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AN UNCONVENIENT DEATH: EASTERN CLAPPER LARK ON BARBED WIRE FENCE

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The Eastern Clapper Lark *Mirafra fasciolata* is a fairly common species in the grassland areas in the Free State and is very vocal during the summer months displaying with its whistled song note and clapping of wings on descent (Ryan and Dean 2005). During the winter they are not so vocal and are frequently overlooked by observers. This short paper describes an observation of note that was made during SABAP2 surveys north-west of Boshof in the Free State.

I was surveying on the farm Vaalrand (S28°27.702' E25°07.512') on 13 June 2013 and was travelling along a farm road fenced on both sides. The habitat was typical of the grassland biome – tall grassveld, especially on the verges of the roads (in the road reserve) where little grazing took place.

I had to back-track a part of the road that I had already surveyed, and I realised how many birds were missed on the first drive through of that part. While back-tracking I saw an Eastern Clapper Lark hanging on a top wire strain of the barbed wire fence. The specimen was still fresh and watery fluids were running out of its bill. Before collecting the specimen for scientific study purposes, I took some photographs of the bird still on the fence (Fig 1). The skin of the bird was later added to the study skin collection of the Department Ornithology).



Fig 1 – The Eastern Clapper Lark found impaled on a barbed wire fence at Vaalrand, Boshof on 13 June 2013.

The possibility exists that the bird was disturbed and flew up from the tall grass and into the fence, where it was caught at its wing shoulder by the barb on the wire.

The bird's wing was also impaled by the barb suggesting that it was at its flight speed when it was caught. The likelihood of predation by the Common Fiscal *Lanius collaris* (this species is known to impale its prey – i.a. birds – on barbed wire fences) was also considered as a probable cause of the bird being impaled. However, the way in which the wing was strung around the wire strain rules this out. It is mainly owls such as Grass *Tyto capensis*, Marsh Owls *Asio capensis* and Spotted Eagle Owls *Bubo capensis* which are known to be caught by fences (Irwin and Lorber 1984; Kemp and Calburn 1987).



These owls forage low over the grass in grassland areas and they can easily land themselves in the wire strains of fences – especially in misty conditions when sight is poor. Through many field surveys I have observed all three of these species caught accidentally in wire fences.

A Corncrake *Crex crex* specimen (NMB 3199) was brought in to the National Museum. The bird was killed flying into a fence at the farm Lincoln, Harrismith on 30 November 1990 (National Museum collection). Other specimens in the collection which were killed in collisions with fences include a Lilac-breasted Roller *Coracais caudatus* and Helmeted Guineafowl *Numida meleagris*. Incidences of smaller passerines getting impaled by wire fences when flying into the wire strains are probably very rare and seldom documented.

This observation of the Eastern Clapper Lark impaled by the barb of a fence probably represents the first report for this species.

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