

# MACALESTER COLLEGE

SAINT PAUL, MINNESOTA 55105

■ DEPARTMENT OF BIOLOGY

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Subject: SHRIKES at ORDWAY.

Each winter we have some evidence of the presence of a Shrike at Ordway. Quite often we see him but not always; sometimes he makes his presence felt in a more ominous and insensible way. If a shrike is about there is usually an accompanying inactivity on the part of the smaller birds and it is this, the "un"-ness of the scene, the lack of movement of the Tree Sparrows and the sweet sound of their cheery, thin voices; the animation of the Black-capped Chickadee and his sassy dee-dee-deeing; it is as if this nothingness is a very real and heavy reality. It is nonetheless real and it is not unreasonable.

For the shrike is a carnivore - stealthy and aggressive and lethal. What he lacks in size and equipment he makes up for in his quiet cunning and his ferocity in pursuing his meat diet. Whenever he cannot obtain sufficient mice or shrews for his menu he supplements with small birds up to sparrow size. The British refer to this bird as "the butcher-bird" and it is reputed to store its excess provender by impaling small birds or mice on thorns or small twigs. The nearest I have come to observing this storage trait was finding the remnants of a Meadow Mouse on the spike of a barbed wire fence, appearing as if it might have been snatched away - perhaps by some competitor of the shrike's. Be that as it may, the shrike does make his presence felt among the smaller prey and while he is around the attendance at one's bird feeders decreases a great deal - approaching 100%.

As winter approaches it is the Northern Shrike (Lanius excubitor) which comes into our area from its arctic summer location. It is a beautiful bird in its markings and when one adds an awesome respect for its ferocious beak it makes a striking figure of a bird. It is mostly grey and has a white underside - many confuse it with the Gray (Canada) Jay; it is about the size of a Robin, i.e. slightly smaller than a Jay but it is chunkily-built. The stark black-and-white pattern of its wings is outstanding and causes some people to confuse this bird with a Mockingbird. (I suspect that some of the northerly sightings of Mockingbirds are indeed Northern Shrikes.) The wide black line which runs along the side of its head and through its eyes is almost diagnostic for shrikes. Its beak is a wonder to behold - notched and slightly curved it is an almost perfect instrument for tearing and that is just the way the shrike works on his prey, holding it in his rather unimpressive jay-like feet and rending the flesh from its bones by use of his potent beak.

The current winter season (1976-77) has given evidence of an "explosion" of this species at Ordway, more having entered our traps than in all other seasons combined. It is interesting to speculate as to the reason(s) for such departures from the "normal" but food is often a strong factor. In every case of capture of this species the captive has been in pursuit of a trapped, live bird, usually a Junco or Tree Sparrow.



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