



Loggerhead Shrike

North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



Dick Daniels

Loggerhead Shrike

Lanius ludovicianus

In parts of the South, the loggerhead shrike is colloquially referred to as French mockingbird and butcherbird. A very similar species, the Northern shrike, breeds sparingly in the far north of this continent and in Europe. There are 72 shrike species worldwide, with the majority found in the arid parts of the African continent.

Description

The loggerhead shrike is gray above and white beneath. The wings and tail are black with considerable white showing when the bird is in flight. A trim black mask serves to separate the gray of the head from the white throat and underparts. Superficially, the bird resembles the familiar and more common mockingbird, and at least one popular field guide compares the two species in flight for clarification. The mockingbird has a thinner silhouette with a noticeably longer tail. The obviously larger head of the shrike is apparent, especially when the bird is observed perched.

History and Status

The loggerhead shrike, so named for its large head, was probably never a common bird in the eastern United States before the arrival of the colonists. It requires large, open areas - conditions seldom found before the arrival of colonists. Land cleared for pasturing livestock (enclosed with barbed wire) favored the expansion of this species, especially where hedgerows were allowed to exist. Such environmental changes resulted in range expansion of shrikes over eastern North America. By the end of the 19th century, numbers peaked with a breeding range extending from New Brunswick, southern Quebec and southeast Manitoba south to Florida and the Gulf Coast. Since then, for unknown reasons, the northern portions of the loggerhead shrike's breeding range have collapsed.

Habitats & Habits

No larger than a robin, this predatory songbird has a curious liking for food items that one usually associates with the Falconiformes, members of the hawk family. Adept at catching insects, small mammals, snakes and small birds, the loggerhead shrike is an enigma among the songbirds of the United States. Clearly a species of open, grassy space, this shrike forages from treetops and electric wires up to 35 feet high. It swoops to the ground and captures and consumes small prey on the spot. A bite at the base of the skull with its powerful, hooked beak quickly dispatches larger prey. The shrike then impales the prey on a barbed-wire fence or a convenient thorn. It tears off edible portions and swallows them whole-bone, fur, feathers etc. and later regurgitates them. Because of its small size and lack of large talons for gripping, the shrike has learned to use "tools" such as thorns or barbed wire in its

At a glance, the loggerhead shrike may be mistaken for the similar-looking and more common mockingbird.



John Carpenter

Range and Distribution

In North Carolina, numbers of breeding shrikes vary from "locally fairly common" in some southerly counties, such as Cleveland, to "virtual extirpation" in Forsyth and other northern Piedmont counties near and bordering Virginia. Numbers west of the Piedmont have never been significant and may be declining.

Range Map



■ Loggerhead Shrike Range Map

Loggerhead Shrike

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environment to aid in holding and consuming these larger prey items. Shrikes will cache larger prey items in larders, a thorny shrub or stretch of barbed-wire, to store food or to impress potential mates.

North Carolina hosts year-round residential population of shrikes, but during the breeding season they will migrate to North Carolina from more southernly states. Shrikes will establish a breeding territory by late March to early April. Two to six eggs are incubated by the female in a very durably constructed nest placed in a shrub or tree, usually 20 feet high or less. The male remains nearby, vigorously defending the established territorial boundaries and feeding his mate. In approximately 14 days, the young are hatched and constantly brooded by the female. The male provides his mate and the young all their food for the first week or so.

Thereafter, both adults become involved in feeding the growing young. Shrikes will often attempt to raise another brood by constructing a second nest, usually several feet higher than the first. The male is responsible for rearing the fledged first brood to independence while the female incubates the second set of eggs. Extended rainy periods during the breeding season make it difficult for the shrike to procure food and rear its young successfully.

Human & NCWRC Interactions

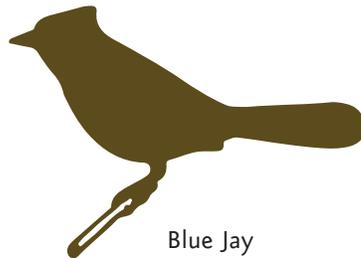
The loggerhead shrike is not a game species and has no hunting season. The numbers of loggerhead shrikes are decreasing at an alarming rate throughout the North American breeding range. Although considerable research is being devoted to these changes, no clear-cut explanation has emerged. Highly suspect are changes in agricultural practices such as elimination of hedgerows, a decrease in acreage devoted to short-grass pasturage and the cumulative effects of longtime use of petroleum-based, fat-soluble pesticides. Recent data indicate that the long-term decrease in numbers, as high as 10 percent per year, appears to be the greatest in the mid-Atlantic states, including North Carolina. Despite declines in the Piedmont, the Coastal Plain has more recently experienced an apparent growth in breeding and overwintering shrike populations, which may be attributed to their ability to tolerate increased alterations to the natural environment by human activity.



Loggerhead Shrike



American Robin



Blue Jay

References

- Bent, Arthur Cleveland. "Loggerhead Shrike," in *Life Histories of North American Wagtails, Shrikes, Vireos and Their Allies* (New York: Dover Publications, 1950).
- Potter, Eloise, James Parnell and Robert Teulings. *Birds of the Carolinas* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1980).
- Green, Charlotte Hilton. *Birds of the South* (Dover Publications, Inc., 1975).
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Credits

Written by Wayne Irvin, updated by John Carpenter, Alex Worm, 2020. NCWRC

Wild Facts

Classification

Class: Aves

Order: Passeriformes

Average Size

Length: 9 in.

Food

Insects, small mammals and birds, lizards, small snakes.

Breeding/Young

Shrikes are monogamous, with the pair bond stronger during the breeding season. Throughout the year, the pair usually remain physically close enough to maintain visual contact. In North Carolina, nesting activities begin in March. Two broods are the norm.

The young, when hatched, are naked and helpless. For the first four to five days, they are constantly brooded by the female to aid in maintaining body temperature.

The male secures all food for the entire family until the young are sufficiently feathered. Fledged young disperse within a few weeks after leaving the nest.

Life Expectancy

7 to 8 years in the wild



Melissa McGaw/NCWRC