

I'm in luck: A Horned Lark in full display

BY BRUCE MCCAMMON

I saw my first Horned Lark when I visited the Columbia Wildlife Refuge with a friend many years ago.

Then, as a resident on the west side of the Cascades, the bird was new to me and my friend walked me through the ID process.

I leaned out the car window and snapped a few photos of the bird as it hopped around on the ground. As we prepared to move

on, I reviewed the images on the camera's LCD screen and showed them to my friend. His comment was, "Maybe we can find some that aren't standing on cow pies." Good idea.

I've learned since then that Horned Larks seem to prefer open areas such as plowed or stubble wheat fields or areas with short grass. The Audubon field guide says that they do well on overgrazed or abused land, which there is plenty of throughout the West.

Even though they are widespread in the continental United States and Canada, Horned Lark populations are in steep decline. The North American Breeding Bird Survey estimates a decline of 71 percent between 1966 and 2015.

Loss of habitat is one reason for the decline. Human encroachment is another.

The Horned Lark is the only



Bruce McCammon is retired, color-blind and enjoys photographing the birds in north central Washington.



The Horned Lark is the only native lark in North America.

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That is, in itself, a cause for celebration. Being able to witness a native bird species is a very good thing.

Horned Larks are slightly larger than a House Sparrow (7-8 inches) but smaller than an American Robin. They travel in flocks of up to 100 birds and you will frequently see them grouped in the middle of the road as you drive around our shrub-steppe/wheat field communities. They tend to stay in place as a car speeds toward them, lifting off at the last minute.

One friend of mine refers to them as "radiator birds" based on her first sighting of one in a car grill. In my experience, the birds are masters of evasion and I've never hit one with my car.

Within the masses of small, brown birds, Horned Larks are distinctive. They have a black

mask that extends from the bill, below the eye and down the cheek. The neck of Horned Larks is yellow that transitions to a black bib on the upper chest.

Males will frequently show two small horn-like feathers on the top of their heads.

Horned Larks forage on the ground for seeds and insects. They eat a wide variety of grasses and weeds as well as waste grain. They hop around in plowed fields and almost disappear between clods of dirt.

When they are startled, they lift off as a group and fly away in a twisting formation. Often, the startled flock will circle back and land in the same area or nearby.

You may see flocks of these birds in dirt fields or spanning the width of a dirt road.

Photographically, a portrait of a Horned Lark on a road surface,

almost always photographed from above the bird, is never valued as more than a record shot.

Finding a few on a fence is not uncommon but they will most likely be on the ground. Like a road shot, a shot on a fence or fence post is a nice record but we can hope to do better.

The male bird in this photo perched atop native sage and sang away for several minutes. Extending his feather "horns" was the perfect addition for the photo.

I have hundreds of images of Horned Larks but very few show the bird on native vegetation and in full display mode. I got lucky.

I hope you take time to drive through our wonderful shrub-steppe areas and get to see these native birds. I wish you luck.

Don't forget your binoculars and camera.