

(Jeff Lemons)



Laniidae the SHRIKES

The Shrike family is one of the most unique families grouped in the Passerine (songbird) order. It consists of 32 species spread across much of the globe. Surprisingly, these medium-sized songbirds have a big reputation as fierce predators. Members of this group have been described as “cruel,” “ruthless,” “savage,” “wanton,” “wicked,” and “sagacious,” and they have been called “butchers,” “thieves,” “murderers,” and “tyrants.” In truth, they are perhaps simply some of nature’s most efficient and persistent hunters.

On April 14, 1831, *The Charlotte Journal* carried a piece titled “Butcher Birds” that shared with area readers a somewhat overstated but largely accurate depiction of members of the Shrike family and their hunting activities:

When it sees a locust, mantis, or small bird, it springs upon it and immediately carries it off, in order to impale it upon a thorn which it does with great dexterity, always passing the thorn through the head of its victim. Every animal which it seizes is subject to the same fate; and it thus continues all day long its murderous career, apparently instigated rather by the love of mischief than the desire of food. Its throne of tyranny is usually a dry and elevated branch of a tree, from which it pounces on all intruders; driving off the stronger and more troublesome, and impaling the inexperienced alive. When hungry, it visits its shambles [slaughterhouse], and helps itself to a savory meal.

Only two species of shrikes are found in North America: the Loggerhead Shrike and the Northern Shrike. The Loggerhead Shrike is a permanent resident in both Carolinas and is discussed in detail below. The larger Northern Shrike has been reported four times in North Carolina, but it has never been reported in the Piedmont. Its presence in the state has been confirmed by a century-old voucher specimen collected at Pea Island. The Northern Shrike has never been documented in South Carolina.

Note: The National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count database includes a listing of five Northern Shrikes on the Spartanburg CBC held on December 15, 1984. This is a data entry error, and these birds should be listed as Loggerhead Shrikes.