Wildlife Preservation Canada

HOME ON THE RANGE

SPRING 2019

A radio-tagged juvenile, ready to be released at our Napanee field site.
Photo Credit: Evermaven, courtesy of the Nature Conservancy of Canada

2018 Season in Review

By Hazel Wheeler

In reflecting on this past season, the best term I can used to describe it is: A mixed bag. Only 19 wild breeding pairs were found in Ontario this year, down from 26 pairs in 2017; however, though we saw fewer breeders, nesting success was relatively high with almost as many wild fledglings seen in Ontario this year as last year. Weather likely played a part in that difference, as the storms we saw this year didn't seem to impact nesting birds as much as last year. We also generally saw more fledglings from each nest – usually 3 or 4 – which suggest that the wild population didn't face as many environmental challenges this year. There was a record-breaking amount of rain in early spring 2017, with amounts returning to normal this year, so perhaps there was more food available, which would make it easier for adults to take care of a nest full of demanding young. A drier spring also means fewer mosquitos that could carry West Nile Virus, to which shrikes are extremely susceptible, so that may have also made for an easier year for Ontario's shrikes. Whatever the reason, a field season with nests full of young birds is a hopeful one.

In the conservation-breeding program, we had another record year, with 130 juvenile shrikes released to the wild! Sixteen of those young were released with radio tags to be tracked on the Motus Wildlife Tracking System. The bulk of the movement data that we've collected for our radio-tagged birds thus far has been from their fall migration through southern Ontario, but with the network continuing to grow south of the border, there's a growing hope that this winter we'll pick up some of our birds in the eastern U.S., but time will tell. Our conservation-breeding program continues to support the wild population, and over 20% of the birds found in Ontario this past summer were captive-bred. Most of those birds bred with wild-origin birds and successfully fledged young, contributing 40% of the wild fledglings counted.

Our thanks go out to all the landowners and volunteers who helped out with the Loggerhead Shrike this year. Together, we continue to work towards the recovery of this amazing species!

NEWS FROM THE RANGE

Photo credit: Evermaven, courtesy of the Nature Conservancy of Canada

Banding across the continent

By Hazel Wheeler

Ontario has been colour banding wild-caught and conservation-bred Loggerhead Shrikes since the early 1990s, and that colour banding program continues to expand through the Loggerhead Shrike Working Group. The map to the right shows all the places where people are out trapping and banding shrikes under the coordinated Working Group scheme.

Why is this important?

Loggerhead Shrikes are tricky characters. There are a number of subspecies found across the continent – some of them are resident, staying in a region year-round, and some are migratory with different breeding and wintering territories – and all of them look the same. What's more, those migrant populations might be mixing with resident birds during the winter, making it quite the challenge to figure out the range-wide movement patterns for different population. By coordinating colour-banding efforts through all these states and provinces, we can see which birds are moving around, and which are staying put, and how they interact with each other.

Above. The dark shaded areas are regions where coordinated banding is underway. **Below**. Photos often show the bird in an odd position with only some of the bands visible which makes identification difficult. **Photo credit:** Howard Ferguson

When banded birds are spotted

When a sighting comes in to the shrike program, an excited flurry of emails ensues to figure out who banded this bird, and where it came from. These sightings usually involve pictures, which may clearly show all the colour bands that a bird wears, but more often give a fuzzy view of only some of the bands we see, and the rest needs to be figured out by conjecture from the clues we have.

This scenario happened early in February, when a picture of a banded bird taken in North Carolina in January came across my desk. The picture clearly showed the right leg (dark blue over red) and a white band on the left leg. The only thing that wasn't visible was the metal band, which had to be on the left, since each leg gets two bands; this was our first clue.

In Ontario, the location of the metal band tells us the origin of the bird, with wild-caught birds banded with metal on the right leg, and captive-bred birds with metal on the left, though this pattern doesn't hold across all regions; wild birds do get a metal band on their left leg in some states. Regardless, there was a bird, hatched at one of our Ontario breeding facilities and released in Carden in 2015 with this colour band combination. It wasn't seen during 2016, but was back breeding in Carden in 2017, and in early spring 2018 was seen in Indiana during migration, though not spotted after that.

Could this be one of our birds, migrating all the way down to North Carolina for the winter after breeding at some unknown location? Thus began the email flurry.

Ontario to Indiana to North Carolina, shrike banders throughout the continent were pulled in to figure out where this bird came from. In Ontario, the excitement over claiming this bird as our own was palpable, and we started to get ready to celebrate the news. In Indiana, however, there was a question: where exactly was the metal band? Was it above the white band, or below? This small detail would make all the difference; Ontario's bird had metal below the white band, but had anyone used the combination with metal above yet?

A search began for a picture of this North Carolina bird with the legs fully visible, and thanks to some North Carolinian birders who saw this shrike, we got our answer: the metal band was above. This was not our bird.

Shortly thereafter, the bander in North Carolina let us know that he had just banded this bird nearby in December. The roller coaster ride was over, we shared a collective sigh, and we all returned to whatever tasks we'd thrown aside during those exciting couple of hours.

Though this sighting didn't pan out for us in Ontario, perhaps the next one will. In the meantime, we have a strong and expanding network of biologists in the Loggerhead Shrike Working Group that are there to help puzzle out these sightings, and share the excitement when we the clues do come together in unexpected ways.

The bird in question. This photo shows the red and blue bands on the right leg, but the left bands are harder to see. Detective work, and more photos were required to solve the puzzle.
Photo credit: Howard Ferguson

Sightings wanted!

Spring migration is around the corner, and loggerhead shrikes could be returning to Ontario as early as the end of March. If you see a shrike, we want to know about it. Returning birds might be banded, so get a look at its legs if you can. These bands may look like a flash of colour or a bump on a shrike's leg, and combinations could include four bands (two on each leg), or just two on the left leg. With patience (and some decent binoculars), you have a good chance of reading the band combinations, and contributing early-season data to the program.
Send sightings to: hazel@wildlifepreservation.ca, 519-993-5155

LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE
WORKING GROUP

New Working Group website!

The Loggerhead Shrike Working Group is now online! The site is a place to find information on the species, the research being conducted, and the latest news from across the species' range.

Check us out at **loggerheadshrike.org**

Go digital

Sign up to receive the lastest shrike news directly to your inbox. We'll send you an electronic version of this newsletter instead of paper, along with other updates live from the field.
Visit: widlifepreservation.ca/shrike-news

Join the team

Join the effort to save Canada's most endangered songbird with a donation today. You can make a symbolic adoption of one of the shrike chicks born this spring by visiting:
widlifepreservation.ca/sponsor-a-shrike

About the project

Eastern loggerhead shrikes are one of Canada's most endangered songbirds. In the past, they could be found from Manitoba to New Brunswick. Now, the population is restricted to two small isolated pockets in Ontario.

Since 2003, Wildlife Preservation Canada has been responsible for coordinating and implementing the recovery program in Ontario. The conservation breeding program was the first in the world to see a captive-bred migratory songbird return from migration and breed in the wild.

Today, up to a third of the wild population was born in captivity, and independent studies have concluded that without our intervention, the eastern loggerhead shrike might have been lost by now. However, there is still more work to be done to identify and address the causes of the species' decline.

Species recovry is a team effort. This project wouldn't be possible without the collaboration of the following partners:

African Lion Safari
Bird Studies Canada
Canadian Wildlife Service - Environment and Climate Change Canada
Couchiching Conservancy
Little Ray's Nature Centres
Mountsberg Raptor Centre - Conservation Halton
Nashville Zoo at Grassmere
The Nature Conservancy of Canada
Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry
Ontario Parks
Private landowners
Queen's University
Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute - National Zoo
Toronto Zoo
York University
And all members of the Loggerhead Shrike Working Group

Wildlife Preservation Canada
RECOVERY • CONSERVATION • KNOWLEDGE

5420 Highway 6 North
Guelph, ON N1H 6J2
Tel: 1-800-956-6608
admin@wildlifepreservation.ca

Visit us online:
wildlifepreservation.ca