'Curtain twitching' skylarks keep track of strangers through their songs (w/ Video)

August 26 2009

(PhysOrg.com) -- Skylarks can hear the difference between friendly neighbours and dangerous strangers, and deal with any threatening intruders, says new research by scientists at Queen Mary, University of London.

Male skylarks learn to recognise local dialects in their neighbours' individual songs, remember where each neighbour is supposed to be and reprimand intruders who don't belong in the neighbourhood, according to a study carried out by Dr Elodie Briefer, a postdoctoral researcher at Queen Mary's School of Biological and Chemical Sciences.

Bird songs are among the most complex sounds produced by animals and the skylark (Alauda arvensis) is one of the most complex of all. The songs are composed of 'syllables', consecutive sounds produced in a complex way, with almost no repetition. The male skylark can sing more than 300 different syllables, and each individual bird's song is slightly different.

Dr Briefer's research found that the songs of neighbouring skylarks share more syllables with each other than they do with strangers, like a dialect. She says: "This may have evolved because it is safer for the birds to live close together, but they need a way to keep intruders out. By sharing a local dialect in their song, they can keep an ear out for other birds that live nearby and kick any strangers out of the neighbourhood."

More information: Response to displaced neighbours in a territorial songbird with a large repertoire, Naturwissenschaften: Volume 96, Issue 9 (2009), Page 1067

Provided by Queen Mary, University of London (news : web)