



Loggerhead Shrike

Lanius ludovicianus

In parts of the South, the loggerhead shrike goes by the name of French mockingbird and has been given the rather uncomplimentary name of 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.

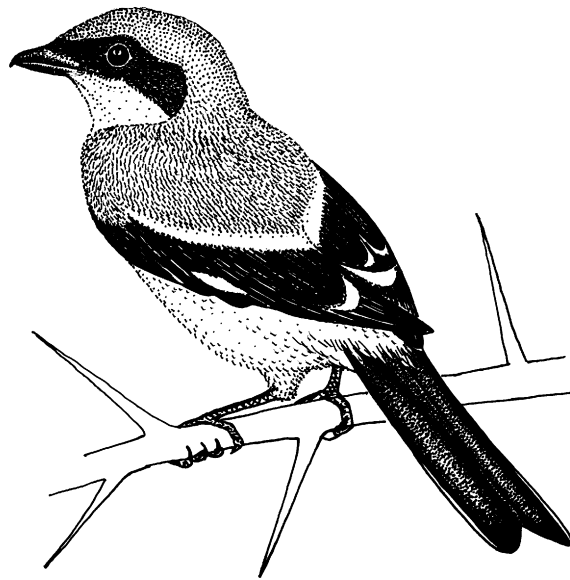
History and Status

The loggerhead shrike, so named for its large head, was probably never a common bird in eastern North America. It requires large, open areas with short grass, conditions seldom found in the eastern United States before the arrival of the 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 breeding range of the loggerhead shrike has collapsed to the point that North Carolina appears to be very near the current northeastern frontier of viable breeding populations.

Description

The loggerhead shrike is gray



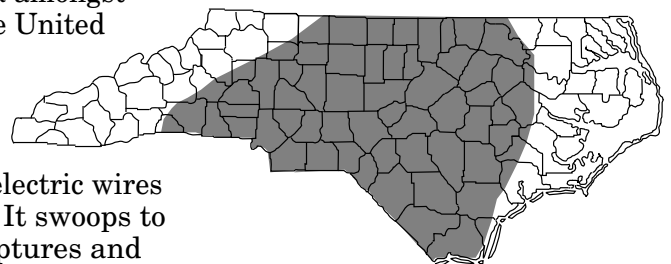
above and white beneath. The wings and tail are black with considerable white showing when the bird is in flight. A trim black mask serves to separate the gray of the head from the white throat and underparts. Superficially, the bird resembles the familiar and more common mockingbird, and at least one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

Habitat and Habits

No larger than a robin, this handsome bird 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 amongst 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. Thus, 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 environment to aid in holding and consuming these larger prey items.

Shrikes are early breeders and in North Carolina have probably established a breeding territory by late March or early April. Four 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 approxi-



Range Map:

Occupied range

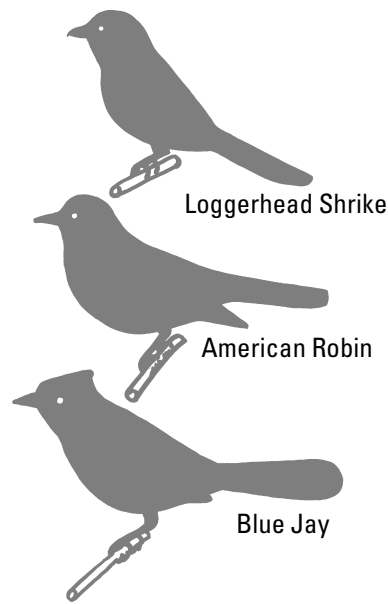
mately 14 days, the young are hatched and constantly brooded by the female. The male provides his mate and the young all their food for the first week or so. Thereafter, both adults become involved in feeding the growing young. Within a week after the first brood has fledged, the female constructs a second nest, usually several feet higher than the first, and lays a second clutch of eggs, usually smaller by one egg 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.

Range and Distribution

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. 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.

Recent data indicate that the decrease in numbers, as high as 10 percent per year, appears to be the greatest in the mid-Atlantic states, including North Carolina.

In examining the distribution map, one should understand that



Loggerhead Shrike

American Robin

Blue Jay

some North Carolina counties, especially the more southerly ones, have received more intensive field-work than others.

People Interactions

A songbird, the loggerhead shrike is not a game species. It enjoys full protection from hunting.

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 F. Parnell and Robert Teulings. *Birds of the Carolinas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

Van Tyne, Josselyn, and A. J. Burger. *Fundamentals of Ornithology* (New York: Wiley, 1961).

Credits

Written by Wayne Irvin.

Illustrated by J. T. Newman.

Produced July 1995 by the Division of Conservation Education, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission.

The Wildlife Resources Commission is an Equal Opportunity Employer and all wildlife programs are administered for the benefit of all North Carolina citizens without prejudice toward age, sex, race, religion or national origin. Violations of this pledge may be reported to the Equal Employment Officer, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, 512 N. Salisbury St., Raleigh, N.C. 27604-1188. (919) 733-2241.

LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE

Classification

Class: Aves

Order: Passeriformes

Average Size

Length: 9 in.

Weight: approx. 1¼ oz.

Food

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

Breeding

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 is the norm.

Young

The young, when hatched, are naked and helpless. For the first 4 to 5 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 have dispersed within a few weeks after leaving the nest.