

2003 Ontario Field Report

The summer of 2003 Field Report was one of highs and lows for the Shrike Recovery Program. After five birds died last fall at the Toronto Zoo from the West Nile Virus, we worried that mosquito exposure on the over-wintering grounds would wipe out what was left of our wild population. What a relief when the first Eastern Loggerhead Shrike was spotted in Canada in early April!

Total numbers, however, are down. At final count, 12 pairs bred in Carden and 12 in Napanee, compared with 12 and 25 pairs in 2002 Field Report. An additional 10 loner birds were spotted in the province. The dramatic drop in the Napanee population is very disappointing, but it is tempered by some positives: the population in Carden remained stable, and the birds that did return reproduced very successfully, with each pair producing an average of five nestlings.

There was almost no nest predation in Carden, and although almost half of the pairs in Napanee lost their first nest to bad weather or predators, almost all pairs managed to raise at least one successful nest by the end of the summer.

The experimental captive breeding and release program was also a roller coaster. The beginning of the summer was marked by a lot of hard work and excitement as the project expanded from Smiths Falls into a second site located on the Bruce Peninsula. We also included more pairs in the program than ever before: 20 pairs were used in 2003 Field Report, compared with 3 to 6 in previous years.

Breeding success, however, could have been better. In prior years almost all captive birds bred, but this year only 3 out of the 20 pairs had young, producing a total of only 4 nestlings. This is a big drop from 2002 Field Report, when 5 of 6 pairs placed in field breeding cages bred, together producing a total 24 chicks!

In science, there is a saying that even a negative outcome is a positive result. In this case, we have learned something important: although the drop in reproduction is still under investigation, we suspect the culprit was a West Nile vaccine that the captive birds received just prior to the summer breeding season. It looks like the vaccine, or simply the stress of the vaccination process, may have prevented the captive birds from coming into full breeding condition. Research into this continues.

At this point we are working hard to assimilate the new information from the past summer. What have we learned? What can we do differently next year to make our work more productive?

There is no magic formula for recovering an endangered species, so it's not surprising to encounter setbacks from time to time. The successes we did have in 2003 Field Report are encouraging, and we're looking forward to building on them in 2004 Field Report .

By Merilee Temple