

What is a Loggerhead Shrike?

A songbird or a bird of prey?

The Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*) is a songbird that hunts like a hawk. Like a bird of prey, it has a strong hooked beak that it uses to kill its prey with a quick bite to the neck. While it mostly eats large insects such as grasshoppers, crickets, dragonflies and beetles, it's more than capable of successfully taking on small rodents.

Unlike a bird of prey, shrikes do not have strong legs or talons with which to grasp their prey. Instead, they impale their prey on anything sharp, such as large thorns or barbed wire, to aid in tearing the food apart, or to store the food for future use. This behaviour is unique among songbirds and earned shrikes the historic nickname of "butcher bird".

Caution: species at risk

Almost all of the world's 30 species of shrikes — the Loggerhead's close relatives — are experiencing population declines, and many are already in danger of extinction in parts of their range. Two of the eleven subspecies of Loggerhead Shrikes currently recognized in North America are found in Canada and both are in decline: the eastern subspecies (*Lanius ludovicianus migrans*) is critically endangered, and the western one (*Lanius ludovicianus excubitorides*) is considered threatened.

The Eastern Loggerhead Shrike once inhabited most of northeastern North America. In Canada it ranged from New Brunswick to eastern Manitoba, but its numbers have declined drastically over the last 50 years. Apart from a few scattered pairs, Eastern Loggerhead Shrikes now can be found regularly breeding in just two areas in Canada.

In recent years, searches of all the historical breeding sites have turned up less than 30 breeding pairs in Ontario, with a few pairs in Manitoba. In 2010 a pair was found breeding in Quebec; the first record since 1995.

Loggerhead Shrike numbers are declining faster than any other grassland bird in North America.

You can help reverse this decline by joining the growing number of landowners and volunteers who are working to bring this unique bird back from the brink of extinction.

Look for the black mask

The Eastern Loggerhead Shrike is slightly smaller than a robin. It has a grey-white breast, bluish-grey back, black tail, and black wings marked with prominent white patches. Its most distinctive features are a raccoon-like black facemask that extends across its eyes, and a short, sharply hooked bill.

The Loggerhead Shrike is easily confused with its cousin the Northern Shrike, which is not a rare bird. Although they look very similar, the Northern Shrike is larger and has a longer beak and brown bars on its underside. The Northern Shrike breeds in Canada's northern boreal forests and winters in southern Canada. It's generally spotted during the late fall and winter months when most Loggerhead Shrikes have already migrated south for the winter.

At home on the range

Over the last two hundred years, this intriguing bird has adapted to changing environmental conditions and habitats: its habitat was once prairie grasslands grazed by bison and maintained by periodic wildfires,

while today its principal habitat is early successional short grassland that is grazed by cattle.

In Ontario, Eastern Loggerhead Shrike are found in rough or unimproved cattle pasture. Shrikes need to have a few trees and shrubs scattered through the landscape for nesting and perching.

In Ontario, Loggerhead Shrikes are found on shallow-soiled limestone alvars near Napanee, Kemptville and Lindsay, and in the pasturelands of Grey and Bruce Counties and Manitoulin Island.

The most likely place to spot an Eastern Loggerhead Shrike is on a dead branch of a large tree or shrub, on a fencepost, or on a telephone wire in an open area. It will be guarding its territory from other shrikes or on the lookout for food. When it spots a potential meal, the shrike swoops in low to the ground, fluttering momentarily before dropping directly on its prey and striking a lethal blow.

On the hunt

These grassland birds feed on large insects such as grasshoppers, crickets, dragonflies and beetles. They also capture small snakes, frogs, mice, voles and even small birds. They are not a danger to crops or livestock, and in fact, when shrikes were more plentiful, they helped farmers by controlling pests.

Breeding habits

Each spring, the Eastern Loggerhead Shrike is one of the first migrating birds to return to Canada from its wintering grounds in the southeastern United States, generally arriving in April as soon as the ground is clear of snow.

In order to attract a female, male Eastern Loggerhead Shrikes set up and defend a territory. Depending on the weather, the birds usually begin to breed in April or May. Shrikes don't necessarily have the same mate or the same nest every year, but the same sites and even the same trees tend to be used by shrikes year after year.

Shrikes build their nests in densely branched shrubs located in open fields or in hedgerows. A breeding pair will work together to construct a bulky, finely constructed nest with an outer layer of twigs and an inner layer of soft plant material, feathers and hair.

Eggs are laid in April, May or early June. The female lays up to seven spotted, grayish eggs and incubates them continuously for 17 days while the male feeds her. Pairs that nest early or lose their nest to storms or predators often lay a second clutch of eggs.

The young are born without feathers, with bright orange skin and yellow beaks and feet. The female keeps them covered for the first few days while the male brings her food for the young. After the first week, both parents feed the nestlings.

The young begin to leave the nest at around 18 days of age. After fledging, they continue to depend on their parents for another three to five weeks as they learn to fly and forage for themselves. As they become increasingly independent, the family bond gradually disintegrates, and migration south begins in late August.

For more information

For more information on the Eastern Loggerhead Shrike and/or the recovery program, please visit our web site (www.shrike.ca), send a message to admin@wildlifepreservation.ca, or call us toll-free at 1-800-956-6608.

