

F O C U S

Longspurs



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Rich Stallcup

LONGSPURS are sparrow-sized passerines (perching birds) that almost never perch: they are always swirling through the air or else on the ground—just behind a dirt clod. The four species in North America (and the world) are all in the genus *Calcarius*, a name that, like “longspur,” alludes to their claw or long hind toenail.

While none nests or seriously winters in California, all may be present from the last week of September through October, most often found in freshly plowed fields with Horned Larks or pipits. Not common in the Pacific States, their order of frequency here is Lapland, Chestnut-collared, McCown's, and Smith's (for which there are only about five California records).

So you are walking on an artichoke field in San Mateo County, a plowed field on Point Reyes, or a short-grass prairie in Placer County, and a flock of 100 small landbirds jumps up, blows around for a while, and lands far away. You aim your scopes and focus down, but all that can be seen are larks and pipits. The longspurs (not larkspurs; those are flowers) are crouched out of sight in furrows or behind clods. Blending with dirt is a specialty of the group.



A Lapland Longspur blends with the ground.

Audibles. The best way to know that there are longspurs in the flock is to listen carefully when the flock is in flight. All of them, and none of the other field birds, deliver “rattle calls” that could sound like running your thumbnail along the teeth of a metal comb (big end for Lapland, small end for Smith's). Chestnut-collareds also have a unique “kittle-kittle” that is more distinctive than the birds themselves. Among the birds' other calls, “rattles” and “kittles” are most telling, yet differentiating species of longspurs by rattles alone is virtually impossible.

Visuals. If you are very good with binoculars, silent longspurs can be picked from the flying group by their

round heads (larks and pipits have longer heads that are pinched forward to their narrower bills). Larks and pipits are also longer-tailed and (pipits especially) show a subtly humped rump with the tail carried lower than the back.

All of the longspurs have white feathers in the tail, but so do pipits and larks. For Lapland and Smith's, the white is restricted to the outer two pairs of rectrices and is usually not a helpful field mark. Chestnut-collareds and McCown's have much more white, and tail patterns that are theirs alone, but in frantic flight (the only way they fly) the details are very hard to see. The best chances to see the spread tails are when birds are braking just before they land. Use your binoculars to follow suspects, all the way.

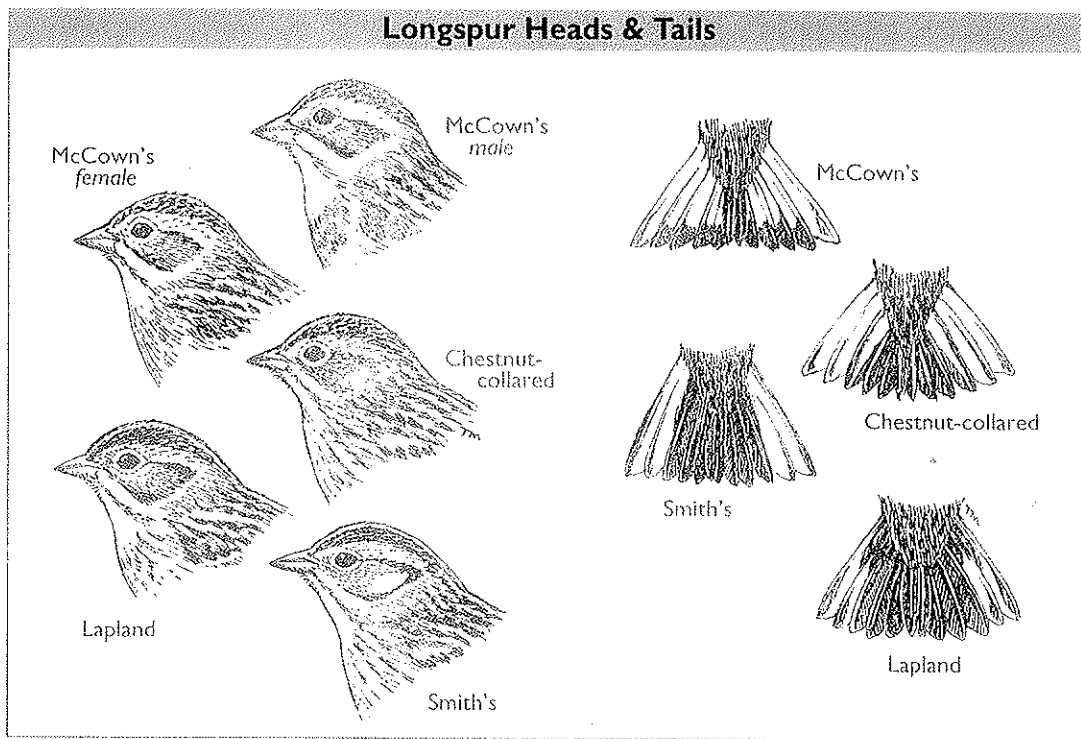
Chestnut-collared Longspurs are the smallest, brownest, and least ornate of the complex. They crouch, even while walking or running (longspurs don't hop); resemble feathered mice; and will dash down field mouse runways through short grass. **McCown's** are the palest and have noticeably fat bills. On the ground you may see that the primary tips of McCown's nearly reach the end of the tail; for Chestnut-collared they just equal the posterior edge of the upper tail *coverts*. The other two, **Smith's** and **Lapland**, have more interesting and stripier backs and, although

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individually variable by age and gender, can usually be sorted out with help from a good bird book.* Laplands have the strongest face and back patterns, with big buffy eyebrows and white scapular stripes (see photo), and have rusty greater wing coverts and tertials. Smith's are orangy-buff on the underparts, and most have white median wing coverts, as do some Chestnut-collareds. Smith's have the thinnest longspur bills.

Look-Alikes Several times while longspur looking, we have found birders staring at an unknown bird that has a sparrow bill, is striped, might have white in the tail, and is meandering through the clods. Which

* *Sparrows and Buntings*, by Byers et al, has the best illustrations and the most thorough text. The *National Geographic* field guide is by far the best in that category, especially the written descriptions.



of the mysterious longspurs is it? A Savannah Sparrow! In Arizona in winter, Vesper Sparrows put on an even more perfect charade when they share the dirt with McCown's and Chestnut-collared longspurs.

IT IS NOT EASY to become one (or four) with longspurs. Flocks of field birds become more and more spooky when pressed, so move slowly, take your time, and bring your scope.