

Nesting Success for Southern Ohio Loggerhead Shrikes

by Mark Skinner

Every trip to my grandmother's farm, near Greenfield in Highland County, includes a perimeter walk of the fields, pasture and woods searching for birds. On Sunday, 4 April 1999, I observed a loggerhead shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*) on the crown of a three-foot tall multiflora rose bush growing in a less-used corner of a cow pasture. The bird was hunting for food, occasionally hovering for a few seconds, then swooping to the ground before returning to another low vantage-point. The bird habitually landed on a low fence wire or branch of a bush, then worked its way higher, rarely going all the way to the crown or top wire before resuming the hunt.

It was only after the bird moved off to the fence near the corner of the field that I realized a second shrike was present. The second bird flew over to land on the fence wire very close to the first. I watched them reaffirm their bond, greeting one another by nearly touching bills. The close proximity of the birds to one another and to me allowed me to see a couple of plumage differences between them. The first bird had a very clean white breast, while the second showed some faint barring of the breast, visible when it faced me. The white band on the upperparts where the wing attached to the body appeared to extend above nearly the entire wing on the first bird but only partially (perhaps three-fourths of the way) across on the second. With time, these differences as well as their behavior enabled me to recognize the first as the male.

During the following week, Dan Sanders and Don Burton visited the farm. They were able to see one of the shrikes take a large white feather from a recently killed chicken in the pasture (the suspected victim of a coyote or dog) to a tall multiflora rose bush. Closer inspection revealed the makings of a nest, and I believe Don was able to take a few photographs of the nest and the birds.

I returned to the farm on April 10 to relocate the nest, relying on Dan's directions and hoping to observe the birds more closely. Both birds seemingly preferred to hunt in the cow pasture and adjacent wheat fields close to the nest. The nest was situated along a fencerow between two wheat fields, 25-30 feet south of the cow pasture and a T-intersection of fences. The wheat was only a few inches high at the time. The cow pasture was also short, but several small rose bushes were scattered near this corner. The fencerow was probably 80 percent overgrown with rose, other bushes, and small trees, the tallest a maple approximately 30 feet tall.

The shrikes had selected the tallest, densest multiflora rose bush on the fence. It had grown into and smothered a small tree of 10 to 12 feet in height, leaving the leafless skeleton of the tree's main branches above the bush for perching. Since it was early spring, the nest was visible as a thick mass, even from quite a distance. The leaves of the rose bush were filling in quickly all the same.

The nest was seven or eight feet off the ground, surprisingly large and bulky, and rather trashy in appearance. It was constructed of weedy sticks, grass, and several large white feathers. I observed the female take a long strand of grass from the pasture to the nest. On the ground beneath the selected nest site were several holes made by a burrowing mammal, possibly a groundhog.

While most of the literature I reviewed discussed shrikes as living and feeding in close proximity to human activity, this nest site was 1360 feet from one road, and in the

other direction more than 900 feet from the nearest structure (my grandmother's house), itself another 500 feet from another road. The area immediately surrounding the nest, several hundred acres, is all either intensively farmed or devoted to woodlots. Most of the fencerows to the west of the nest are overgrown to varying degrees, and a few have large hardwoods. The fence selected was one of the least overgrown.

I returned to the farm for the week of April 24-30. The nest was now obscured from view, and only once did I move aside the shielding vegetation to check the nest. The female spent most of her time there. I was unable to see if she spent any time in the bush off the nest. She appeared at dusk and dawn in the bare branches of the smothered tree, always when the male was perched nearby on another branch. I saw her leave on several occasions, at which times the male remained at the tree, but not in the bush. While my vantage-point was not optimal for seeing all movements to and from the nest, I was able to see him bring her food about once every hour on average. More scientific studies recorded males feeding mates every 23 minutes on average (Johnson, 1940 as cited in Lefranc, 1997).

Whenever I observed the male's approach to the nest, his behavior was unvarying. He flew in low across the wheat field or pasture and landed on one, nearly always the same, of the dead branches of the tree. He then waited ten or fifteen seconds before hopping down to the top of the rose bush; after a few more seconds of waiting he then entered the bush. He appeared to remain on or near the tree each night, and was found on the same branch at sundown and sunrise on all five days I was able to observe him.

By this time, his primary hunting grounds had changed from the pasture to a fencerow on the opposite side of the wheat field, approximately 400 feet from the nest site. This fencerow featured three small dead trees, each with multiflora rose bushes entwined in them. The snags of these trees served quite often as his hunting perches. In fact, he was the only bird observed utilizing one particular perch. The field opposite this second fencerow was corn stubble from the previous year's crop interspersed with low weeds. During the week, the owner of the wheat field between the male's hunting perches and the nest site plowed under the half of the field closest to the perches in order to plant corn. The half of the field closest to the nest remained in wheat.

On June 11, a group of birders spent two hours not far from the nest site, and walking the length of the pasture, but failed to locate any shrikes. I myself was unable to visit the farm until June 18, at which time I checked the nest site. The nest appeared badly damaged, half having been ripped away and fallen to the ground. I saw no evidence of shell debris. The white feathers used in the nest's construction were missing. Now several red-winged blackbirds were congregating in the nest tree and elsewhere in that corner of the fencerows. Unfortunately, I had been unable to visit the farm during the month of May, so cannot say precisely when the nest was disturbed.

On June 18, I obtained permission from the owner of the field to the west of the pasture to walk the fencerow where the male's hunting perches had been located. The region was suffering from a drought. The corn was in but not very high, and based on the tractor tracks it had been sprayed very recently, presumably with herbicide or insecticide. The field of corn stubble had been sprayed with some sort of broad herbicide, and soybeans had been drilled with no tilling. Very small bean plants were present.

At 4:00 pm, the male appeared, landing on his favorite hunting perch atop the snag on which I had never seen another bird land, while I was standing directly beneath it. It

was too close to use my binoculars; I froze and watched him for a few minutes. His plumage was still as crisp and distinctive as it had been in April; I could see no barring on the breast, even at this close range. As he surveyed the field of soybeans, I made an unintentional movement and he looked down at me. He started bobbing his tail like a kestrel or a phoebe, staring fiercely at me. I cannot recall reading anything about this tail-bobbing behavior in the literature, but I took it to be aggression toward me. I backed away, and after I was at some distance he resumed scanning the bean field.

I called Columbus to make arrangements for the Audubon Society's Avid Birders to see the shrike during their field trip scheduled for the following day. Around 6:30 pm I returned to the fencerow, this time keeping my distance from the favorite perch. The male arrived near 7:00 pm. A few seconds later, the female landed directly beside me, and now I stood between them. The barring on her breast was more apparent at this distance. Recalling my earlier encounter with the male, I cautiously moved away to avoid stressing them further.

On the morning of June 19, I was viewing the birds from approximately a quarter of a mile's distance. I saw the male on his favorite tree. The sun was rising behind me on a clear, bright day. I couldn't see where he went when he left, but between 6:00 and 6:30 am he left and returned to the tree four times. At 6:50 am the female landed in the same tree; in the bright light and with a 40x zoom, I was able to make out the barring on her breast and the partial white band above the wing. The male hadn't been seen for about fifteen minutes. Suddenly an immature shrike flew up next to her and opened its mouth, begging for food. The young bird appeared nearly her size, but was a dirtier gray, almost brownish in color, and more heavily barred. Its black mask was incomplete, its extension behind the eye sketchier and mottled.

The adult female flew to the ground and quickly returned to stuff something in the young's mouth. I was so excited by the evidence of successful nesting I ran inside to tell my aunt and grandmother; nonbirders, they nonetheless shared my elation at this turn of events. When I went back outside I was feeling sure I'd have a chance to see all three birds, but my luck had turned. Having found only one fledgling and knowing from the literature that a female will lay from four to eight eggs was a concern, but I told myself more fledglings may have been in the vicinity.

My Columbus friends arrived at 7:15 am. We went out to the far fencerow on which the birds had been seen. On the way out, Steve Landes spotted a cicada skewered to a thorn near the original nest site, evidence of the shrike's larder. We waited near the favorite perch for a while with no success. I moved down the fencerow alone toward where the female had been seen the night before. As I approached, two shrikes flushed from the fencerow between me and the rest of the group, whereupon the others joined me to look in the direction the birds had flown. Finally we spotted a shrike in a big oak, scanning the soybean field. I believe it was the male. We stayed long enough to watch the shrike swoop to the ground as it hunted, then left the area.

Speculating that the fencerow was hosting a second nesting attempt, I returned on July 10 to search for the birds and a nest. The area was still suffering from a bad drought. The wheat and nearby hayfields had been cut, but the soybeans were not much larger than three weeks earlier. The multiflora leaves were stunted and dropping; I could now see through several bushes that earlier had been too dense and dark to penetrate. Food seemed plentiful; grasshoppers were quite evident in the wheat stubble

and along the fencerow. I wondered whether shrikes would be bothered by dry conditions, given their favored arid habitats in the West. I could see no evidence of a nest.

The first sign that the shrikes had moved on for good was the number of species using the male's favorite perch and the rose bush—song sparrow, dickcissel, grasshopper sparrow, common yellowthroat, goldfinch, indigo bunting, robin, catbird, and red-winged blackbird. The fencerow was a far more active place than it had been while the shrikes were present; I had the feeling these other birds wouldn't have dared had the shrikes still been around. Two and a half hours of searching, scanning area fence lines and waiting near the perch, yielded no shrikes.

I'm still hopeful they'll attempt a second nesting somewhere in the area. As loggerhead shrikes become increasingly scarce in eastern North America—they are on the endangered lists of at least six Midwestern states and all of Canada—opportunities to observe them nesting are limited. While I hope more than one young bird fledged, I consider myself quite lucky to have witnessed as much as I was able to of their success.

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Several web pages:

- Illinois Fish & Wildlife Information Service
<http://www.inhs.uiuc.edu/chf/pub/ifwis/birds/loggerhead-shrike.html>
- Loggerhead Shrike Recovery Action Team
<http://www.bsc-eoc.org/losh.html>
- Environmental Protection Agency
<http://www.epa.gov/grtlakes/oak/Proceedings/Herkert.html>
- Alberta Provincial Government Fish & Wildlife Service
<http://www.gov.ab.ca/env/fw/theatsp/shrike/sta.html>
- Canadian Wildlife Service
<http://www.ec.gc.ca/cws-scf/hww-fap/loggerhd/logger.html>
- Ohio Birders' Resource Center
<http://aves.net/birds-of-ohio/birdlosh.htm>