

# FIRST RECORD OF BIMACULATED LARK *MELANOCORYPHA BIMACULATA* FOR SPAIN AND THE BALEARICS

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**SUMMARY.-** First record of Bimaculated Lark *Melanocorypha bimaculata* for Spain and the Balearics. A Bimaculated Lark *Melanocorypha bimaculata* was found at Sa Barrala, near Campos in Mallorca on the 31<sup>st</sup> December 2020. The bird was seen by two other observers on the date of finding, but proved extremely elusive thereafter, only being seen in flight by one other observer on 4<sup>th</sup> January 2021. The bird represents the first record for Spain and the Balearics.

**Key words:** Bimaculated Lark, *Melanocorypha bimaculata*, rarity, Parc Natural es Trenc-Salobrar de Campos, Balearics.

**RESUM.-** Primer registro de calàndria bimaclada *Melanocorypha bimaculata* para España y Baleares. Una calàndria bimaclada *Melanocorypha bimaculata* fue observada en Sa Barrala, cerca de Campos, en Mallorca, el 31 de diciembre de 2020. Posteriormente fue vista por otros dos observadores, pero resultó extremadamente esquiva a partir de entonces, y solo fue vista en vuelo por otro observador el 4 de enero de 2021. Esta observación es la primera cita para España y Baleares. **Paraules clau:** Calàndria bimaclada, *Melanocorypha bimaculata*, raresa, Parc Natural es Trenc-Salobrar de Campos, Illes Balears.

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On 31<sup>st</sup> December 2020, Jason Moss, a local ornithologist, made a visit to the farmland area of Sa Barrala; a site abutting the Parc Natural es Trenc-Salobrar de Campos. With its open fields and cereal stubbles, the area is interesting for its wintering bird populations, hosting groups of Common Crane *Grus grus* in most years as well as large numbers of common farmland birds. On this day large flocks of Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis* were noted feeding on the larger bare fields, mixed with Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*,

Thekla's Lark *Galerida theklae* and Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra*. The flocks were scanned from the car, checking carefully for something out of the ordinary.

Most rare and scarce lark and bunting species in the Balearic Islands show a clear bias towards spring and autumn occurrences (REBASSA *et al.*, 2018). However, the potential of vagrant species being found overwintering is relatively high, as demonstrated further afield through records of Richard's Pipit *Anthus richardi* and Little Bunting *Emberiza*



Photo 1. Bimaculated Lark *Melanocorypha bimaculata*, Sa Baralla, Campos, Mallorca, 31<sup>st</sup> December 2020.

Foto 1. Calàndria bimaculada *Melanocorypha bimaculata*, Sa Baralla, Campos, Mallorca, 31 de desembre de 2020.

*pusilla* wintering across many sites in western Europe, and not least demonstrated by the discovery of an overwintering Pine Bunting *Emberiza leucocephalos* in Mallorca, also discovered in December 2020. The habitat and feeding opportunities provided at Sa Barrala offer good opportunities for searching for rarer larks, pipits and buntings.

Today's visit proved the sites potential beyond expectation when a large lark of the genus *Melanocorypha* came into view. The *Melanocorypha* stood out distinctly amongst the *Alauda arvensis* as being larger and paler, and on first impression and balance of probability was assumed likely to be a Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra*; a very rare bird in its own right in Mallorca. Leaving the vehicle and setting up

the telescope, views confirmed the initial impression, with its large and bulky structure, short square tail, strong white supercilium and eye surround, broad black patch on the collar sides and pale scapular tramlines all appearing superficially good for *Melanocorypha calandra*, as illustrated in the following image of the bird, taken at distance and through heat haze (Photo 2).

Knowing that both *Melanocorypha calandra* and *bimaculata* are very similar in appearance, it was quickly apparent that the bird would require careful observation to identify. During the next hour a combination of plumage and structural features were recorded. Of these, an apparent black loreal stripe and generally contrasting head pattern rang alarm bells, as they suggest-



Photo 2. Initial views of the Bimaculated Lark *Melanocorypha bimaculata*, before the identification was confirmed. Sa Barrala, 31<sup>st</sup> December 2020.

*Foto 2. Primera imagen de la Calàndria bimaculada Melanocorypha bimaculata, antes de que se confirmara la identificación. Sa Barrala, 31 de diciembre de 2020.*

ed Bimaculated Lark. However referencing the Collins Field Guide in the field, the bird's bill didn't seem as heavy as that illustrated. Also due to distance of viewing and heat haze, the dark loreal stripe would appear brownish and poorly marked at certain angles, leading to doubts and conflicting thoughts. The tail pattern was not visible as the bird fed on the ground. At one moment the bird gave an extended wing stretch showing its underwing, but proved frustratingly too brief to be sure of the underwing colour beyond doubt. To add insult to injury, When the bird flew with the *Alauda arvensis* flock, it headed at an angle which failed to offer a view of these important plumage features, leaving the identification still undetermined.

At this point the news was put out to local birders of a possible Calandra Lark, though sharing that the identification wasn't certain. Re-finding the bird proved difficult, taking 2 hours before it was relocated again in the original field. Mike Montier and Josep Manchado arrived and were able to watch the bird for around an hour, though views were still distant. During this time the bird flew on two occasions, but the underwing colour still could not be confirmed, with one flight appearing to show brownish underwings, while on another occasion they appeared blackish. Also, during these flights neither the presence or absence of a pale trailing edge of the wing or pale terminal bar to the tail could be seen due to light conditions and distance. At this point Mike and Josep had to

Photo 3-6. Montage of flight images of Bimaculated Lark *Melanocorypha bimaculata*, showing the birds dull brown underwings, lack of white trailing edge to secondaries and white terminal bar to the tail. Sa Barrala, 31<sup>st</sup> December 2020. *Foto 3-6. Collage de imàgenes de vuelo de Calàndria bimaculada Melanocorypha bimaculata, mostrando las aves con la parte inferior de las alas de color marrón opaco, la falta de borde de salida blanco en las secundarias y la barra terminal blanca en la cola. Sa Barrala, 31 de diciembre de 2020.*

leave due to plans relating to New Year's Eve, leaving Jason alone to observe the bird further.

During the next hour, with careful approach, it was possible to watch the bird through a scope as it fed at around 50-meter range, and therefore offering a much-improved chance to assess plumage details accurately. It became evident that the birds loreal stripe was indeed blackish. However final confirmation of the birds identification came when during a prolonged flight, a series of photographs were taken which illustrated the bird identification beyond doubt as a *Melanocorypha bimaculata*.

The presence of pale brownish underwing coverts and undersides of the flight feathers, absence of a white terminal secondary bar and also the characteristic white terminal bar on the tail are revealed well in the following series of images (Photo 3-6), and confirm the birds identification beyond doubt.

The site was visited by several observers during the following week but the bird proved very elusive, only being seen in flight by one other observer on 4<sup>th</sup> January 2021.



The breeding range of *Melanocorypha bimaculata* extends from Turkey across to Iran and Afghanistan, wintering in north-east Africa and India (CLEMENTS *et al.*, 2019) (Figure 1). The Turkish breeding population is estimated from 5,000–50,000 (HEATH *et al.*, 2000) to 1–2 million pairs (BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL, 2021) and is considered stable or increasing. On its breeding grounds, the species prefers open habitats, particularly cultivated areas, usually stonier and with less grassy terrain than areas preferred by Calandra Lark. The breeding season occurs from late March or early April until mid-August. The species is migratory, although it may be resident in parts of the extreme south of its range. (BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL, 2021).

Despite the relative proximity of the species' Turkish and Middle-eastern breeding grounds, and

its frequency of occurrence as a migrant through sites such as Cyprus, *Melanocorypha bimaculata* remains an extreme rarity in western Europe. To date there have been fewer than 30 records in Europe. The majority have occurred during the month of May, while 7 have occurred between December and February. Occurrences are widely distributed, with the vast majority of European records coming from the Scandinavian countries (THOMA & TÄSCHLER, 2013). The lack of records from Spain, Portugal and France suggest that this western Mediterranean record is quite exceptional. However a scattering of central European records, and 4 records from Italy perhaps suggest that the species' appearance further west in the Mediterranean should come as little surprise.

At the time of writing, this record had been accepted by the *Sociedad*



Figure 1. Map of the global breeding and wintering grounds of Bimaculated Lark *Melanocorypha bimaculata* (BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL, 2021).

Figura 1. Mapa de las zonas de reproducción e invernada mundiales de Calàndria *bimaculata* *Melanocorypha bimaculata* (BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL, 2021).

*Española de Ornitología* Rarity Committee (CR-SEO) as the first national record (RODRÍGUEZ-ESTEBAN *et al.*, 2020).

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