

On the Breeding Biology of Skylark, *Alauda arvensis cantarella* (Aves: Passeriformes) in West Bulgaria

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Abstract: The breeding biology of Skylark was studied on a material from 35 nests from the area close to Sofia, West Bulgaria. Only the first broods were studied. The first nests were found in the beginning or at the end of April depending on the weather conditions. Most of the nests were found on pastures among sparse vegetation, between 15 and 30 cm tall. Clutch size varied between three and six eggs, 4.06 eggs per clutch (N=142) on an average. The egg size is connected with the clutch size - longer eggs were found in clutches with three eggs compared with clutches with five eggs. Incubation was during a period of 11 days.

Commonly, a synchronized hatching was recorded - all the nestlings hatched during a few hours. The nestlings stayed in the nest till their 8-10 days of age. They opened their eyes on the fourth day of their life, rarely on the fifth day. After eight days and sometimes even on the seventh day of their life the nestlings hide among the grass close to the nest. They made first trials to fly only at 15-17 days of age. Data on the growth of 57 nestlings from 17 nests are presented.

The diet of the nestlings was quite various and consisted mostly of insects - their component percentage was 71%. The largest part of the diet was formed by beetles (Coleoptera) - 33% and dipterans (Diptera) - 18%.

The average breeding success of the Skylark population studied was 39.8%, varying between the three seasons of research from 21.6% to 60%. The main reasons for the death of the nestlings were predators - rooks (*Corvus frugilegus*) and probably magpies (*Pica pica*), crows (*Corvus corone cornix*), white storks (*Ciconia ciconia*), dogs and foxes.

Key words: Skylark (*Alauda arvensis cantarella*), nests, nestlings, breeding success