

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Great Egret Predation on a Horned Lark

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Great Egrets (*Ardea alba*) are common in the San Joaquin Valley year-round. They are often seen in wetlands, as well as in grassy fields where they forage on invertebrates and small mammals (e.g., *Peromyscus* sp. and *Microtus* sp.; Houck 1967; pers. obs.). Predation on avian species has been reported infrequently. Here I describe a predation event involving a Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris*).

On 12 February 2025, at about 12:00, I was driving southbound on State Route 43 just north of Nevada Avenue, approximately 5 km north of Corcoran in Kings County, California. I saw a Great Egret with prey in its bill along a grassy ruderal strip between the highway and the Burlington Northern and Santa Fe Railway tracks, which prompted me to pull over for a better look. The observation took place under cloudy conditions, with a slight breeze and temperature 13° C (55° F).

From the road shoulder I took several photos of the event, which lasted <2 minutes before the egret with the prey item flew away over the railroad tracks and into an orchard. I sought to identify the prey, since it seemed to be large. I determined that it was a bird, which was still struggling in the egret's bill, with fitful and weakened wing flaps. After examining the photos, I identified the prey as a Horned Lark due to the small size, yellow and black markings on the head, pointed wings, brown back, light breast and belly, and black tail feathers (Figures 1 and 2; Sibley 2014).

Horned Larks are year-round residents in California, occupying open habitats and nesting on the ground (Beason 2020). It seems likely that an egret foraging in grassy open habitats would encounter Horned Larks, but catching this alert and swift bird may be challenging. Other avian prey reported for Great Egrets throughout their nearly worldwide range include Western Meadowlarks (*Sturnella neglecta*), sandpipers (*Calidris*), crakes (*Porzana*), kingfishers (*Halycon*), sparrows (*Passer*), white-eyes (*Zosterops*), swallows (*Hirundo*), terns (*Sterna*; Genelly 1964, Reppenning 1977, McCrimmon et al. 2020), and Yellow-rumped Warblers (*Setophaga coronata*; C. Conard, pers. comm.).



Figure 1. Great Egret with Horned Lark in bill.



Figure 2. Great Egret readjusting its grip on the Horned Lark.

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