



### **Brunswick Wildlife Loggerhead Shrike**

How about a double order of skewered cricket for brunch? This Loggerhead Shrike was hunting from a cedar tree at the top of Battery Buchanan at Fort Fisher. Watching was a great experience; I had never heard a shrike so talkative. There were the chirps and buzzes of its song and also its sharp, raspy warning call. After a minute or so I realized it was fussing. My class and I had interrupted brunch.

Brunch? I noticed a cricket impaled on a sharp spine on a dead branch just below the bird. This is common and distinctive foraging behavior for shrikes, sometimes using thorns or barbed wire fences. The bird was not comfortable with eating the cricket in front of us so it made additional hunting trips to the base of the battery.

Very high tides, called “spring tides”, occur twice a month with full and new moons. Spring tides, their name not derived from the season, are the result of the gravitational pull of the sun and moon acting together (the earth, moon, and sun are in a straight line) to amplify high and the low tide levels and strength of tidal currents. The highs are higher and the lows are lower than normal.

On this day, brunch coincided with a spring tide which, as normal, flooded the tip of Federal Point and formed a partial moat around the battery. The encroaching water made it easy for the shrike to locate escaping insects. Birds know this stuff!

Shrikes are uncommon, permanent residents of the Lower Cape Fear, with pairs having permanent territories. Also in winter, birds from northern populations shift south and may overwinter with us. There is at least one territory between the Fort Fisher Museum and Battery Buchanan and also one downhill behind the at Sea Trail Clubhouse at Sunset Beach.

The fledgling shrike was photographed in a parking lot. This bird was with its sibling and they had not been out of the nest for long. They were strong enough fliers to make it to a nearby shrub where their mother was still feeding them.

Shrikes are found in open country with few trees, grasslands, pasturelands, parks, and neighborhoods...all good habitats with good perches for hunting.

Their diet includes mice, bats, birds, small reptiles, amphibians, and insects; however, they prefer large insects. Hunting from an elevated perch in the open, a shrike swoops down and captures prey. It breaks or severs the prey's neck and then carries its bounty to another perch where it may be impaled to hold for eating or for temporarily storage.

The shrike's raptor-like hunting skills are enabled by its broad wings and long tail, built for speed and maneuverability. Like a raptor, its powerful, hooked beak is made for ripping up its catch. Shrikes do not have the strong legs and talons of raptors so their hunting styles do not include use of their feet. Impaling prey is an adaptation that compensates for not being able to use its feet and enables shrikes to immobilize larger prey.

Shrikes may be identified by their black mask, wings, and tail; otherwise, they might be mistaken for mockingbirds. "Loggerhead", another word for "blockhead", refers to the large size of its head in proportion to its body. Another common name for shrikes, for obvious reasons, is "butcherbird".

Populations are sharply declining throughout most of its range largely due to loss of habitat, killing of its prey by pesticides and fire-ants, climate change, and competition with birds that are more tolerant of human changes in land use. Ten subspecies, differing slightly in coloration of plumage and bill shape, are spread across the United States and Canada. Two of these subspecies are listed as "endangered" and one is "threatened".

The Loggerhead Shrike is among the top ten in Audubon's Common Birds in Decline list. They are in the top five declining species for many states, including North Carolina where their percentage of statewide decline is 95%. The shrike is listed as an endangered species in several states, a species "Of Special Concern" in our state, and it may be on the way to inclusion on the national "threatened" list under the Endangered Species Act.

According to Audubon, shrikes have declined nationwide from 10 million to 3 million (or 70%) over the past forty plus years based on numbers compiled from Christmas Bird Counts sponsored by Audubon and annual Breeding Bird Surveys sponsored by the US Geological Survey's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center.

The decline of the Loggerhead Shrike is similar to that of other grassland and early-successional adapted species. Farmland in the northeast has been abandoned by family farms and is either being reforested or lost to development. In other regions, farmland is being used more intensively and efficiently, leaving no field borders or fallow patches for grassland birds.

In the southeastern, the best hope for shrikes may be the Northern Bobwhite Conservation Initiative, which encourages restoration of brush habitat along field edges. Other desirable practices to help this species include maintaining brush along fences, leaving scattered trees in pastures and fields, and allowing hedges to remain around fields to provide nest sites. Also, through changes in practices by state departments of transportation, roadside habitat

may be restored by less use of herbicides, less frequent mowing, and by leaving some shrubs standing along roads. Today's highly efficient technology for clearing roadsides is overkill...in more than one sense.

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