

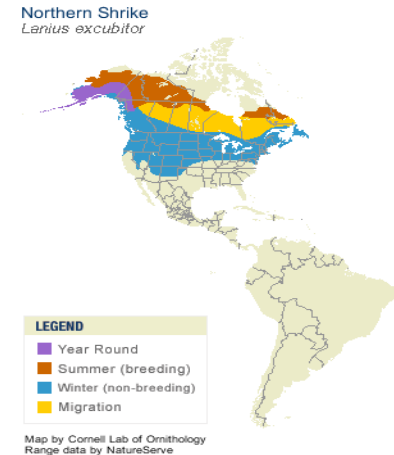
Northern Shrike
Lanius ludovicianus



No need to watch CSI Miami or Law and Order if you are into drama, intrigue or sudden fatal assaults. Believe it or not, all of the aforementioned can be witnessed here at the Fairview Farm bird feeding station. It sounds almost contrary to use the words ‘predatory’ and ‘songbird’ in the same sentence however, that is how one would describe the Northern Shrike, whose Latin name, *Lanius excubitor*, means “Butcher watchman.”

This wary and difficult-to-approach bird has a gray body with an eye-liner looking black mask and tail, with white outer feathers. The Northern Shrike has black feet and legs that stand out against its whitish throat and chest and gray back, and is similar to the smaller, all black billed and fuller black masked Loggerhead Shrike.

This Robin-size grayish visitor breeds in taiga (swampy coniferous northern forests, beginning where the tundra ends) and winters in southern Canada and the northern United States. The rarity and remoteness of its breeding habitat makes population trends difficult to assess. Nevertheless, there are large areas of suitable breeding habitat in Alaska and northern Canada that are protected, making tall perches, including shrubby fields and wetlands and forest edges a suitable habitat for wintering over.



What makes this a fascinating and unusual bird for this area is the falcon-like way it pursues, seizes and dispatches its food. You see, the shrike possesses a hooked beak with a sharp, tooth like projection near the tip. And like the falcon, it is a solitary, open country hunter who can be seen on conspicuous perches. When prey is sighted, it leaves its hunting perch in swift direct pursuit, seizing most prey (mice, small birds and large insects) on the ground. It kills vertebrate prey by pounding its bill into the base or back of the skull and using its hooked bill to sever the spinal cord, just like a falcon. The Northern Shrike, like other shrikes, displayed behavior characterized by early observers as “wanton killing” because it seemed to kill more prey than it could immediately eat. But that is not the case. Shrikes have been known to impale their prey on thorns, barbed wire, sharp twigs or wedge it into forked twigs for later consumption. Believe it or not, the size of a male’s larder is a direct reflection of his hunting prowess and the quality of his territory, and may very well influence his chances of attracting a mate. This storing method also helps the bird survive arduous winter weather, particularly long periods of

heavy snowfall. Both male and female birds sing throughout the year, but the male sings especially in late winter and early spring with a catbird like song of musical phrases.

So if the movies or your TV are offering more of the same old same old this winter -- or your CD player has eaten your favorite CD -- and you are in need of some fresh air and Mother Nature, come for a walk at Fairview Farm. We promise you that you will never see the exact same thing twice. And if you are very lucky, you just may have a front row seat at seeing nature at its most brutal -- as well as at its most beautiful, all for free. Just be sure to bring your own popcorn!