

Landowners Guide for Maintaining and Encouraging Loggerhead Shrikes

Loggerhead shrikes are in trouble – but you may be able to help. Throughout the United States, and particularly in the Midwest, loggerhead shrikes are disappearing at an alarming rate. So serious is the decline that the loggerhead shrike is one of six bird species considered threatened in Minnesota.



What is a loggerhead shrike?

Loggerhead shrikes are special birds – an interesting cross between songbird and hawk. They feed on large insects such as grasshoppers and beetles, mice, small birds, frogs and toads. Shrikes spend much of their time perched on powerlines, fences or the top-most branches of trees and shrubs, scouting for prey and then swooping down to catch it. Then the bird either eats its prey, impales it on a nearby thorn or barbed wire fence or wedges it into the fork of a branch. Because shrikes lack the strong, sharp claws and feet of hawks, impaling food holds it in place as the bird tears at it with its bill. Your first clue that loggerhead shrikes are on your property may be finding an animal impaled on a fence barb or a thorn. This habit has earned the loggerhead shrike the nickname “butcher bird.”

What do loggerhead shrikes look like?

The robin-sized loggerhead shrike has a slate-gray back with a light breast. The most distinguishing markings of this bird are the black mask, which extends across the eye, and the black and white wing and tail patches which flash when the bird flies. Males and females are similar in size and color.

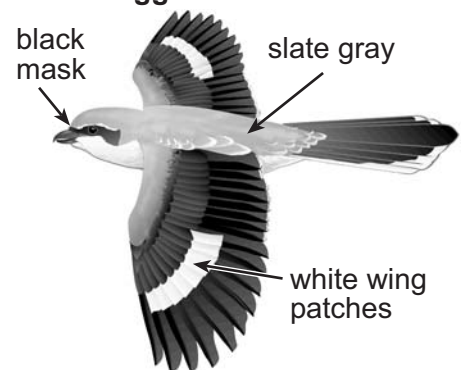
In Minnesota, loggerhead shrikes are most easily confused with eastern kingbirds and northern shrikes. However, eastern kingbirds have no mask, their heads are entirely dark, and they do not have white patches on their wings. The northern shrike looks very similar to the loggerhead shrike, but occurs in Minnesota from October through April, whereas the loggerhead shrike is here from March to October. During the early spring and fall, when both shrikes are in the state, they can be told apart by the loggerhead shrike’s completely black bill and its mask which extends across the top of the bill.

Where do they live?

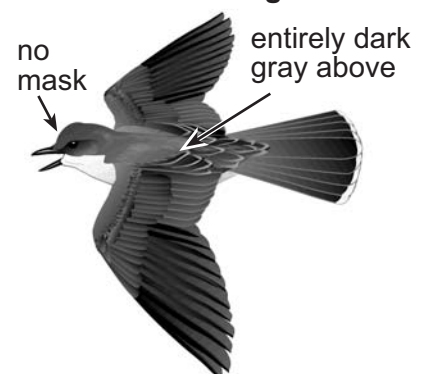
Loggerhead shrikes were once found throughout much of the unforested region of the state. Today, their numbers are very low. Recent surveys have located fewer than 30 nests in the state (Fig. 1). It is very important that we try to maintain habitat for the few shrikes that still breed in Minnesota.

Shrikes use grassy, open areas with scattered trees and shrubs such as pastures, prairie patches and grassy roadsides. A few trees and shrubs, along with fences and powerlines provide nesting sites and perches from

Loggerhead Shrike



Eastern Kingbird



continued on back

which to hunt. Red cedar, hawthorn and plum trees are often used for nesting. A pair may range over 2.5 - 30 acres.

Loggerhead shrikes are early nesters, arriving in Minnesota from their wintering areas in the southern U.S. and Mexico in early spring. Shrikes lay 4-6 eggs that hatch after about 16 days. The young birds remain with their parents for about 4 weeks after leaving the nest. It is at this time that the birds are most conspicuous. Shrikes tend to nest in the same general areas from year to year, although they may be absent for a year or two and then return again, as long as the habitat remains.

Why is the loggerhead shrike population declining?

The decline of the loggerhead shrike is likely the result a combination of factors, including loss of habitat resulting from the conversion of pasture and grasslands to houses or cropland and the encroachment of forest and brush on pastures and grasslands. In addition, changes in farming

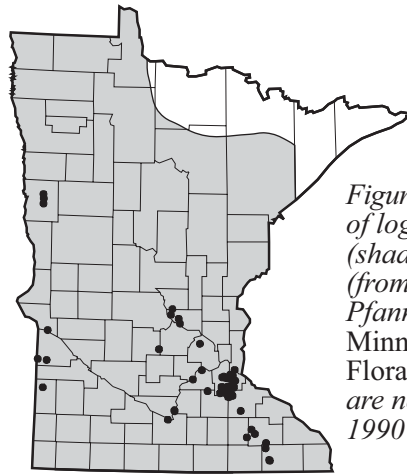


Figure 1. Historical range of loggerhead shrikes (shaded) in Minnesota. (from Coffin and Pfannmuller. 1988. Minnesota's Endangered Flora and Fauna). Dots are nests found between 1990 and 1996.

practices have resulted in larger fields and fewer trees, shrubs and fences scattered about. The increasing use of pesticides may also play a role in the decline of shrikes because these chemicals affect many animals that shrikes eat.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP LOGGERHEAD SHRIKES?

If there are shrikes nesting on your property, congratulations! You are one of a very few Minnesotans fortunate to share your property with such a unique bird. We hope you will want to help this bird continue its presence in your neighborhood. Obviously your land management practices and land use are already compatible if the birds have selected your land for nesting. While biologists continue to investigate the decline of the shrike there are things you can do on your property to encourage shrikes.

1. Leave fences standing for shrikes to use for perching and impaling food. If a fence must be removed, or if there are no fences near your grassland or pasture, you can create perch and impaling posts. To do this, wrap barbed wire near the top of a post. Place these posts along the edges of pastures and fields for shrikes to use. Your local nongame wildlife biologist can help you select the best locations for the posts.

2. Keep brush from encroaching upon grasslands by removal or burning, but only to the extent that the shrubs and trees don't dominate the grassland. A few scattered shrubs and trees are necessary to maintain the best shrike habitat.

3. Pastures and grassland are more attractive to shrikes than are row crops. Therefore, it is important to maintain existing pasture and grasslands. Investigate the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) which pays farmers to retire highly erodible farmlands from production and to establish permanent grassland. Contact your local Natural Resources Conservation Service office (formerly the Soil Conservation Service) for more information about this program.

4. Take advantage of financial incentives for maintaining compatible land uses. In many counties, the Agricultural Preserve Program and/or the Green Acres Program provide tax adjustments and/or deferments to farmers to help them maintain their land for agricultural use. Contact your county assessor's office for more information about these programs.

5. Minimize use of pesticides. Pesticides can reduce the supply of large insects and other non-target animals that shrikes need. Also, because shrikes feed on animals at which pesticides are directed, these chemicals can build up in the birds and impair their ability to reproduce and reduce the survival of their young.

For more information about shrikes or to report loggerheads shrikes on your property please contact:

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or locally contact: