

Eastern Loggerhead Shrike 2007 Season Update

Wild Population

Seven wild shrike pairs were found in Napanee this year, 6 of these fledged at least 27 young, and the 7th pair was unsuccessful. Two of these pairs initiated second clutches, and one of these successfully fledged 4 young. This is the lowest number of pairs recorded in the area since recovery work began (down from 10 pairs in 2006). However, productivity and breeding success were high in comparison to previous seasons. In total, a minimum of 31 young were produced this year in Napanee.

In addition, 1 pair with at least 2 fledglings was confirmed in the Pembroke area, but there have been reliable reports of 3 breeding pairs in this area.

Twelve pairs were found in Carden this year (up from 7 pairs in 2006). All 12 pairs successfully bred, producing a minimum of 48 fledglings. Three pairs went on to initiate second clutches, and 2 of these successfully fledged at least 3 more young. In total, 12 pairs have fledged a minimum of 51 young in Carden this year. This is much better productivity than has been seen in the area for the last couple of years. In 2006, 7 pairs fledged 24 young, and in 2005 14 pairs fledged only 33 young.

On September 12, we had a reliable report of 3 shrikes spotted near Crane Lake in Dyer's Bay. One silver banded adult and one juvenile were confirmed. This is exciting news, as there has not been a confirmed case of breeding in Grey-Bruce counties since 2002.

Nests were observed remotely at both sites this again this year. At least 85 young shrikes fledged in the wild in Ontario this season, up from 63 in 2006.

With the release of 111 captive-born shrikes in 2006, more than all previous years combined, staff anxiously awaited the results of their efforts this year and they weren't disappointed! Five shrikes released in 2006 were spotted along migration routes and on breeding grounds this year – a huge milestone for the program.

In late March, a green-banded bird was observed eating a lizard in Ohio. This was the first band recovery outside of Canada for the program since banding began in 1999, with over 1000 wild and released shrikes banded. The bird remained in the area for approximately 2 weeks. On the Carden breeding grounds, three 2006-release birds were spotted. Two of these were males that successfully bred with wild females, producing at least 7 fledglings. The third was a single bird, also likely a male, that was observed eating a songbird and only briefly lingered in the area. A fourth 2006-release bird was spotted around the field breeding enclosures at the Dyer's Bay site a few times in early May. It can't be confirmed whether this is the same bird spotted with a juvenile near Crane Lake later in the season. The return of 4 release birds to the breeding grounds represents a 3.6% juvenile return rate, which is comparable to that seen in other small migratory songbirds. This is testament to the ability of our captive-breeding and release program to produce fit individuals capable of migration and returning to breeding grounds to integrate into the wild population and augment its numbers.

Field Breeding and Release

The captive population was also productive this year. Field staff cared for 23 pairs at our Carden and Dyer's Bay field breeding sites. In Carden, 9 of 13 pairs successfully bred and in Dyer's Bay, all 10 pairs were successful. This year, one of 6 pairs kept back at our Ingersoll facility fledged young, and these were taken to Carden in August to be grouped with other young in preparation for release. Five additional pairs at the Toronto Zoo did not produce any young this year. Six young were considered genetically important and were retained for the captive population. In total 94 young were released in Ontario this year over July and August (53 in Dyer's Bay and 41 in Carden), which is slightly down from 2006. Due to funding constraints, we were unfortunately forced to limit breeding to some extent this year, something we were loathe to do as it is contrary to the goals of the program. If we had not been forced to take this action, we anticipated surpassing last year's release numbers.

This season saw the first captive juveniles released with live radiotransmitters as part of a radiotelemetry study. Trials with harness design over the winter ensured that birds were able to wear the harness for prolonged periods with no ill-effects. A total of 19 juvenile shrikes were released with live transmitters from our Carden field site this summer, and they will continue to be tracked into the fall in the hopes that they will provide clues on migration routes and wintering grounds which remain a large knowledge gap for the species. Radio-telemetry staff have also been collecting data on post-release survival, dispersal and habitat use which will provide useful information for the ongoing management of the program.

An Update on Program Funding

As you may have heard on the CBC on September 20th, the federal government has imposed severe budget cuts on Environment Canada (EC) including a recent freeze to wildlife programs that impacted the shrike recovery program funding this year. In 2007, the cuts forced a reduction in the breeding and release activities, though Wildlife Preservation Canada (WPC) was still able to successfully release 94 juveniles in Ontario (down from the 111 released last year).

In late August WPC learned that EC would be able to provide only \$100,000 from their Operations and Management stream of funding and an additional \$50,000 through their Grants & Contributions stream of funding of the \$172,000 required to complete a pared down season. WPC was fortunately able to secure the remaining \$22,000 through the new Ontario Species at Risk Stewardship Fund, which will allow us to maintain the captive population over winter (to March 30, 2008).

Beyond March 2008, the future of the captive population and related recovery activities (wild population monitoring, habitat stewardship/restoration activities, public outreach and research) is uncertain. EC has indicated that it cannot continue to fund the maintenance of the captive population beyond this year and Species at Risk program staff are working on developing contingency plans as to how to divest themselves of the 120 captive shrikes.

These budget cuts have come on top of previous cuts to the Canadian Wildlife Service. Not only is the future of the shrike recovery program in jeopardy but the future of the over 500 species at risk of extinction in Canada is also looking very grim.