



# home on the range

## RECORD-BREAKING YEAR FOR SHRIKE!

by Hazel Wheeler

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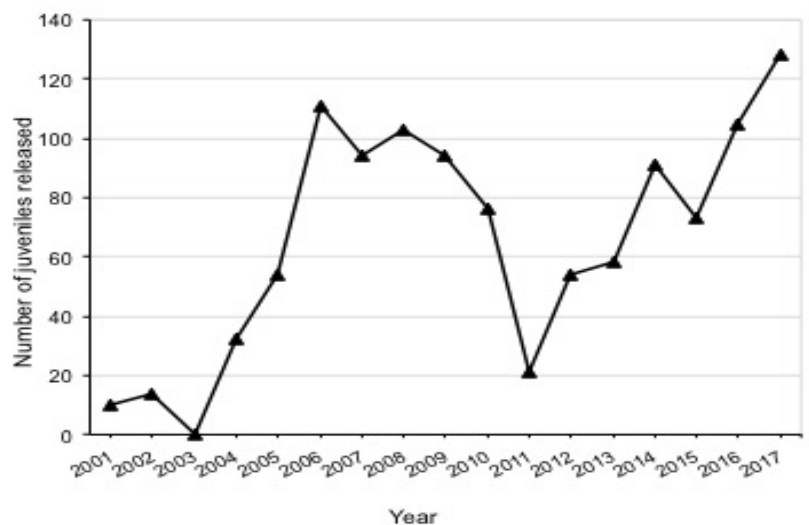
It's been a banner year for the eastern loggerhead shrike recovery program! The conservation-breeding program surpassed all expectations, releasing a record-breaking 128 conservation-bred juvenile shrikes in Ontario this year. This is the second year in a row that we've released over 100 young, and we have high hopes that these sustained numbers can have a strong positive impact on the wild population in the province.

Wild numbers were also up for the second year in a row, with 26 breeding pairs found across Ontario. Breeding is still largely confined to two core areas - the Carden Alvar and the Napanee Limestone Plain - but there were several early summer sightings of single birds in other areas, including Smiths Falls, Grey-bruce, and, for the first time since 2010, Quebec (see the story on page 3 for more late season surprise sightings). There was also a breeding pair seen in Pembroke for the first time since 2011. About a third of the birds seen weren't banded, so there's a certain level of estimation that goes into figuring out how many birds we were actually looking at, but by conservative counts the wild adult population in Ontario was about 60 birds this year (10 of which came from the conservation-breeding program). This number is still cause for concern, and there's still much work to do, but this is a vast improvement over the 35 birds we counted just two years ago.

Wild pairs fledged about 60 young this year, and combined with the 128 conservation-bred juveniles that were released at our field sites, that's a good number of young birds added to the population. Our hopes go with these birds as they face the trials of their first migration and winter.

Our sincere gratitude goes out to all of the conservation-breeding facilities, field staff, volunteers, and all other program partners for contributing to a fantastic season!

*spot a shrike, help save a species*



# GRAPPLING WITH THE “SHRIKE EFFECT”

by Hazel Wheeler



Lead Biologist Hazel Wheeler

After years of working with shrike, I’ve noticed that nothing is ever as straightforward as I hope it to be. I’ve dubbed this the “Shrike Effect”; think of it like Murphy’s Law, but with more feathers. Others who have worked with shrike are probably also familiar with this phenomenon, though they may not realize how widespread it is. I’ve encountered it in so many large and small ways that I just accept it as part of working with the species.

For example, let’s say you want to catch a wild shrike. We do have great traps for it, but make sure you do everything you need with the bird the first time you catch it, because it’ll never be tricked by that trap again. For that matter, you best hope that a bird doesn’t see its mate trapped, because that could be enough to make it shy of the trap for the rest of its life. Shrike effect.

Or perhaps you want to radio-tag some birds to answer the burning questions about shrike migratory routes and wintering grounds. There are certainly tags that can be used on a shrike, but make sure you get the body reinforced with hard plastic, and upgrade to a thicker, stronger antenna while you’re at it, otherwise the birds are likely to destroy the radio tags with their strong, raptor-like beaks. Shrike effect.

Incidentally, if you’re applying any kinds of bands to shrikes, either metal or plastic colour-bands, don’t kid yourself by thinking that they will take the typical aluminum bands used on most songbirds, or simple butt-end colour bands. No, shrikes need stiff, stainless steel bands (they can crush the aluminum), and you must use special “double-overlap” colour bands that wrap around themselves, making them more difficult to remove (which a shrike would surely do to a butt-end band). You should probably also melt the band to seal it to itself, because even these bands aren’t immune to a shrike’s prying beak. Shrike effect.

You may think that I am complaining, or that I don’t enjoy working with this species; I assure you, that isn’t the case. On the contrary, the Shrike Effect makes the loggerhead shrike a challenging and endlessly exciting bird to work with. One never knows what problems are going to arise that need to be solved, but you can be sure that things will always be interesting.

I shouldn’t have been surprised then, when I started digging in to our records to get some information on a very exciting milestone we passed this season, and hit a stumbling block. This year, we surpassed 1000 juveniles releases over the life of the recovery program, and I wanted to know exactly which bird was “Lucky 1000”. Turns out, there were two. It was the morning of July 20th when the 1000th bird left the release cage in Carden: a bird hatched at African Lion Safari, carrying a radio tag, and painted blue on its neck. This bird was followed immediately by another bird, ostensibly number 1001, and then...they both flew back in. About 10 minutes later, one of the clutch-mates of the first 1000th bird then left the release cage, so now this bird was the 1000th release... or 1002nd? In fact the first 1000th bird would go out and back in to the cage two more times before it was finally out and the cage was closed, so who can even keep track anymore? The Shrike Effect strikes again!

## LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE MIGRATION MYSTERIES

*by Hazel Wheeler*

At the end of each summer, once the Eastern Loggerhead Shrike Recovery field season has wrapped and Ontario's loggerhead shrike (along with the field staff who have been studying them) start moving towards their winter homes, I take to the internet to watch for hints about migration (of the shrike, not the field staff). The majority of young birds that we release in Ontario as part of the conservation-breeding program will be colour-banded, so my weekly checks on eBird sometimes yield sightings of one of "our" birds, like the conservation-bred bird we released in early August in Carden that was spotted in Buffalo, NY at the end of that month.

However, sometimes it's sightings of unbanded birds that really pique the interest, as happened this fall. The first was a sighting of a juvenile loggerhead shrike at the end of September at Whitefish Point, Michigan, which is west across the Canada-U.S. border from Sault Ste. Marie. Loggerhead shrike are endangered in Michigan, as they are in Ontario, and sightings this far north are rare, but a juvenile – this means there were birds breeding somewhere, but where?

The second surprise sighting was in mid-October, when a second-year (meaning it hatched in 2016) loggerhead shrike was spotted on Manitoulin Island. Shrike used to be more common on Manitoulin, but we haven't seen birds there in a number of years. The sighting was interesting not only because of the location, but also because of the timing. By October, Ontario shrikes have generally moved south in to the U.S., so what was this bird doing? Was it a vagrant

(meaning that it's strayed from its usual migration), or was it coming from somewhere farther north?

Since neither of these late-season birds had any bands, they couldn't be linked to the conservation-breeding program, nor had they been wild-caught and banded in the core breeding areas in Ontario. Interestingly, this spring we also saw a bird show up in Quebec, where we haven't seen any loggerhead shrike since 2010. Are we starting to see an expansion of the range in eastern Canada? Or have these birds always been here, but people were just in the right place at the right time to see them, and report? At this point all we have are questions, but you can be sure that I'll be constantly watching for more clues that will hopefully one day lead us to some solid answers about loggerhead shrike movements in and around eastern Canada.

### Loggerhead shrike spotted on Manitoulin Island at the end of October (Photo courtesy of T. Hagedorn)





## About the Project

Since 2003, Wildlife Preservation Canada has been responsible for coordinating and implementing the recovery program in Ontario for the eastern loggerhead shrike, one of the most endangered songbirds in Canada. The cornerstone of our recovery program is breeding shrikes and releasing their young to boost wild populations. We have proven that the released shrikes survive in the wild, migrate south and return to Ontario to breed successfully. Studies have shown that although the recovery effort has prevented the species from disappearing from Canada, more work is required to identify and address the causes of the species' decline.

## Learn More

Visit [www.wildlifepreservation.ca](http://www.wildlifepreservation.ca). You can also contact Wildlife Preservation Canada toll-free at 1-800-956-6608 or via email [admin@wildlifepreservation.ca](mailto:admin@wildlifepreservation.ca) or by writing to RR#5, 5420 Highway 6 N., Guelph, ON N1H 6J2.

## Project Partners

Wildlife Preservation Canada • African Lion Safari • Bird Studies Canada • Environment and Climate Change Canada • Couchiching Conservancy • Little Ray's Nature Centre • Mountsberg Raptor Centre • Nashville Zoo at Grassmere • The Nature Conservancy of Canada • Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry • Ontario Parks Queen's University • Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute • Toronto Zoo • York University • Numerous local naturalist groups • and more to come!

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