

Shrikes

Shrike—this is a songbird that thinks it's a hawk, which is reason enough to pay attention.

You don't want to be on the business end of a shrike's hooked bill, with which it kills and tears apart prey items that include insects, other birds, reptiles, and small mammals. Loggerhead shrikes are deftly efficient killers. Sometimes thorns or barbed wire become their storehouses.

Shrikes will break the spines of their victims with a bite to the neck, impale the prey, leave them, and then return to the dead-festooned thorns to eat from their cache. According to *The Birder's Handbook*, shrikes usually have an impressive memory; one study in Texas showed that eight months after creating a cache of dead frogs, the songbirds returned to eat the dried remains. During two months, one pair of parents and their youngsters (seven) eat the equivalent of almost 20 pounds of food, which, reports the definitive *Birds of North America*, "equals about 75 birds...222 microtine rodents...and 394 bumble-bees." I've always wanted to see, up close, one of those spiky collections of shrike prey.

Although they typically hunt from perches, shrikes will ground hop to rustle up insects and other prey, and they'll hover like a kestrel.

Young shrikes not only mock-attack each other and stab at plants, but they've been seen attacking large mammals. It's for all this aggressiveness, and for their habit of leaving prey caches hanging from thorns and barbs, that shrikes have earned the nickname "butcherbirds."

Shrikes' much-noted behavior of forgetting or leaving uneaten cached prey has yet to be fully explained, but it likely arises from the fact that male shrikes will kill more than they need in order to impress potential mates. (This strikes me as the premise for a bad reality TV show.) I suppose forgetting where one has stored a collection of impaled house sparrows isn't a big deal; even I don't remember what's in my freezer.

All of this blood and gore, this impaling, this youthful hatred of mega fauna—did I mention that shrikes also attack caribou?—may seem unattractive for what is technically a songbird, a passerine. But a shrike is a sleekly spiffy bird. It sports a grayish back, white-gray underside, and black wings that show two daubs of white when perched and a conspicuous curved white patch in flight. A shrike's dressiest feature is its black mask, which is narrower in the northern shrike than in the loggerhead. The loggerhead's mask is bigger and its head is bulkier—hence its name.

Not long ago I listened to recordings of a loggerhead shrike to remind myself of what I'd heard in Kansas years ago: harsh, high, two-syllable tweets. A clustered, whistly call; a trill of sorts. A burry, fast call that reminds me of a hawk.

Where I live in northern Utah, both northern and loggerhead shrikes can be found in winter, and I've seen both species in the dead of it. Warmer weather sends the northern to the north, while loggerheads can be found throughout the Lower 48 and Mexico year-round. Some loggerheads also move north to breed and nest.

Loss of shrubby, woody, short grass edge habitat; pesticides; and the impact of vermin control are all contributors to the loggerhead shrike's decline across the continent. (The only natural predators of adult shrikes are raptors.)

If I were to happen on a shrike's nest, I'd leave it alone. I'd want to save my scalp from this stabby bird and not alert predators to the nest's location. Loggerheads make a great outcry when one disturbs the nest and will pop their bills in a manner that suggests grinding of teeth in rage. Such rage can be directed to other nest threats, among them brood parasites such as the brown-headed cowbird. I love birds that recognize the cowbird's tricky habit of laying its eggs in another bird's nest.

Curiously, otherwise bumptious loggerheads set aside differences among themselves before breeding season, says *Birds of North America*, in so-called group meetings. It's a kind of mixer or block party, where singles can meet and everyone gets to know the neighbors before setting up property lines. Maybe it keeps loggerheads from having to complain to the city council.

Courtesy of Bird Watcher's Digest and Christopher Cokinos