desert enigma

GRAY'S LARK

above *Gray's Larks use their stout bills to dig up invertebrates and seeds, vigorously flicking gravel and sand sideways, which leaves a distinctive raked pattern in the ground.*

top *The larks often perch on a small shrub, flying or jumping down to resume foraging. This might serve as a sentry function, as in the Spike-heeled Lark complex, but could also offer a respite from wind-blown sand at ground level or the chance to offload excess heat during the hottest part of the day.*

The Namib Desert is home to two endemic larks: the Dune Lark, confined to the sandy desert, and Gray's Lark, found on gravel plains. The Dune Lark forms part of the Karoo Lark complex and is closely related to Barlow's Lark, which replaces it at the northern extreme of the succulent Karoo. Indeed, some authorities consider the two as conspecific. By comparison, Gray's Lark *Ammomanopsis grayi* is a distinctive species with no close relatives.

Its short, stout bill and plain plumage recall the desert larks *Ammomanes* of North Africa and south-western Asia and until the advent of genetic studies Gray's Lark was placed in this genus. However, we now know that the desert larks are part of a group of larks including the sparrow-larks and Dusky Lark superspecies, whereas Gray's Lark is related to the Long-billed and Spike-heeled lark complexes in a group that also contains the hoopoe-larks. Its physical resemblance to the desert larks is a result of convergence – they look alike because they live in similar habitats and feed on similar foods.

From the genetic evidence available to date, it is unclear whether Gray's Lark is closer to the long-billed or spike-heeled larks. Its display flight, given mostly after dark, is closer to that of the long-billed larks, but like the spike-heeled larks it typically lives in small groups of three to five birds and can even have helpers at the nest. Because it differs structurally from both groups and probably diverged from them more than 10 million years ago, it is placed in its own genus.

Gray's Larks are found on gravel plains from the Sperrgebiet south of Lüderitz to Iona National Park in south-western Angola. They feed on a mix of seeds and insects and gain enough water from their food to not need to drink. Breeding typically takes place in autumn, after there has been some rain. The nest is a deep cup, usually placed on the east side of a large rock or grass tuft to provide shade from the afternoon sun. It is so deep that the incubating adult is level with the plain, making it extremely difficult to spot. The cup typically is thickly lined with grass flower heads, but nests built immediately after rains, before grass grows, are unlined. Once the chicks hatch they grow quickly on a diet of invertebrates and leave the nest at about 10 days old, before they can fly, accompanying the adults on foot.

right *The Namib's open gravel plains are often windswept, creating challenges for a small, 20-gram bird. Wind-blown sand threatens their eyes and they often keep their eyes partly or even completely closed, even while walking about.*

PETER RYAN (5)

Given their often confiding behaviour and relative abundance close to Swakopmund, it is surprising that we don't know more about the social lives of these intriguing larks. A study of colour-marked individuals would provide novel information about their home ranges and the stability of the small groups in which they normally occur.

PETER RYAN

Gray's Larks at Cape Cross (above, left) are slightly more rufous above than those found 100 kilometres farther south near Swakopmund (above). Cape Cross is generally regarded as the boundary between the paler nominate A. g. grayi *and the darker northern subspecies* A. g. hoeschi. *However, the colour of the upperparts varies locally in relation to the colour of the gravel plains and I doubt that two subspecies are warranted.*