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Loggerhead Shrike Experimental Releases: 2000-03

In 1997-98, 43 nestling shrikes were taken into captive facilities at the Toronto Zoo and McGill University by the Eastern Loggerhead Shrike Recovery Team, with the primary and most urgent aim of preserving their genetic material. A secondary goal has been to develop a small-scale captive breeding program, in part to provide birds for experimental wild release in Ontario.

In 2000, two adult females that were the progeny of the original captive birds were released in the territories of single, unmated males. The first female simply flew off and was never seen again. The second female, however, was housed in a temporary aviary erected in the male's territory for a few days prior to release, to allow the birds a chance to establish a pair bond. This technique proved effective. When the female was released, she stuck around and the pair actually built a nest and laid eggs. Unfortunately, the nest was preyed upon before hatching. Still, this work was a small, but important first step towards developing "release technology."

In 2001, three mated pairs of captive-bred shrikes were encouraged to nest in field propagation cages in the Smiths Falls area of eastern Ontario. From these pairings, 10 young shrikes were produced. Once the young had become fully independent of their parents, they are released on site in the hopes that they will return in subsequent years to nest in Ontario. Meanwhile, the adults were returned to their captive facilities in Toronto and Montreal.

In 2002, the experiment was repeated with six pairs of captive-bred adults. The resulting pairing produced 21 young shrikes that were released into the wild on site. As before, the adults were returned to their captive locations at the conclusion of the nesting season.

More releases will continue in 2003 within the species' historic range in the Smith's Falls area and at a new site at Prince Edward National Wildlife Area near Picton. At least some of these planned releases will involve entire family groups – adults and young. Colour banding studies by Bird Studies Canada have demonstrated that adults are much more site-faithful to their nesting areas (i.e. more likely to return year after year) than young birds, which are more likely to disperse very widely.

Meanwhile, with fewer than 50 pairs of shrikes potentially remaining in eastern Canada, the Eastern Loggerhead Shrike recovery program has a clear primary focus on protecting and restoring shrike habitats. Before large-scale releases are ever undertaken, it will be necessary to ensure that there is sufficient high-quality breeding habitat remaining in Ontario, Quebec and southeastern Manitoba. Still, working towards developing the necessary propagation and release "technology" is an important and complimentary activity.

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Led by the Canadian Wildlife Service, the Eastern Loggerhead Shrike Recovery Team presently consists of federal and provincial government representatives from Ontario, Manitoba and Quebec, McGill University, Toronto Zoo, Bird Studies Canada, the Canadian Cattlemen's Association, and Wildlife Preservation Trust Canada, with strong support from a variety of consulting biologists. For more information about the shrike recovery program, check out a new web site that has just been launched at www.shrike.ca

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