



## ORNITHOLOGY

# The White-winged Lark in France and Europe

28 April 2026

By Fany Jariod, Thomas Blanchon & Marc Duquet



White-winged Lark, Camargue, 18 April 2026 (© Thomas Blanchon)

## I - A White-winged Lark in the Camargue : first record for France

On 18 April 2026, late in the day, as we often do in spring, we (FJ & TB) decided to go birdwatching in the Camargue. Our initial plan was to explore the Mas d'Agon area, north of the Étang du Vaccarès, but the sighting of a Black-winged Pratincole a few days earlier suggested the site would be very busy, so we changed our minds. In search of a less popular area, our choice naturally turned to the inland part of Beauduc and its bushes near the coast, in the hope of spotting passerines stopping over during their migration.

Arriving on site in the early evening, we were greeted by the typical species of this season – Common Redstart, Pied Flycatcher, Willow Warbler, Tawny Pipit, Whinchat, Wryneck, etc. Numbers were not high, but we did note that a small influx of migrants had taken place in the bushes. We were then far from imagining that we were on the verge of 'making a French first'.

After an hour, we turned back to explore another area when, at around 7.15 pm, a bird flew past about ten metres in front of us, before landing and disappearing into a patch of scrub. The sighting was brief, giving us just enough time to note its lark-like appearance and a very distinct white trailing edge on its wings, which immediately caught our attention. At that moment, however, the possibility of an individual with abnormal plumage could not be ruled out. Before setting out to search for the bird, we consulted the Collins Bird Guide to find out what to look for and note down during our next observations. The bird was quickly spotted again, but it flew off once more and disappeared behind a dyke some 300 metres away from us.

We searched for it unsuccessfully for half an hour, until a final sweep of the marshland allowed us to relocate it and confirm that it was indeed a lark... but it flew off again immediately and settled 200 metres further on. On this occasion, we note the presence of reddish tones in the plumage and a contrasting underwing pattern. The White-winged Lark is now on our minds, but we need a longer observation and photographs to be sure of the identification and, above all, to document the record, as the species has never been observed in France.

Fortunately, around 8.00 pm, although it had previously been quite wary and had taken off 75–100 metres away from us, the lark finally allowed us to approach to within about forty metres, enabling us to observe it and note the features supporting the species. Its entirely dark bill gave us pause for a moment, but upon zooming in on one of the photos, we realised it was simply dirty and completely covered in mud. After taking a few usable photos, we sent one to Thomas Dagonet and Julien Birard for confirmation. Thomas calls us back immediately to confirm the identification! We had just had the chance and privilege of observing the very first White-winged Lark in France, but it took several congratulatory messages for us to fully realise it.

We locate the bird one last time, to indicate its precise location, in preparation for the twitchers arriving the next day. The White-winged Lark was indeed seen by more than fifty birdwatchers on the 19th and another twenty or so on the 20th, between the Étang de Beauduc and the Étang du Vaisseau, in the commune of Arles (Bouches-du-Rhône), in the south-east of the Camargue.

Examination of the photos, particularly those of the bird in flight, reveals reddish primary coverts, indicating that it is a male.



White-winged Lark, Camargue, 18 April 2026 (© Thomas Blanchon)



White-winged Lark, Camargue, 18 April 2026 (© Thomas Blanchon)



White-winged Lark, Camargue, 20 April 2026 (© Thomas Perrier)



White-winged Lark, Camargue, 20 April 2026 (© Thomas Perrier)



White-winged Lark, Camargue, 19 April 2026 (© Sylvain Bost)

## II - The White-winged Lark *Alauda leucoptera*

Long classified within the genus *Melanocorypha*, the White-winged Lark has recently been placed in the genus *Alauda* following a phylogenetic revision of the family *Alaudidae* (Alström *et al.* 2013).

This monotypic species breeds in the north-west of the Caspian Sea, in southern Russia, across the northern half of Kazakhstan and in the far north-west of China (Fig. 1). Primarily migratory, it moves south-west from late August to early November, mainly in September and October, to winter as far west as the northern Black Sea, in the Trans-Caspian region and northern Iran, and as far east as Kazakhstan. Spring migration takes place in the second half of March and early April, but birds rarely return to the far north of the range before the first few days of May (Alström 2020).

Although it is not considered globally threatened, the White-winged Lark is generally less abundant than other larks in the region. In southern Ukraine and Russia, following the conversion of the steppe to cropland, a decline in numbers and a significant contraction of the species' range were noted after the 1970s. This decline, attributed to the use of agricultural pesticides, ceased in the 1990s and a recovery in numbers has even been observed recently in Russia (Piskunov 2020).

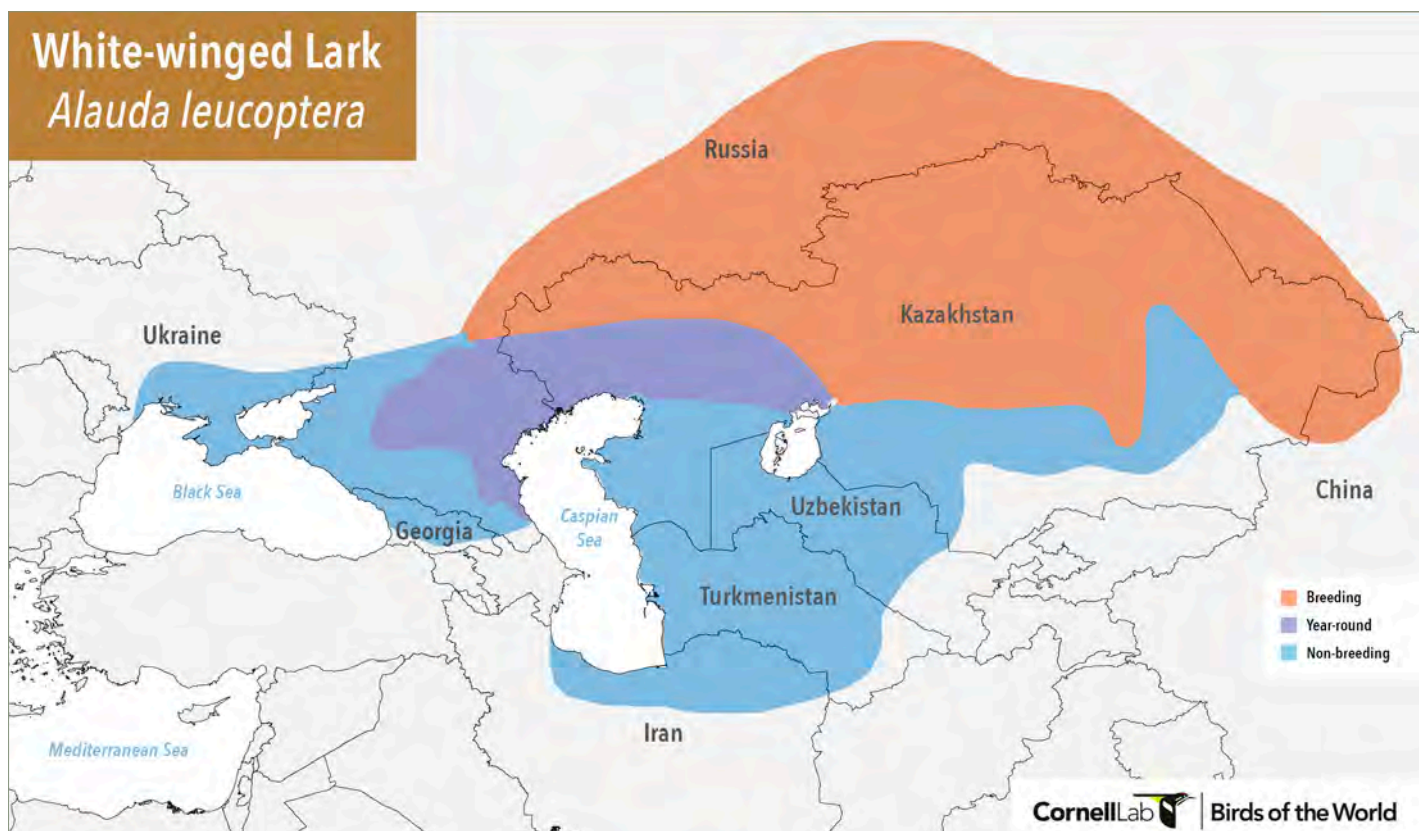


Fig 1. Range of the White-winged Lark (source: *Birds of the World*)

## III - Chronological list of European records (1900-2026)

There are 26 verified records of the White-winged Lark in Europe since the early 20th century, the westernmost being those from Norfolk (1981) and the Camargue (2026):

- 1909 Romania - Malcoci, Tulcea, Dobruja, 1 male (shot), 3 February (Romanian RC),
- 1924 Switzerland - Buochs, Nidwalden, 1 bird, 11 November (Winkler 1999),
- 1926 Italy - Camposanto, Modena, Emilia-Romagna, 1 bird (shot), 21 November (Brichetti & Fracasso 2020),
- 1932 Poland - Zawiercie, Silesia, 1 male, 22 March (Stawarczyk *et al.* 2018),
- 1957 Italy - Foggia, Apulia, 1 male (shot), 9 November (Brichetti & Fracasso 2020),
- 1959 Greece - Néa Zikhni, Serres, Central Macedonia, 1 bird, 4 May,
- 1963 Greece - Axios Delta, Thessaloniki, Central Macedonia, 1 bird, 24 February,
- 1966 Greece - Corfu, Ionian Islands, 1 bird, 18 June,
- 1971 Finland - Mustasaari, Norrskär, 1 bird, 9 June,
- 1975 Poland - Czolpino, Pomerania, 1 male, 21 October 1975 (Stawarczyk *et al.* 2018),
- 1981 United Kingdom - King's Lynn, Norfolk, 1 bird, 22-24 October (Lines 1987, Marr & Porter 1995, Lines & Moyes 1996, BOURC 2018),
- 1988 Poland - Chalupy, Pomerania, 1 bird, 30 March (Stawarczyk *et al.* 2018),
- 1993 Poland - Będziemyśl, Lesser Carpathians, 2 males, 12 May (Stawarczyk *et al.* 2018),
- 1997 Bulgaria - Kamen Bryag, 1 bird, 16 February,

- 1996 Italy – Marano Lagunare, Udine, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, 1 bird, 8 December (Guzzon 2003, Brichetti & Fracasso 2020),
- 1999 Finland – Kalajoki, Letto, 1 male, 21–23 June,
- 2001 Norway – Kramvik, Vardø, Finnmark, 1 male, 24–29 May,
- 2002 Sweden – Suderudd, Gotland, 1 bird, 7 July (Fågelåret 2002: 148–149),
- 2004 Finland – Luumäki, Hepokangas, 1 male, 11–13 April,
- 2004 Norway – Skagen, Vardø, Finnmark, 1 female, 19 July–14 August,
- 2010 Sweden – Holmögadd, Västerbotten, 1 male, 20 September–13 October (Fågelåret 2010: 116),
- 2014 Romania – Tuzla, Constanța, Dobruja, 1 male, 7 December (CH Romania)
- 2015 Norway – Herdla, Askøy, Vestland, 1 male, 20 May,
- 2015 Norway – Hamningberg, Båtsfjord, Finnmark, 1 bird, 16 June 2015,
- 2018 Finland – Loviisa, Hamnskär, 1 male, 13 May,
- 2026 France – The Camargue, Arles, Bouches-du-Rhône, 1 bird, 18–20 April.

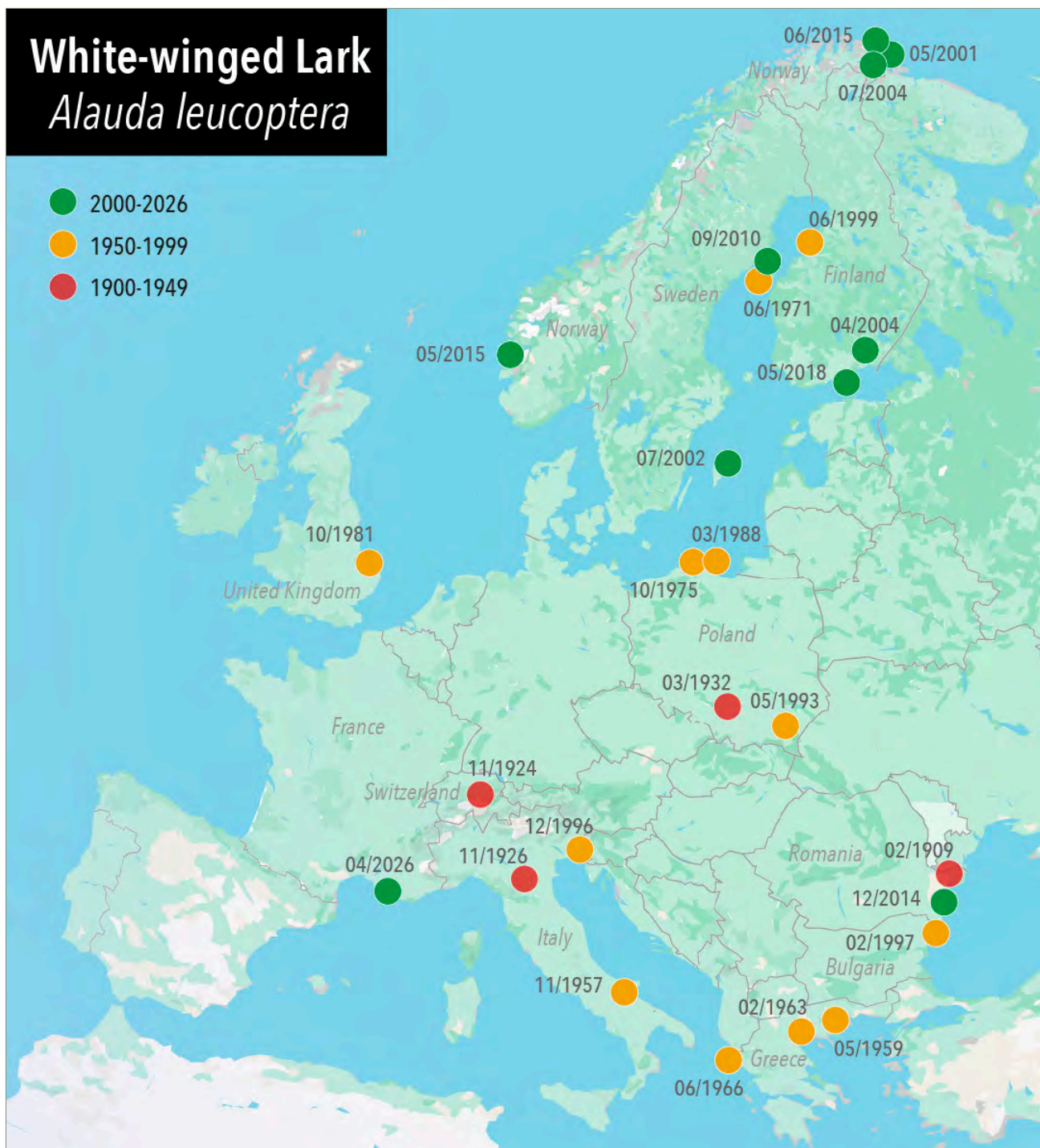


Fig. 2. Distribution of European records of the White-winged Lark from 1900 to 2026



White-winged Lark, Finland, April 2004 (© Sami Tuomela)



White-winged Lark, Sweden, September 2010 (© Christer Sundström)

In addition to these records, there are 6 birds killed in Italy in the 19th century and preserved in Italian museums (Brichetti & Fracasso 2020):

- 1 first-winter male, Trento, Trentino-Alto Adige, November 1869,
- 1 adult male, Bergamo, Lombardy, October 1871,
- 1 female, Verona, Veneto, 2 October 1871,
- 1 first-winter female, San Giorgio, Trentino-Alto Adige, November 1886,
- 1 bird, Malagrotta, Rome, Lazio, 22 January 1896,
- 1 adult male, Bovolenta, Padua, Veneto, 30 March 1896.

It is interesting to note that, with the exception of the Roman record, they all come from north-eastern Italy and were collected in non-breeding season (October-March), which is consistent with the pattern of occurrence of the White-winged Lark in Europe.

For Romania, Vasiliu (1968) also mentions two significant influxes during the winters of 1902-1903 and 1907-1908, as well as a record from 1855, though without providing further details. This information is interesting because it is possible that the White-winged Lark, like Black Lark *Melanocorypha yeltoniensis* and Pallas's Sandgrouse *Syrrhaptes paradoxus*, once undertook invasive movements west of its Central Asian range (and as far as Europe). For these three species, however, such movements ceased at the beginning of the 20th century.

In the British Isles, four of the five previously accepted English records have been reviewed and rejected by the British Ornithologists' Union Records Committee (Marr & Porter 1995, BOURC 2018): three (November 1917, August 1933, August 1955) are likely the result of misidentification (confusion with the Snow Bunting in two cases and with a leucistic Skylark in the other), whilst the wild origin of the fourth, a bird collected in November 1869, could not be established with certainty.



White-winged Lark, Kazakhstan, May 2024 (© James Eaton)

#### IV - Discussion

Note that most European records of the White-winged Lark have been made in the east and north of the continent (Fig. 2) and that the species is extremely rare in Western Europe, with only two other records (England and Switzerland), both of which are old, making the Camargue record all the more remarkable.

The chronological distribution of records in Europe (Fig. 3) shows a slight peak in May–June and a less pronounced one in October–November, but the sample ( $n = 26$ ) remains limited. Including the 19th-century Italian records, there are 10 records for spring (March–May) and the same number for autumn (September–November), 6 for the summer months (June–August) and 6 for the winter months (December–February). These sightings in the western part of the White-winged Lark's range coincide with the species' migratory movements (see above), although these remain limited.

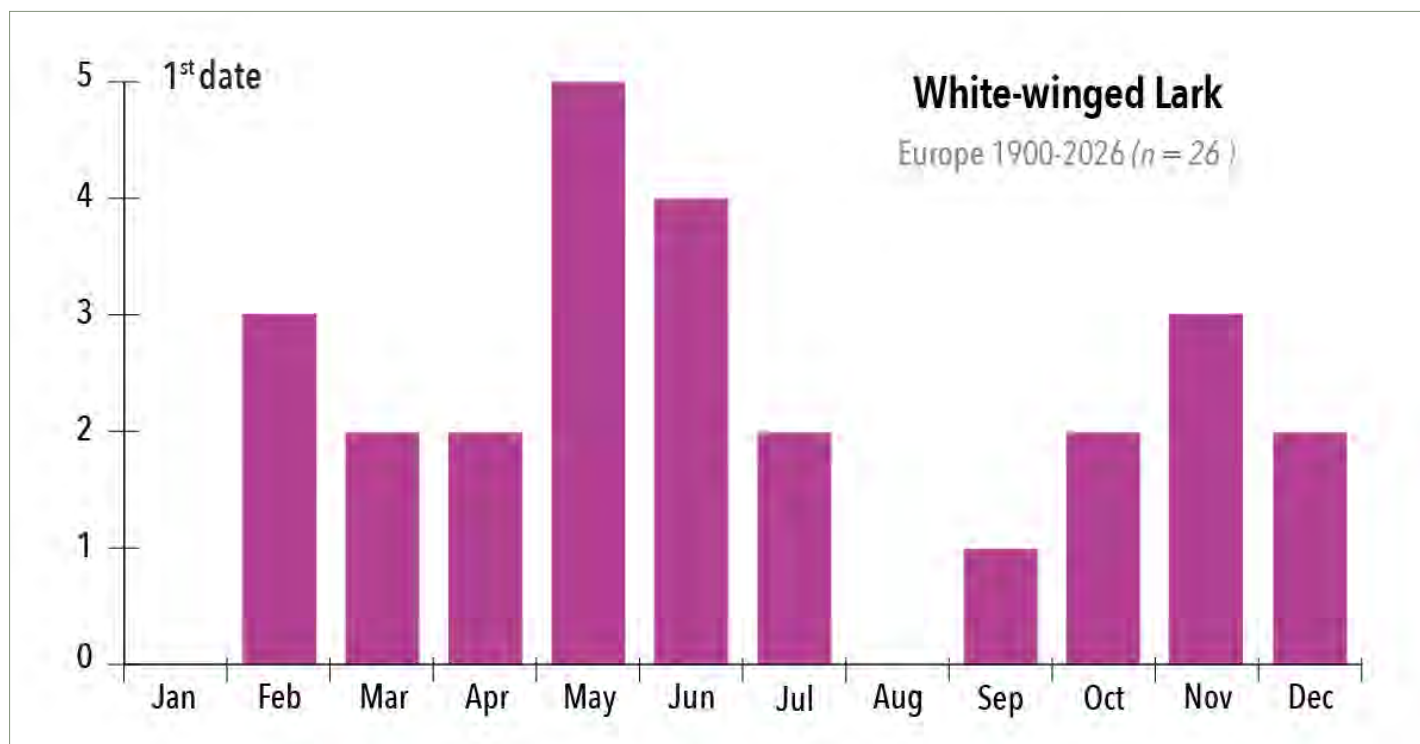


Fig. 3. Monthly distribution of European data on the White-winged Lark from 1900 to 2026

A quick analysis of the spatio-temporal distribution of the records (Fig. 2) reveals, however, that those from southern and western Europe are predominantly autumnal and winter (October–February) and correspond to birds moving beyond their wintering range towards the south-west, whereas records from Poland and Fennoscandia are mainly between March and July and appear to result from a classic phenomenon of spring overshooting.

It should be noted that the vast majority of data (69.5%) concerns one-day sightings (excluding, of course, birds that were shot...), four birds (17.4%) were seen over three days and only two stayed longer, for 23 and 26 days respectively in late summer 2004 in Norway and early autumn 2010 in Sweden. This finding may be due primarily to the species' elusive nature and the habitats it inhabits, where it can be very difficult to locate... as was the case in the Camargue.

The sex ratio of birds observed in Europe is heavily skewed towards males: 16 males to just 3 females (including 19th-century Italian data). If only collected birds are taken into account, the sex ratio appears less skewed, with 5 males to 2 females. It is conceivable that in the field, spotting a male is much easier than spotting a female when the bird is perched, particularly due to the plain russet crown and upperwing coverts; however, in flight, males and females display the same wing characteristics, namely russet upperwing coverts, a black wing tip and a very broad white trailing edge on secondaries and inner primaries (Robertson 1986, Lindroos & Tenovuo 2000, van Duivendijk 2024, Svensson *et al.* 2025).

In the White-winged Lark, as in other larks, juveniles and adults undergo a complete moult from August to October (Svensson 1992). It is therefore virtually impossible to distinguish first-year birds from adults from late autumn onwards, and even more so in winter and spring. This explains why almost all birds whose age has been determined are adults. Among the individuals shot in the 19th century in Italy, however, two had been identified as first-year birds (Brichetti & Fracasso 2020), no doubt based on criteria (unmoulted juvenile feathers, etc.) observable only when held in hand.

#### V - Conclusion

The presence of this male White-winged Lark from 18 to 20 April 2026 in the Camargue represents a new species for France (subject to inclusion in Category A of the French List by the French Avifaunistic Commission). It may be linked to a significant influx observed during the winter of 2025–2026 around the Caspian Sea (*Ornithomedia* 11/02/2026, *BirdGuides* 23/02/2026), where large numbers were reported: for example, 1,000 individuals on 16 January at Aktau in western Kazakhstan, or a flock of around 300 birds on 8 February in Shirvan National Park, Azerbaijan.

**References :** • Alström P. (2020). White-winged Lark (*Alauda leucoptera*), version 1.0. In del Hoyo J., Elliott A., Sargatal J., Christie D.A. & de Juana E. (eds), *Birds of the World*. Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca. • Alström P., Barnes K.N., Olsson U., Barker F.K., Bloomer P., Khan A.A., Qureshi M.A., Guillaumet A., Crochet P.-A. & Ryan P.G. (2013). Multilocus phylogeny of the avian family *Alaudidae* (larks) reveals complex morphological evolution, non-monophyletic genera and hidden species diversity. *Molecular Phylogenetics and Evolution* 69 (3):1043-1056. • BOURC (2018). British Ornithologists' Union Records Committee (BOURC) : 49th Report (October 2018). *Ibis* 160 : 936-942. • Bricchetti P. & Fracasso G. (2020). *The Birds of Italy. Volume 2 : Pteroclididae-Locustellidae*. Edizioni Belvedere, Latina. • Guzzon C. (2003). *Monitoraggio ornitologico e check-list delle specie della Riserva naturale regionale delle Foci dello Stella, Marano Lagunare, 1998-2002*. Regione Aut. Friuli Venezia Giulia, Dir. Reg. Parchi. • Lindroos T. & Tenouvo O. (2000). White-winged Lark – Field identification and European distribution. *Alula* 6(4) : 170-177. • Lines J. (1987). White-winged Lark : a bird new to Norfolk. *Norfolk Bird & Mammal Rep.* 1986 : 416-417. • Lines J. & Moyes A.W. (1996). White-winged Lark in Norfolk. *British Birds* 89(5) : 232-234. • Marr T. & Porter R. (1995). The White-winged Lark in Britain. *British Birds* 88(8) : 365-371. • Piskunov V.V. (2020). White-winged Lark. In Keller V., Herrando S., Vorisek P. et al. (eds), *European Breeding Bird Atlas 2 : Distribution, Abundance and Change*. European Bird Census Council. Barcelona, Lynx Edicions : 595. • Robertson I.S. (1986). Identification of White-winged Lark. *British Birds* 79(7) : 332-335. • Stawarczyk T., Cofta T., Kajzer Z., Lontkowski J. & Sikora A. (2018). *Rzadkie Ptaki Polski [Rare Birds of Poland]*. Polish Avifaunistic Commission. Studio B&W Wojciech Janecki. • Svensson L. (1992). *Identification Guide to European Passerines*. Stockholm. • Svensson L., Mullarney K. & Zetterström D. (2025). *Le Guide ornitho*. Delachaux et Niestlé, Paris. • van Duivendijk N. (2024). *Identifier les oiseaux d'Europe. Le guide ultime*. Delachaux et Niestlé, Paris. • Vasiliu G.D. (1968). *Systema Avium Romaniae*. Alauda, Paris. • Winkler R. (1999). Avifaune de Suisse. *Nos Oiseaux*, suppl. 3.



White-winged Larks, Kazakhstan, January 2021 (© Bassel Abi Jummaa)

**Acknowledgements:** Many thanks to Tor Olsen (Norway), Aron Edman (Sweden), Sebastian Andrejeff (Finland), Nikos Probonas (Greece), Zbigniew Kajzer (Poland), Andrea Corso and Ottavio Janni (Italy) for providing or confirming the data officially recognised in their respective countries. Thanks to Thomas Perrier and Sylvain Bost for the additional photographs they sent us, and to Philippe J. Dubois for the bibliographical references provided and his constructive feedback on the manuscript.

**Contacts :** Fany Jariod ([f.jariod@outlook.fr](mailto:f.jariod@outlook.fr)) et Thomas Blanchon ([blanchon@tourduvalat.org](mailto:blanchon@tourduvalat.org))



Find many more free articles in the digital magazine *Post-Ornithos*!