



## Liben lark surveys in Jigjiga Region, Ethiopia in 2024

Report to Donors

25 February 2025

**Summary:** During 2024, BirdLife commissioned a 2<sup>nd</sup> annual survey of breeding numbers and distribution of the Liben Lark *Heteromirafr archeri* in the Jigjiga region of eastern Ethiopia, with an earlier having been completed in 2023. A team of 4 experienced bird surveyors and photographers undertook the survey between 16 September and 9 October 2024 in most of the same areas covered in the 2023 study, using the same methodologies. Twenty-three larks were seen during the survey. The surveyed transects had a total of 709 waypoints and covered a total of 178 km.

The survey in 2024 covered a wider area than that covered in 2023, when between 21–23 larks were found. We are unable to determine whether the results indicate a stable or declining trend.

The field team recorded data about the habitat at waypoints along the survey transects. They provided commentary about habitat changes in the areas surveyed, including invasive plant encroachment in grassland habitat, grazing and cropping.

**Key actors in the survey work:** The programme was conducted in consultation with Ethiopia Wildlife and Natural History Society (EWNHS), the BirdLife Partner in Ethiopia. BirdLife contracted Dr Bruktawit Abdu, the BirdLife Species Guardian for Liben Lark, along with Samson Zelleke, Henok Samson and Abiy Dagne, to conduct the field surveys for the larks plus Temesgen Yohannes who undertook socio-economic work with government agencies and communities in Jigjiga. The programme activities were managed by BirdLife International's Africa Preventing Extinctions Programme coordinator, Fadzai Matsvimbo.

**Stakeholder engagement:** A fifth member of the field team, Temesgen Yohannes, undertook socio-economic work with government agencies and communities in Jijiga, to examine the willingness of the different parties in the region to participate in a conservation programme and to explore the mechanisms to develop the landscape-scale management on the Jigjiga Plain.

The research team held a stakeholder workshop on 5 October 2024. The group developed a Terms of Reference for a Technical Working Group, comprising 12 institutions, with representatives from key Somali regional state bureaus (Pastoral Development, Environmental Protection and Rural Land Administration, Tourism and Culture, Bureau of Agriculture, Institute of Pastoral and Agropastoral Research etc.), Jigjiga University, and the administrative offices of the Fafen Zone and Haroreys Woreda. This group covered a range of interests from rangeland management to community engagement. They established an ambitious programme of work, objectives and recommendations, which reflect the complexity of working in this region with multiple stakeholder interests at play. The TWG's activities were independent of BirdLife's current programme of work.

### **Threats to Liben Lark population stability:**

The bird research team encountered evidence for the rapid expansion of industrial agriculture in the region for cereal crops. They identified weed encroachment as further factor adding to the degradation of the lark's habitat, as well as the existence of many small hamlets on the Jigjiga Plain which might change the grassland landscape over time. The team considered that the grasslands were rapidly disappearing and discovered a plan by government to increase agricultural production, including conversion of the existing grasslands into cropping areas.

There are ongoing security concerns in the region, meaning that direct engagement of research teams or EWNHS with local communities was not advised.

### **Conclusion and next steps:**

BirdLife is extremely grateful to Natuurpunt, the African Bird Club and Julian Francis for their commitment to the Liben Lark's conservation. Without their support the important surveys of 2023 and 2024 could not have taken place.

The survey results confirm that the Liben Lark is still present in the landscape, but do not provide reassurance that it has a secure future in the area. Given the planned imminent agricultural expansion, there is an urgent need to establish a management process involving local stakeholders and communities to safeguard this apparently tiny population.

Through its Preventing Extinctions Programme and the BirdLife Africa office, BirdLife has been progressing plans to develop further conservation work in the Jigjiga area, to be led by EWNHS. BirdLife will explore synergies with other lark conservation programmes in Africa.

For further information about the Liben Lark project, contact Fadzai Matsvimbo [fadzai.matsvimbo@birdlife.org](mailto:fadzai.matsvimbo@birdlife.org) Preventing Extinctions Programme Manager, Africa and Susan Micol [susan.micol@birdlife.org](mailto:susan.micol@birdlife.org) Preventing Extinctions Senior Manager, BirdLife Global Office.



Liben Lark and suitable lark habitat seen during the 2024 survey at Jigjiga plains, Ethiopia.  
Photo credit: Henok Samson.