

The Loggerhead Shrike: Beautiful, Bloody, or both?

by Tara Mulhern Davidson

The Loggerhead Shrike is a distinctive grassland songbird that is currently listed as threatened under the Species at Risk Act. Slightly smaller than a robin, Loggerhead Shrikes have a very distinctive black eye mask, a stout, black hooked beak, a grey head and back, white belly, and black wings that feature small white patches. Perhaps it is not their appearance or sweet birdsong that is the species' most striking feature, but rather its particular gory habit that can catch farmers and rancher by surprise ... they routinely impale their prey!

Loggerhead shrikes impale their food on sharp thorns or barbed wire while they dismember and eat the flesh of the prey at their convenience. This disconcerting ritual has earned them the name "butcher bird." They will hunt smaller birds, mice, voles, insects, and sometimes even frogs and garter snakes, leaving its supply of food to fester on a fenceline.

The breeding and nesting range for Loggerhead Shrikes is the mixed and moist mixed prairie grassland ecoregion in Saskatchewan, with potential occurrences in the Aspen Parkland. The birds usually return to the prairie in April and stay until they migrate south to the southern United States and Mexico in September. Pairs will lay clutches of four to six eggs, and often build nests in isolated trees with dense cover, to help protect themselves from predators. In spite of being fairly aggressive hunters, they do deal with predators themselves, including magpies, bull snakes, feral cats and weasels.

Loggerhead Shrikes make use of a diversity of habitat, preferring open prairie grasslands with some cover from tall shrubs such as chokecherry, thorny buffaloberry, and Saskatoon berry. Shrikes can also be found in tame pastures, existing or abandoned farm yards, agricultural lands, creeks and other riparian areas, and roadsides. Because the species relies on thorny shrubs or fencelines for impalements, they can often be found nesting in prairie

cemeteries, golf courses, parks, or any other areas that have shelterbelts and fencelines. Loggerhead Shrikes face threats due to grassland and shelterbelt habitat loss in Canada as well as its wintering grounds. Also, past use of organochlorine insecticide products used to kill insects, including grasshoppers, have been flagged as potentially causing a decline in Loggerhead Shrikes. Vehicle collisions, particularly as birds congregate along roadsides or other high traffic areas, are another potential threat to the species. As well, juveniles are often unable to withstand very cold or very wet conditions, both of which have been prevalent in its prairie habitats in the last few years.



Loggerhead Shrike photo courtesy of Emily Putz

While the "butcher bird" does deal with a few challenges, there are a variety of programs in place to help producers and others who are interested in conserving Loggerhead Shrike habitat. PCAP Partner Nature Saskatchewan has a voluntary, non-binding program called "Shrubs for Shrikes," that encourages landowners and land managers to conserve habitat for Loggerhead Shrikes. Through an annual mail-out survey, producers and landowners report whether the shrikes have returned each year. "It is the producers who have first-hand, long-term knowledge about their land and they are the ones who can really make the difference when it comes to conservation on the prairies," said Ashley Vass, Habitat Stewardship Coordinator with Nature Saskatchewan. "Working with producers to monitor species and conserve habitat is key," Vass added. An



Garter Snake photo courtesy of M. Yaskowich

easy way for any producer interested in helping Loggerhead Shrikes through Nature Saskatchewan is to call their toll-free line, 1-800-667-HOOT (4668). Information is kept confidential and used to help monitor shrike populations. More information on Shrubs for Shrikes can be found at <http://www.naturesask.ca/what-we-do/stewards-of-saskatchewan/shrubs-for-shrikes>.

Simply Ag Solutions Inc. has recently developed Species at Risk Beneficial Management Practises which focus on target species in Saskatchewan, including the Loggerhead Shrike. Simply Ag is hosting workshops across the province for producers interested in creating Species at Risk Farm Plans to help mitigate potential threats against Loggerhead Shrikes and many other species at risk. Simply Ag lists several useful beneficial management practices that producers may want to incorporate in their operations that support shrikes, including: maintain existing shelterbelts; conserve native or perennial grassland habitat; maintain existing riparian (i.e. creek) corridors; plant trees and shrubs; maintain a buffer of natural vegetation adjacent to trees and shrubs; clean up spilled grains; store grains in bird and animal-proof containers; moderate grazing intensities on perennial grasslands to support vegetative structural diversity and remove woody debris, trash piles, or abandoned buildings to discourage shrike predators

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from moving in. More information on Simply Ag Solutions programming as well as upcoming workshops can be found at <http://simplyag.ca/species-at-risk/>.

The South of the Divide Conservation Action Program (SODCAP), also a PCAP Partner, has taken measures to identify optimal habitat requirements for Loggerhead Shrikes as part of an effort to partner with producers who provide such environments. Ideal habitat has been identified as grassland areas containing tall shrubs (i.e. greater than 2 meters in height), such as chokecherry, thorny buffaloberry, or Saskatoon that are present on less than 30% of the landscape. It's important to note that Loggerhead Shrikes won't make use of short shrubs, such as buckbrush or rose, so shrub height is a very important indicator. Loggerhead Shrikes can certainly live in a variety of habitats, although the previously mentioned indicators are considered to be optimal to support shrikes and other species at risk populations. Landowners who provide such habitat in the Milk River Watershed (i.e. South of the Divide), the Missouri Coteau, or the Sandhills, may be interested in participating in Results-Based Conservation Agreements through SODCAP and the Saskatchewan Stock Growers Association under the Species at Risk Partnership on Agricultural Lands (SARPAL) program. Results-Based Conservation Agreements provide financial incentives for producers who are able to meet the particular habitat targets outlined previously. Producers interested in participating in such agreements with SODCAP can learn more at <http://sodcap.com/>.

The Loggerhead Shrike is indeed a unique bird species that shows up on farms and ranches across Saskatchewan. While the species faces numerous challenges, conscious conservation efforts and producer partnerships will hopefully help to ensure the survival of the "butcher bird" long into the future. 



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