

Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) – threats and concerns

The skylarks (*Alauda arvensis*) is one of the most abundant and widespread of ground-nesting farmland birds¹. It is a small-sized (16–18 cm long) song bird belonging to the order Passeriformes and is native to India and many other countries. The breeding season starts from mid-April to early July, but breeding activity varies from year to year, probably depending on the temperature. As these bird species has an extremely large range, it has been listed under IUCN category as Least Concern.

A survey was carried out in a small coverage of two acres of land during March and April 2012, in the areas surrounding Ousudu Lake in Villupuram District, Tamil Nadu between 49°54'N and 15°59'E. The study area is an abandoned agricultural land characterized by the predominance of small grasses, scattered with prosopis trees (*Prosopis juliflora*; Figure 1a).

We searched for skylark nests in the whole study area. This covered the breeding season of skylarks. These birds generally avoid fields with dense coverage and tall vegetation². Therefore, we located nests by systematically searching only the ground of sparse and low-vegetated fields. Search for nests was conducted mainly in small grassland areas.

Before the declaration of the Ousteri Lake as a bird sanctuary, it had its natural water flow during the rainy season; and was drained partially or fully during summer season. As a result, there was open grassland and reefs flourished. The native skylarks largely used these lands as feeding grounds as well as for reproduction. After declaration of the Ousudu Lake as a bird sanctuary, the Government of Puducherry has completely blocked the water for recreation

purposes. This has caused the grasslands to be completely submerged under water, as a consequence of which the skylarks have migrated to the surrounding abandoned agricultural fields. When these agricultural fields are ready for second-term cultivation in April–May, this results in the destruction of the skylark nests and its hatchlings during the summer ploughing and irrigation. These activities have reduced the skylark population in the Ousteri Lake area, which needs conservation measures. Skylarks are commonly included among the top indicators of loss of biodiversity in agriculture landscapes³. Intensive management of arable land has led to a reduction of insects and weed seeds, which serve as food for the skylarks. Thus food shortage has resulted in rapid decline of the species. In the study area, there were around 79 nests: nest with eggs, 34; nests hatchlings (Figure 2), 8; completed nests, 22 and nests under construction, 15. These are under threat due to the second-term of paddy cultivation. Thus intensive agriculture has had a particularly damaging effect on the skylark species in the Ousteri Lake region.

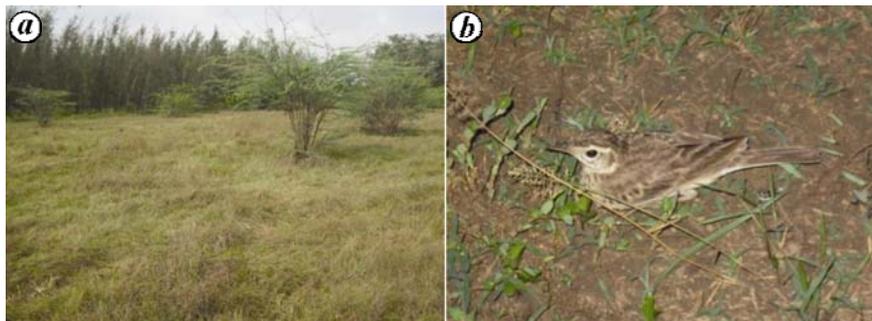


Figure 1. The grasslands are under threats to skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) bird population.



Figure 2. Skylark hatchlings on farmland.

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