



male Great Horned Owl caught for banding

Hardy Pletz

LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE TAKES HOUSE SPARROW

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approximately 10:00 a.m. on 15 October 1989, (my wife) Darlene, (son) Marshall, and I were sitting at the table usually watching the birds at our back-

yard feeder 11 km north of Winnipeg and between PTH #9 and the Red River. Of the 18 or 20 birds present, half, or more, were House Sparrows, largely immatures;

about six were immature Harris' Sparrows; the rest were Dark-eyed Juncos. The bird feeder, about 15 m from the window, is near a treed shelterbelt of hybrid poplar, willow and spruce. Our attention was heightened when the birds suddenly flushed from the feeder into the shelter of a spruce which was about 3 m away. This type of behaviour generally indicated the arrival of a larger bird or intruder. By leaning forward I was able to see the new arrival in a poplar about 10 m west of the feeder. I recognised it as a shrike, but from the distance I was not sure of the species, so I stepped into the next room for my binoculars.

I returned to the window just in time to see the shrike pounce on an immature male House Sparrow that had flushed from under a spruce. When hit by the shrike, the sparrow was in flight about 0.5 m above the ground. The shrike struck, talons first, in the forward body of the sparrow. The attack carried both birds to the ground with the shrike on top. It maintained balance with several wing thrusts while simultaneously striking with its bill at the head or neck of the sparrow. As the fluttering of the sparrow decreased, the shrike struck twice again with its bill at the same area, with sufficient force that blood and feathers adhered to its bill.

When the sparrow ceased struggling, the shrike picked it up in its bill and attempted to fly off. However, the weight seemed to give it considerable difficulty as it barely made it off the ground and only went a distance of about 2 m. The shrike then renewed its grip and managed by half flying and half dragging, to get about another 3 m and up into a low fork in a nearby willow. The view, now partially obscured by a spruce, caused me to move to a window in an adjacent room. As I reached the window, the shrike, now carrying the sparrow in its talons, flew by and disappeared past the corner of the house. Even though the prey had been transferred to its talons the shrike was

only flying about 1 m above the ground and was beating its wings much more rapidly than normal, obviously exerting considerable effort to carry the sparrow. By the time I was able to move to another window the bird could no longer be seen.

On checking the bird guide I identified the shrike as a Loggerhead.² Primary field marks that I observed were the relatively uniform black stripe across the base of the bill and through the eye, the dark crown and nape, the absence of barring on the sides, and the dark upper and lower mandibles.

Bent states that the Loggerhead Shrike's warm season diet consists largely of insect prey, while in winter the greater part consists of mice and small birds, mostly sparrows and warblers.¹ Salt and Wilk make essentially the same observations, noting that only when insect prey is unavailable does the Loggerhead take mice or small birds.³

The overall observation period from the time the shrike was first observed until seen departing with its prey was estimated to be approximately 5 minutes. This is the first sighting I have made of a shrike in this particular area although we have resided there for 15 years.

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¹ BENT, A.C. 1965. Life histories of North American wagtails, shrikes, vireos and their allies. Dover Publ., N.Y. 417 pp.

² ROBBINS, C.S., B. BRUNN and J. ZIMM. 1983. Birds of North America (Revised Edition) Western Publication Office, Racine. 360 pp.

³ SALT, W.R. and A.L. WILK. 1966. The birds of Alberta (Second Edition). Department of Industry & Development, Edmonton. 511 pp.