

MEDIA BACKGROUNDER: The Eastern Loggerhead Shrike and Recovery Efforts

What is an Eastern Loggerhead Shrike?

The Eastern Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus migrans*) is a songbird that hunts like a hawk. It feeds on large insects such as grasshoppers, crickets, dragonflies and beetles, as well as mice, meadow voles, small snakes and other small birds.

It is slightly smaller than a robin, with 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.

Nicknamed “butcher birds,” shrikes do not have strong legs or talons to grasp their dead prey. Instead, they impale it on anything sharp, such as large thorns or barbed wire.

How many are there?

Shrike populations have been declining steadily for the past 50 years. In 1991, the Eastern Loggerhead Shrike was listed as a critically endangered species in Canada, and it is also threatened or endangered in 14 American states.

In 2005, there were just 25 pairs in Ontario, 6 pairs in Manitoba, and none in Quebec where Eastern Loggerhead Shrikes have not been spotted breeding in roughly a decade. Their numbers are declining faster than any other grassland bird in North America.

Where are they found?

The Eastern Loggerhead Shrike once ranged from New Brunswick to eastern Manitoba. Today, apart from a few scattered pairs, Eastern Loggerhead Shrikes can be found regularly breeding in only a handful of areas in Canada: in West St. Paul, Manitoba, just north of Winnipeg; on Ontario’s Carden Plain, northeast of Lake Simcoe; and on Ontario’s Napanee Plain, west of Kingston.

In the recent past, shrikes were also found in Smiths Falls, Bruce County and Manitoulin Island in Ontario, and in the Outaouais area of Quebec. However, since 2000 only the Carden and Napanee Plain have had core, albeit small, breeding populations.

Shrikes need short grass where they can spot their prey. Historically they were found on buffalo-grazed plains, and more recently, on cattle pastures. Shrikes also need densely branched shrubs for nesting, dead trees or telephone poles where they can perch to scan for prey, and thorns or barbed wire for storing what they catch.

What’s causing the population decline?

The reasons behind the decline in shrike populations are not clear, but biologists suspect four main causes.

Loss of habitat: As pastureland disappears with changing land use and new farming methods, shrikes have fewer places to nest and hunt. The hedgerows, shrubs and trees that they depend on are being removed as pastures are converted to cropland.

Toxic chemicals: Pesticides and other chemicals are known to affect the health and reproductive success of many bird species.

Predation: More predators, including crows and cats, have become a problem in many nesting areas.

Accidents: Shrikes often perch on fence posts or hydro poles on the edge of fields, next to roads. Unfortunately, this means that some shrikes are killed by passing vehicles.

What's being done to boost shrike populations?

Habitat stewardship and restoration: A key part of the solution is improving shrike habitat. This could mean clearing brush, installing fencing to allow cattle grazing, or planting nesting trees. These activities are spearheaded by Eastern Loggerhead Shrike Recovery Action Groups (RAGs), which are community-based groups that share information, organize volunteers, and work with private landowners.

Captive breeding and release: When shrike numbers fell to only 18 pairs in Ontario, a captive population was established to ensure that the genetic makeup of those birds would not be lost and to act as a safety net against their extinction. A total of 43 nestlings were taken from the wild population in Ontario in the summers of 1997 and 1998. The program has been successful, and since 2001, when experimental releases began, 110 captive-bred birds have been released to the wild to boost wild populations. In 2005, a captive-bred female was spotted nesting on the Carden Plain, proving that these birds can survive, migrate and breed.

Monitoring: Each year, field biologists and volunteers survey Eastern Loggerhead Shrike habitat to see how many birds there are and whether they are building nests and laying eggs, providing important data for recovery efforts.

Banding: One important source of information about the shrike's behaviour, survival, and migration habits comes from banding. In this process, tiny bracelet-type rings are attached around the bird's legs that allow observers to identify each bird and when and where it was banded.

Genetic analysis: When biologists band a shrike, they also painlessly remove a tail feather, which grows back within six weeks. DNA in the feather is used to obtain a genetic profile for each bird, which, in turn, provides important information about shrike population dynamics.

Who is involved in the recovery effort?

A broad range of people and organizations are working to save the shrike, including many conservation groups, government agencies, private landowners, agricultural associations and aggregate producers. Private landowners are key to shrike recovery, since most shrike habitat is located on private land.

In 1992 a Loggerhead Shrike Recovery Team was formed, and it completed a Loggerhead Shrike Recovery Plan in 1994. The Recovery Team evolved into two separate groups: one to help the endangered Eastern Loggerhead Shrike, and the other to focus on the threatened Western Loggerhead Shrike in the southern prairies. Recovery efforts for the Eastern Loggerhead Shrike are being undertaken by regional offices of Environment Canada in Quebec, Ontario and Manitoba.

A 2003 Conservation Agreement with Environment Canada under the federal Species At Risk Act gives Wildlife Preservation Canada responsibility for coordinating and implementing the Eastern Loggerhead Shrike recovery strategy in Ontario.

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