

Loggerhead Shrike *Lanius ludovicianus*



Folk Name: Butcher Bird, French Mockingbird,
Loggerhead

Status: Resident

Abundance: Uncommon/Rare in urban areas

Habitat: Open country, weedy fields, pastures

The Loggerhead Shrike was once known throughout the Carolinas as the “Butcher Bird.” People were in awe of its hunting abilities and some considered this songbird to be quite fearsome. This masked “savage in feathers” is known to quickly dispatch small snakes, birds, and mammals by biting them behind their head—to immediately separate their backbone and immobilize them—then it proceeds to impale its prey on a large thorn or barbed wire. Like its shrike relatives worldwide, the Loggerhead Shrike will cache many prey items in one spot and then return later to this larder to feed.

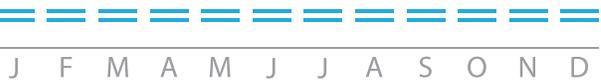
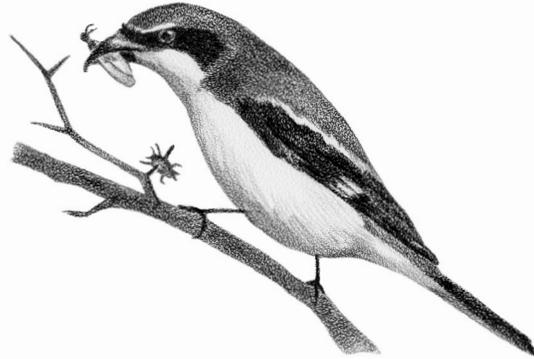
This distinctive trait has remained a mystery to most Carolinians. When a food cache was discovered it often led to wild speculation as to how and why this strange assortment of creatures came to be displayed on a tree, wire, or bush; or, if the bird was known to be the culprit, as to why the shrike had left many of its prey items entirely uneaten. On January 5, 1895, *The Wilmington Morning Star* carried this piece to describe this enigma:

This is the puzzle: The butcher bird in his riotous love of killing slays many more victims than he has any possible use for. He seems to do it for the mere fun of the thing. Instead of leaving the dead, however, he carries them one by one to some thorny hedge or tree and there impales them in all sorts of fantastic positions in the branches. It gives one a start to come out of a piece of woods when gunning and see a thorn tree laden with a ghastly crop of locusts, toads, sparrows, grass snakes, lizards, and chipmunks.

If the shrike ever returned to feed upon his grim hoard, there would be an explanation of his conduct, and he would be credited with the epicurean taste of a thoroughbred vulture that likes things ‘a bit gamy.’ But such is not the case. The weird fruit hangs for days upon the limbs, and if hawks or crows do not find and steal it, it will rot until only a few white skeletons remain to tell of the massacre.

The discovery of a food cache would often make the news:

“Discovery of a bird that engages in killing mice and hanging them on a thorn bush aroused much interest



at Linwood during the holidays. ...When the last count was reported the bird had twenty-one mice all nicely dangling from the thorn bush, each pierced by a sharp thorn. ...The Linwood farmers who have observed the bird are said to be hopeful that its tribe will increase if it confines its activities against mice, snakes, and bugs.”

—*Statesville Record and Landmark*, January 3, 1933

“The mystery of the dead snakes [21 total] hanging from the trees in North Carolina appeared solved Tuesday. They were impaled by shrikes or butcher birds. That was the consensus of scientists and laymen alike. The snakes were first discovered on thorny locust trees here [Troy] Sunday, and then similar reports came in from around the state. The snakes here—plus a mouse and lizard on trees—have been viewed by thousands of curious folk.”

—*The Gastonia Gazette*, April 19, 1950

Scientists have developed several hypotheses as to why the Loggerhead Shrike evolved this caching behavior. First, it is simply one way this songbird can quickly immobilize larger prey. Secondly, it is a way of insuring food is available during lean times. Thirdly, it is a way a male bird can display his hunting prowess to a female. Lastly, it is a way to ensure enough food is available for nestlings during the breeding season. These voracious nestlings need a constant supply of food. In York County, researchers documented a mated pair of shrikes delivering up to 17 prey items per hour and up to 165 items in one day to their young. So, instead of being viewed as the work of a “cruel, murderous, butcher,” the cache of the shrike could alternately be viewed as the end result of some showing off for a mate or the positive outcome of the labor of a very hard-working Mom and Dad.

The Loggerhead Shrike can be found in our farmlands, open weedy fields, and short-grass pastures. Here it feeds

on insects and spiders 80% of the time in the summer and fall (especially grasshoppers), with amphibians, reptiles, birds, and small mammals making up the remaining 20% of its diet. During the winter and early spring, these percentages reverse. A shrike will eat small prey immediately, but it will impale all large prey.

The Loggerhead Shrike averages 9 inches in length, which is about an inch smaller than our ubiquitous Northern Mockingbird, and to many non-birders, these two gray-and-white birds look alike. This similarity of appearance led to another of the shrike's common names: the "French Mockingbird." However, upon close inspection, these two birds are distinctly different.

The Loggerhead Shrike has a large flat head with a black mask that is, in essence, a wide black stripe across each eye connected by a thin stripe above its bill. Its black bill is stout and hooked. Its wings and tail are darker black than the Mockingbird and the patch of white on its wings is smaller. Some ornithologists have speculated that these two species might represent a case of mimicry, where one species adapts over time to resemble a more dangerous species in order to enhance its long-term survival. It is important to note that the shrike does not have talons like a bird of prey. Instead, it has perching feet like the Mockingbird and other songbirds; therefore, it must rely on its hooked bill for tearing and eating the flesh of its prey.

This predator's classification as a songbird begs many to question: Does the Loggerhead Shrike sing like most other songbirds? The answer is yes, but its song is very rarely heard.

"At times he gives forth a series of notes that resemble nothing so closely as the squeak of a new wheelbarrow.

Then, after a pause, another series of notes, high-pitched, quavering, almost melodious will be heard from an entirely different direction. It takes considerable observation to convince oneself that all these notes proceed from the one bird but they do, as he is an excellent ventriloquist."

—*The Pinehurst Outlook*, January 21, 1905

"This bird has various notes most of which are harsh and grating, and it is able to imitate to perfection the creaking of an old windlass that has not been oiled for a year or two. On occasion it can produce a very melodious song, but few people ever hear it."

—*Citizen-Times*, November 15, 1942

"At Oakwood [cemetery] on Saturday, November 30, a bird's song note fell into the early morning mist. The Loggerhead Shrike, grey suited, highway man's mask over eyes, offered his rarely heard song from the bare top twig of an Oriental cherry tree. The first notes reminded one of the Jaybird's calls, then as the sun shot through the grey air and fell upon his upturned face, he burst into a high cheerful piping. ...It is said the shrike sings

only in the springtime. But the summerful weather of November had the power to move even a shrike, even this Butcher bird, to romantic diversion and a canticle to the sun."

—*Statesville Record and Landmark*, December 5, 1946

Two races of the Loggerhead Shrike have been documented in the Carolinas. The two are virtually indistinguishable by sight in the field and birds present here during the winter could possibly be either subspecies. Our resident bird is *Lanius ludovicianus ludovicianus* which is at the northern edge of its breeding range. At one time, the northern breeding species dubbed the "Migrant" Shrike, *Lanius ludovicianus migrans*, is believed to have bred in Iredell County and along the Foothills of western North Carolina. The *migrans* race moves south from its northern breeding sites during the winter and supplements our local population. Recent research indicates that the *migrans* race may not be present in most, or all, of South Carolina in the winter.

In the late 1890s, R.B. McLaughlin of Statesville provided nesting information and a specimen of a Loggerhead Shrike to William Palmer, author of the paper "Our Small Eastern Shrikes" published in the July 1898 issue of *The Auk*. This paper provided the seminal description of the two eastern subspecies (races) of shrike found in the Carolinas. McLaughlin described it as a common breeding bird. Around that same period, Leverett Loomis described the status of the shrike in Chester County as: "common in winter; very common during spring and fall; not observed to be common during summer."

There were many reports of shrikes in the Central Carolinas in the early twentieth century. They lived in "both the town and country." C.S. Brimley reported a Loggerhead Shrike in Mecklenburg County, 18 miles north of Charlotte, on August 13, 1918. Frank Sherman, State Entomologist, reported shrikes as being "quite common" in Monroe and Wadesboro while he was



Snake stored by shrike on a farm in Cabarrus County.
(MCPRD staff)

conducting a survey of the region in July 1922. E.M. Hoffman found a wintering shrike on January 3, 1922, in Rowan County. Frank Sherman found a nest in Salisbury on July 19, 1923. F.R. Brown reported a nest there on May 16, 1925, that “was about thirty feet up in a pine tree, out near the end of the limb, and contained young birds almost ready to leave the nest.” C.S. Brimley recorded a shrike in Statesville on September 8, 1924.

In the 1920s, Charlotte’s William McIlwaine noted the Loggerhead Shrike was so common in Charlotte that they were regularly seen perched on telephone wires throughout the city. He provided many nesting details:

On June 24 [1926] I found a shrike’s nest in the top of a little willow oak about twelve ft. from the ground. A nest about the size of that of a thrasher, but more neatly built, and deeper. Of sticks, grasses, and roots. Very compact. Nicely finished on the inside. Empty. A little (?) one about size of parent was most assiduous in claiming attention of its parent, with much following and cries.

On July 12, 1926, William McIlwaine wrote:

On this date I visited again the shrike’s nest I had found sometime before. It had five eggs. White, about one inch long, ovate, with a heavy covering of dark brown spots (rather large spots), even heavier at the large end. While the spots were brown yet there was at the larger end a decided violet or lavender tinge. This is a well-made deep nest, with nice work on the inside, including down and horse hair. (Horse hair is becoming a scarce commodity for birds these day [*sic*] of automobiles.) The mother bird sat silently in the top of a neighboring tree, very self-possessed, while we took a picture of her nest. And taking a picture while you are balanced in a tree-top is no easy matter. Well, I have a better opinion of the shrike after seeing the nest, and the manners of the mother bird.

He found two other nests in 1928. One on 20 March: “As I crossed over Dilworth Road I heard a shrike doing his best to sound alluring. I suppose he was feeling proud of himself; for just above my head in a pine tree I saw another shrike light in the business end of a thick branch; and going closer I found their nest. It was twenty feet up; so all I could do was surmise.” The second nest on 2 April:

In a tangle of rose bushes on the edge of the Duke Estate, about five feet up, I found a shrike’s nest with five eggs. I think the old lady was beginning to “set.” At any rate, I have no great love for the multiplication of this species; so I took the nest. And maybe I did not get a beautiful picture! Maybe! Another picture I have of a shrike’s nest with eggs is dated in July. Therefore at least two sets of eggs

a season. By the way, these eggs were not nearly as dark as were those of the July nest. I suppose it is a matter of individual birds.

On May 3, 1928: “I shall find young ones in a certain shrike’s nest that until now has held its six spotted white eggs.” And on 15 May, he noted: “This is the day my butcher birds were hatched in the pine tree just back of the Batten’s.”

In 1940, Elizabeth Clarkson noted the Loggerhead Shrike as being a “common nester” in Mecklenburg County, and she emphasized her distaste for them nesting anywhere near her bird sanctuary. She wrote:

I discourage their coming to my garden and cut down a beautiful white locust because shrikes used its thorns to spear their prey. Its thorns would constantly have grasshoppers and other prey wriggling on them until they died. We watched a shrike spear a Vesper Sparrow before we could stop the murder. He did this by cornering the sparrow and thrusting him powerfully on a thorn, which went under the neck and came out the mouth. The head was immediately jerked from the body as quick as a flash and left on a thorn. He dropped the body only on our excited and close approach, and every time we walked away he came immediately back to it fearlessly. He is an exceedingly interesting bird but unwelcome in my garden.

Ernest Mitchell found a shrike nest in Charlotte on May 8, 1948. He observed the adult carrying food to three young birds in the nest. The nest was believed to have been “used for at least two seasons.” The average clutch size of shrike eggs is four or five, but as many as nine eggs have been documented in a shrike nest in North Carolina.

On August 5, 1955, Joe Norwood of Charlotte observed a Loggerhead Shrike outside his window and watched this gruesome scene unfold while eating breakfast:

In a moment it flew to the ground between the feeder and the gum [tree] and picked up the body of a female House Sparrow, which it had apparently just killed, and returned to the tree. After wedging the sparrow’s body in the fork of a branch the shrike began working at the neck with its beak and after much pulling, decapitated it. The body fell to the ground and the shrike retained the head. It then wedged the head in the same fork and proceeded to remove and eat the brains. Several House Sparrows and a female Cardinal watched in what seemed to be “morbid fascination” from about five feet above, in the same tree. The shrike made no move at these birds, nor did they attempt to molest it.

Our highest single day tally of Loggerhead Shrikes counted in the region was of 41 birds counted on the New

London Christmas Bird Count on December 30, 1960. The highest count on a Charlotte CBC was 37 shrikes counted in 1973. The highest single day tally on a Spring Bird Count in the region was 58 on the Charlotte count in 1967.

Researchers at Winthrop College conducted a detailed study of almost 50 shrike nests in York County in the mid-1980s. About two-thirds of the nests were built in red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) trees. The rest were built in hackberry trees (*Celtis laevigata*) and other deciduous trees. Pasture was the predominant habitat within 100m of each nest with hayfields, lawns, and fallow fields making up the rest. Nests in the study fledged an average of four to five young. Active nests were found between 17 March and 16 July.

Birders began to report the decline of shrikes breeding in the Piedmont of both Carolinas in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In 1982, shrikes were noted as “alarmingly scarce” in the breeding season “especially” in the Piedmont of North Carolina. By 1985, the shrike was described as continuing its “steady decline as a breeder” with “no obvious reason” apparent. Numbers of wintering shrikes declined as well. Over the next 30 years, declines continued in the Piedmont, but these declines were determined to be less pronounced in the adjacent Sandhills region. Numbers found on both Piedmont Spring Bird Counts and BBS routes declined sharply during this time. The reasons for this decline have been considered a bit “mysterious” with many possible reasons given including: habitat loss, changes in agricultural practices, pesticides, elimination of hedgerows on farms and right-of-ways, loss of “stand-alone” nest trees, car impacts, and more.

The North American Bird Conservation Initiative warns that the population of the Loggerhead Shrike is

rapidly declining throughout its range. It is currently listed as a “common species in steep decline” with a population loss continent-wide of over 70% in a 40-year period. It has been placed on the Watch List in the state of North Carolina and it is considered a species of Special Concern.

The Loggerhead Shrike was designated as “critically imperiled” as a breeding species within Mecklenburg County in 2008 because only a few remaining nest sites were known. The last nest site in the county was in a field beside a busy movie multiplex parking lot. Unfortunately, this outparcel was later turned into a gas station. Volunteers failed to find any evidence of breeding during the recent Breeding Bird Atlas project, and it now appears that this bird may have been extirpated (lost) as a breeding species in Mecklenburg County, at the core of the Central Carolina region.



Loggerhead Shrike. (Jeff Lemons)