, many birders were able to get a series of images of the bird (see the many that accompany this article). Mike Malpass and Rob Wardle took full advantage and managed to get several superb shots (see plates 1-2 & 3-5). It continued to show extremely well throughout the rest of the day and remained until dark.

It was still present the next morning (Tuesday 3rd) and showed well again in its favoured burnt area throughout the day. Nigel Blake visited the site and took over 118 shots of the bird (see plates 26-27) and other birders amongst the estimated 700 or so to have visited South Stack during the day included Bob Flood and Ashley Fisher from Scilly and Eugene Archer and others from Dublin. The bird made the Press Association wires and therefore featured in several National newspapers.

Being a diurnal migrant it was hardly surprising that it remained for a fourth day but with improving conditions and slack winds it was somewhat remarkable that it was still present on the Friday (6th June). By now it had been admired by over 3,760 observers and was making its way towards the record books of being one of the most observed rarities in Britain of all time. The blackened area of heather and gorse was acting like a magnet to the bird and was obviously full of nutrient-rich plants on which the bird was feeding. Since its burning in May this charred area had been a haven to migrating birds with many groups of Northern and Greenland Wheatears stopping off for several days as well as Whinchats and Willow Warblers. With the ground still being relatively warm, presumably many insects are attracted to it too.



Plate 5: Black Lark, South Stack RSPB, Anglesey, June 2003 (Rob Wardle)

This is the first genuine Black Lark to have appeared in Britain and Ireland but follows fraudulent claims of up to 10 birds said to have been obtained in Kent/East Sussex in 1907 & 1915 (see Appendix 1 below) and a probable glimpsed by Barry Spence and Mick Bell at Spurn Point, East Yorkshire, in autumn 1984.

**Appendix 1: claimed records of Black Lark in Britain subsequently rejected as part of the Hastings Rarity scam.**

**1907 Kent** Lydd, four females, shot, 18th February (*British Birds* 55: 362-363 & 374-375)

**1907 East Sussex** Pevensey Levels, four adult females, shot, 29th January (*British Birds* 55: 362-363 & 374-375).

**1915 East Sussex** Westfield, single females obtained on 30th January & 1st February (*British Birds* 55: 362-363 & 374-375).

**1915 East Sussex** Hollington, January (*British Birds* 55: 362-363 & 374-375).

Elsewhere in Europe, there have been just 17 records (of 25 birds) with only 4 sightings since 1980 (see Appendix 2). The records span 11 different countries and predominate in spring between March and early May. There are just two records in summer and two records in autumn. The farthest west the species has been recorded prior to the Anglesey sighting is Sweden and Germany.

## Appendix 2: accepted records of Black Lark in Europe.

**AUSTRIA:** one record: 'late 19th Century'.

**BULGARIA:** one record: a female at Kaliakri on 25th May 1995 (two earlier records have been rejected including one considered to be an escape)

**FINLAND:** two records: single males at Joensuu on 24th March 1989 and at Korppoo on 8th April 1989.

**GERMANY:** two records: Heligoland on 27th April 1874 and 27th July 1892.

**GREECE:** three records involving 11 birds: Spring 1930; a male in Athens on 20th April 1958; 8 birds at Koronia on 20th February 1963 and two birds at Axios Delta on 8th February 1964.

**ITALY:** two records: Autumn 1803 and at Foggia on 3rd May 1961.

**MALTA:** one record: winter 1929.

**POLAND:** one record: Kosienice on 17th January 1988.

**ROMANIA:** two records: March 1897 and March 1900.

**SWEDEN:** one record: a male at Karlstad on 6th-7th May 1993.

**TCHEKIA:** one record: a male at Zakupy on 28th November 1981.

## Black Lark Distribution

The distribution of Black Lark reaches east from the river Volga to Kazakhstan and Central Asia. It is typically a bird of dry arid steppes but breeds close to water – both salt and freshwater lakes – and favours generally more humid steppes than its close relative the White-winged Lark (Harrison 1992, *An Atlas of the Birds of the Western Palearctic*). The Russian breeding population is estimated to be in the region of 6-10,000 pairs (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997, *The EBCC Atlas of European Breeding Birds*) and is almost certainly decreasing and retracting in range. The original steppes have been destroyed over a large area with widespread cultivation and agricultural practises taking place.

It is a resident and partial migrant. Part of the population migrates west or southwest in autumn whilst the remainder rove in huge flocks (up to a thousand birds) about the plains and steppes (largely dependent on water availability). The westernmost birds winter in Ukraine and the southeastern parts of European Russia and largely depend on localised weather conditions. In winter, large flocks can often be found foraging for food around towns, roads or near livestock, very reminiscent of the behaviour of North American Lark Buntings to which they somewhat resemble.



Plate 6: Black Lark, South Stack RSPB, Anglesey, June 2003 (John Carter)



Plate 7: Black Lark, South Stack RSPB, Anglesey, June 2003 (Carl Baggott)



Plate 8: Black Lark, South Stack RSPB, Anglesey, June 2003 (Kelvin Pearce)



Plate 9: Black Lark, South Stack RSPB, Anglesey, June 2003 (Kelvin Pearce)



Plates 10-11: Black Lark, South Stack RSPB, Anglesey, June 2003 (Roy Harvey)





Plates 12-13: Black Lark, South Stack RSPB, Anglesey, June 2003 (Bill Aspin)



Plates 14-16: Black Lark, South Stack RSPB, Anglesey, June 2003 (Ian Barnard)



Plates 17-20: Black Lark, South Stack RSPB, Anglesey, June 2003 (Pete Wragg)



Plate 21: Black Lark, South Stack RSPB, Anglesey, June 2003 (Steve Huggins)



Plate 22: Black Lark, South Stack RSPB, Anglesey, June 2003 (Steve Blain)

### **Detailed Description**

The bird was mainly pitch-black in plumage, but with greyish-white fringes to the lower flanks (quite extensive) and fore flanks and similar extensive markings on the lower scapulars and to a lesser extent on the mantle and tertials. The greater, median and lesser coverts were also paler tipped and a few pale flecks were apparent on the uppertail-coverts and on the crown. The bill was contrastingly pale and in most light conditions appeared to be ivory-white (although could appear bluish-white or even pinkish-white in other light conditions). The legs and feet were blackish.

In flight, the underwings could be seen to be pitch-black. There was no white on the tail-edges or terminal edge of the wing.

Overall it was a large and sturdy lark with a somewhat pot-bellied appearance.



Plates 22-23: Black Lark, South Stack RSPB, Anglesey, June 2003 (Steve Blain/Lee Woods)



Plates 24-25: Black Lark, South Stack RSPB, Anglesey, June 2003 (Steve Blain)

Steve Blain's superb photographs above clearly show the extent of pale markings in the bird's plumage. The upper shot reveals extensive greyish-white V-shaped markings in the uppertail-coverts and rump and a row of pale fringed feathers on the

scapulars. The patches on the upperwings are more liberally scattered and in different areas on both wings. The pale feathers are features of a bird in fresh breeding plumage and these gradually wear off as the summer moult approaches. The visibility of the pale feathers depends on the degree of wear.



Plates 26-27: Black Lark, South Stack RSPB, Anglesey, June 2003 (Nigel Blake)

A few birders have commented upon the captive possibility of Black Lark in Britain. Some exhaustive enquiries were made and these confirmed that no Black Larks had ever been imported into this country (*per* Pegasus traders in Essex, DEFRA & Heathrow Animal Reception Centre). Furthermore, for the past three months, Britain has not imported any birds from Europe due to an outbreak of 'Chicken Flu' in the Netherlands. Mongolian Larks are the only species of lark regularly encountered at the Antwerp and Rotterdam Bird Markets, with a few Sky and Wood Larks present in captivity in Britain (privately owned and apparently imported from Eastern Europe).

The *UK400 Club* has no hesitation in accepting the Anglesey Black Lark on to [Category A](#) of the British List and its appearance coincides with that of other species from the region in recent weeks (*eg* Oriental Plover in Finland, Turkestan Shrike in Somerset, Thick-billed Warbler on Fair Isle, Rose-coloured Starlings in Argyll & East Yorkshire).

Its appearance is on a par with some of the other staggering ornithological events of the past 50 years, such as the occurrences of Pallas's Sandgrouse, McQueen's Houbara Bustard, Rufous Bushchat, White-tailed Plover and Caspian Plover and is fully deserved of its star status. It is unsurprising therefore that some 3,760 observers had enjoyed excellent views of the bird before the Friday evening.

The essential reference regarding Black Lark identification is the short paper by Olli Tenuvuo and Tom Lindroos in *Alula* 1/2002 (pages 22-27). Also relevant is an account by S. Larsson of the Swedish occurrence on *Birding World* 6: 189.

### **Acknowledgements**

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