FEATURED PHOTO

FIRST RECORD OF THE EASTERN MEADOWLARK FOR CALIFORNIA

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In the summer of 2018, in a meadow in northeastern California, Calvin Lou and I found a singing male Eastern Meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*) showing characteristics of either the nominate subspecies *S. m. magna* or of *S. m. argutula* (photograph on this issue's back cover). The bird was seen from 10 June to 30 July. This represents the first documented and accepted record of this species in California (California Bird Records Committee record #2018-057) and one of few in the West. Here I describe its identification, habitat, and the species' status in the West.

The bird was in the town of Day, Modoc County. Day is known as the northeastern limit of several California-based species such as Nuttall's Woodpecker (*Dryobates nuttallii*), Hutton's Vireo (*Vireo huttoni*), California Towhee (*Melozone crissalis*), and Lawrence's Goldfinch (*Spinus lawrencei*), all of which are rare or absent in eastern California north of the Day Valley. The area is a patchwork of several habitats, including chaparral dominated by manzanita (*Arctostaphylos* spp.), woodland of Oregon white oak (*Quercus garryana*), forest of Jeffrey pine (*Pinus jeffreyi*), and meadows/grasslands.

The Eastern Meadowlark is a polytypic species with approximately 16 currently recognized subspecies, only four of which are relevant to the western United States: nominate *S. m. magna*, *S. m. argutula*, *S. m. hoopesi*, and *S. m. lilianae*. Nominate *magna* breeds primarily in grasslands of northeastern North America from the Atlantic coast west to North Dakota, Kansas, and north-central Texas. *S. m. argutula* breeds south of nominate *magna* from eastern Texas and Oklahoma east to Georgia. *S. m. hoopesi* occurs in southern Texas and far northeastern Mexico. *S. m. lilianae* breeds from central New Mexico west to west-central Arizona and south to central Mexico (Jaramillo and Burke 1999)

Because of the extensively dark upperparts and head pattern of the Eastern Meadowlark at Day, California, *S. m. lilianae* can be eliminated. Additionally, *S. m. hoopesi* should show upperparts paler than this bird's (see description below). Therefore, I conclude the bird represents nominate *magna* or *argutula*.

The Eastern Meadowlark has a limited history of vagrancy in the western United States, probably due in part to difficulty in identification. *S. m. lilianae* has demonstrated short-distance vagrancy, with several records along the Arizona side of the Colorado River (Rosenberg et al. 1991). Thus it has long been expected to show up in southern California. There are two previous records of *S. m. magna*/*argutula* west of the Rocky Mountains, both of which were of singing males:

- 18–28 June 2009, Madison County, Montana (Marks et al. 2016)
- 1–4 June 2012, Skagit County, Washington (Mlodinow and Bartels 2016)

Including the one in California, all three of these Eastern Meadowlarks were discovered in the month of June. None was coastal, and, perhaps surprisingly, none came from well-covered migrant and vagrant "traps" in the desert. The lack of fall records possibly indicates the difficulty of locating and identifying silent Eastern Meadowlarks rather than their actual pattern of vagrancy. The Montana and Washington records were of birds in relatively wet meadows and, notably, not in the presence of Western Meadowlarks (*S. neglecta*)—reflecting a general habitat difference between the two taxa, with *S. m. magna* preferring lusher grasslands.

Unsurprisingly, the Eastern Meadowlark in California was located and identified by vocalization, the five-noted whistled song. While under observation it gave three

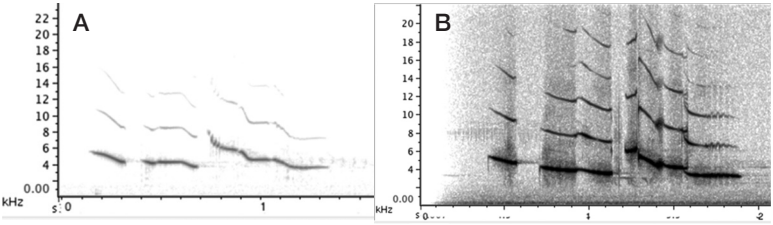

Figure 1. (A) Three-noted song given by the Eastern Meadowlark at Day, California. (B) Eastern Meadowlark song recorded in the species' core range in Pennsylvania.

Recordings by Curtis Marantz (A) and Wilbur L. Hershberger/Macaulay Library at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology (B, ML94369)

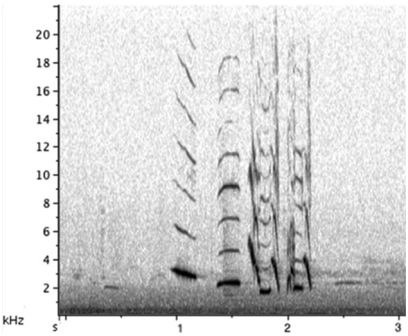

Figure 2. Typical Western Meadowlark song.

Recording by Wilbur L. Hershberger/Macaulay Library at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology (ML516717)

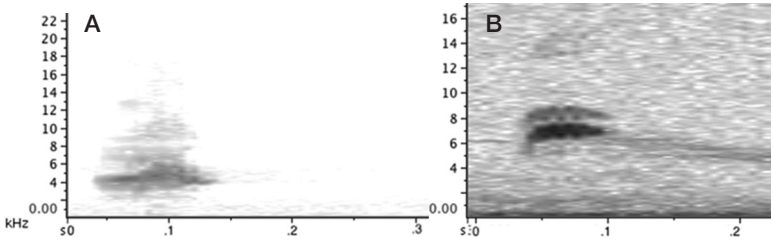

Figure 3. (A) "Bzrrrt" call given by the Eastern Meadowlark at Day, California. (B) "Bzrrrt" call of an Eastern Meadowlark recorded in the species' core range.

Recordings by Curtis Marantz and Wilbur L. Hershberger/Macaulay Library at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology (B, ML94367)

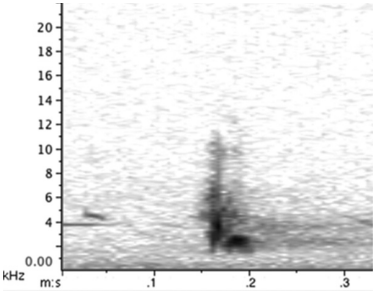

Figure 4. "Chup" call of a Western Meadowlark.

Recording by Wilbur L. Hershberger/Macaulay Library at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology (ML534727)

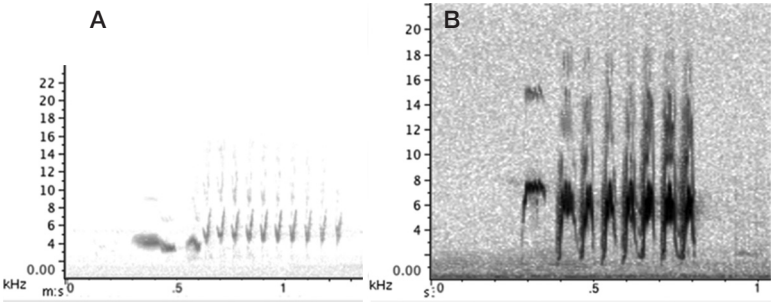

Figure 5. (A) Flight rattle of the Eastern Meadowlark at Day, California. (B) Flight rattle of an Eastern Meadowlark recorded in the species' core range.

Recordings by Curtis Marantz and Wilbur L. Hershberger/Macaulay Library at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology (B, ML94369)

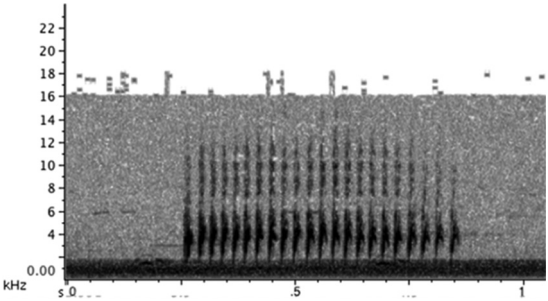

Figure 6. Flight rattle of a Western Meadowlark.

Recording from www.xeno-canto.org/472289

primary vocalizations: its melodic song of three to five notes, its "bzrrt" note, and its shrill, high rattle. Below I discuss these three vocalizations, and their differences from those of the Western.

The Eastern Meadowlark's song varies widely, both between individuals and within a single individual's repertoire. The bird in California gave several variations of this song, the number of audibly discernible notes ranging from three to five (Figure 1A), and resembling a song recorded in Pennsylvania (Figure 1B). Most songs began with a single high note, followed by a lower note, followed by a note similar to the first note, followed by two descending notes. All notes in the song were clear and melodic, in contrast to those of the Western, which typically starts with a series of clear ascending notes then proceeds to a more jumbled section (Figure 2). That song has been described as "flute-like," a quality which would not apply to the song of the Eastern Meadowlark at Day, California.

While in flight, the bird frequently gave its high buzzy call (Figure 3A), similar to Eastern Meadowlark calls given in the species' normal range (Figure 3B). This call is very distinct in quality, resembling a lower-pitched Eastern Kingbird call: a high, thin, rapid trill often described as "bzrrrt" or "dzert." It differs from the low-pitched "chup" flight call given by the Western Meadowlark (Figure 4). Calls of the meadowlarks are inherited, indicating that the Eastern Meadowlark in California was not a hybrid.

Additionally, while in flight, this bird occasionally gave a rattle call (Figure 5A), similar to calls of Eastern Meadowlarks recorded in Pennsylvania (Figure 5B). This call is more staccato than the corresponding vocalization of the Western Meadowlark—a more liquid, less explosive rattle (Figure 6).

Visually, this bird was in almost every way similar to the nearby Western Meadowlarks, but a few key differences were noticeable in the field. It stood out as being more contrasting than the Westerns because of its much bolder, darker upperparts and much brighter face pattern. The back feathers were all dark-centered with broad buffy edges. In the Western and Lilian's the edges of the greater coverts are grayish overall. On the face, the bold black eyeline contrasted with bright white supercillia and silvery cheeks, bolder than the Western's more muted face pattern. The malar area was notably white without intruding yellow, and in flight the outer four pairs of rectrices were extensively white, more than on even extreme Westerns. Also, the flank pattern was distinctive, showing stronger black streaking extending to the sides of the breast, rather than the duller spotting of the Western Meadowlark.

The Eastern Meadowlark at Day, California, was in a field with many Western Meadowlarks. Its flight style often differed from that of the nearby Westerns, with fast flickering wingbeats recalling those of a Spotted Sandpiper. The Westerns at this location did not appear to exhibit this flight pattern.

With now three records of vagrant Eastern Meadowlarks in the far West, it seems likely that states such as Idaho, Oregon, and Nevada all have the potential for *S. m. magna/argutula* in lush meadows in June.

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