

## Nature Note: little beasties from the East

As I write this, it's still a very mild winter, but we thought that in January last year too, didn't we ... Who knows what the temperature will be in February? The only clear lesson from climate change seems to be, 'Expect the unexpected'. And there has been one unexpected winter event already. A small party of four birds has arrived from Lapland and taken up residence on the shoreline between Shingle St and East Lane. The clue to their identity is in the habitat. They are shore larks, which breed on tundra or alpine moors above the tree-line in northern Scandinavia. The scientific name, *Eremophila alpestris* conveys the same idea, translating as 'Alpine lover of desert places'. They are rare winter visitors of Britain, but small groups appear most years on the East Coast and I'd been hoping to see some here one day. They have striking head-patterns, with sulphur-yellow faces and black eye-patches and bibs, and in summer plumage the males have little curved 'horns' of black feathers on the crown (hence their North American name of 'horned larks'). Despite these showy effects, however, they are quite



Jeremy Mynott

Shore Lark

hard to see on the shingle and very well-camouflaged against the weedy vegetation. They shuffle slowly around like small mammals, feeding on seeds and tiny insects. They are also very tame, perhaps because where they come from they don't actually see many people and the only ones who bother them here are harmless birdwatchers and not quite-so-harmless photographers.

They are in the same general family as our skylarks but don't have anything like the same lovely song. The shore lark's song, which I did hear once when I was in the Arctic Circle at the tip of Norway, is a tuneless jangle of harsh chirruping notes – tuneless to our ears anyway, but presumably very seductive to the female of the species. There were some skylarks near them on the shingle for comparison – somewhat larger and much more flighty. Skylarks were also originally birds of open steppe lands, hence their preference for open grassy fields here. They seem to hate any vertical structures like tall hedges or buildings. The skylarks too were probably migrants, in fact, since we now know that large numbers arrive here from the Continent each year (note to self: don't mention Brexit). When scientific studies revealed the scale of these migrations in the 1930s, some Norfolk farmers, fearing for their winter corn, decided that they were not British enough to protect and one national newspaper headline (don't mention the *Mail*) read, 'Skylarks that sing to the Nazis will get no mercy here'.

**Jeremy Mynott**, Shingle Street