

Sighting Spells Hope for Critically Endangered Songbird

June 13, 2007

Guelph, ON – The sight of a male Eastern Loggerhead Shrike tending a nest on the Carden Plain, near the City of Kawartha Lakes, confirmed the success of a captive breeding and release program designed to boost the wild populations of this endangered songbird.

Spotted on May 29, the healthy bird is the third captive-bred shrike in as many years to migrate south, return to Ontario, and breed in the wild.

“I know of no other captive breeding and release program involving a migratory songbird that has seen this much success this quickly,” said Elaine Williams, Executive Director of **Wildlife Preservation Canada (WPC)**, a national registered charity based in Guelph that is spearheading the recovery of the Eastern Loggerhead Shrike in Ontario.

“There’s no question that the recovery efforts are beginning to pay off,” agreed Bird Studies Canada’s Jon McCracken. “These are truly encouraging results.”

Once comparatively common in Canada, Eastern Loggerhead Shrikes were well known for hunting mice and insects and impaling them on thorns and barbed wire. However, their numbers dropped steadily over the past half-century. In 1997, when only 18 pairs could be located, Environment Canada established a captive population.

The birds are raised in specially designed cages in their natural habitat. Sixty-two shrikes were released last year from a site on the Carden Alvar, while 49 were released from a site on the upper Bruce Peninsula.

“It’s so rewarding to see this bird come back,” said WPC’s Carden Biologist Janet Lapierre, who as an intern at Carden last year helped to raise the returned male. “We owe a huge thanks to the landowners who made it possible by providing space for cages and creating shrike habitat on their properties.”

Lapierre has confirmed a total of 10 wild pairs (including the released male) to date on the Carden Plain — an increase over the seven pairs found in 2006. Six more pairs have been confirmed in the Napanee Plain, and one near Pembroke.

Another captive-bred shrike has been spotted on the Bruce Peninsula this year, but it’s not clear whether it has found a mate.

This year, WPC biologists will put radio-transmitters on the captive-bred birds before releasing them. Their goal is to track how shrikes migrate and where they spend the winter — currently a mystery. “We suspect a key cause of the population decline involves their overwintering location,” Williams explains. “With landowners stewarding shrike habitat in

Ontario and now that we've proved the success of our captive breeding and release program, we need to pinpoint that cause."

In Ontario, the Eastern Loggerhead Shrike recovery program is a community-based partnership that includes landowners, stakeholders such as the cattle and aggregate industries, land trusts, naturalist groups, corporate supporters, foundations, Environment Canada's Species at Risk and Habitat Stewardship Programs, LCBO Natural Heritage Fund and French Rabbit Wines, McGill Avian Science and Conservation Centre, the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, the Canadian Cattlemen's Association, the Couchiching Conservancy, Bird Studies Canada, Canadian Association of Zoos and Aquariums, the Toronto Zoo and Wildlife Preservation Canada, all working to meet the recovery goal of establishing 500 pairs of shrike in the wild.

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