

Notes

Northern Shrike Preys on Pine Grosbeak

Barry Kinch

In early February 2006, I observed a Northern Shrike (*Lanius excubitor*) attack and kill a Pine Grosbeak (*Pinicola enucleator*) at our feeder in Kenabeek, northwest of New Liskeard, Timiskaming District, Ontario. After killing the grosbeak, the shrike did not appear able to fly away carrying the whole bird. It proceeded to pluck some of the grosbeak's feathers and remove the head, part of which it ate. Then, the shrike flew off carrying the grosbeak carcass. I watched this process for about 15 minutes. A few years ago, I observed another successful Northern Shrike attack on a Pine Grosbeak, but in that case the shrike flew away immediately, carrying the grosbeak, although with some difficulty.

Discussion

The Northern Shrike utilizes a "wide range of prey from small insects to mammals and birds its own size and larger" (Cade and Atkinson 2002). Especially in winter, it preys primarily on small birds and mammals. However, a long list of birds reported as winter prey by Cade and Atkinson (2002) included

such larger species as Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*), Blue Jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*), Gray Jay (*Perisoreus canadensis*), American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*), and Evening Grosbeak (*Coccothraustes vespertinus*).

These shrikes can carry prey in flight that is equal to or greater than their own body weight, which averages 64 g in winter (Cade and Atkinson 2002). Prey up to about 25 g are carried in the bill during flight, but larger prey are shifted from the bill to the feet as the shrike takes off and then carried tucked under the tail in raptor fashion (Cade and Atkinson 2002).

White (1963) reported a Northern Shrike killing a Pine Grosbeak in Alaska. The shrike attacked the grosbeak as it hovered picking at berries on a shrub, bit it in the head region, and knocked it to the ground. According to White, the shrike then picked up the grosbeak in its feet and flew to a tree about 23 m away. A Pine Grosbeak averages 56 g in weight (Sibley 2000), and although lighter than a Northern Shrike, it would likely be a heavy load to carry.

Acknowledgements

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Barry Kinch, R.R. 2, Kenabeek, Ontario P0J 1M0

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Kenneth F. Abraham: Distinguished Ornithologist

Jean Iron

This note is based on remarks by Jean Iron at the presentation of the Distinguished Ornithologist Award to Ken Abraham at the OFO Annual Convention in Ottawa on 30 September 2006.

It is a privilege to tell you about the accomplishments of Ken Abraham, the 2006 and ninth recipient of OFO's Distinguished Ornithologist

Award. Ken is a leading research scientist respected worldwide for his knowledge of waterfowl and shorebirds, particularly Canada Geese, Cackling Geese, Snow Geese, Ross's Geese, Brant, and Marbled Godwits. Ken's interest in birds started when he was a youngster growing up in rural southern Minnesota, an area rich in marshes, creeks and willow scrub. Wandering about on his own,



Figure 1: Ken Abraham (right) receives the Distinguished Ornithologist Award, presented by Jean Iron at the OFO Annual Convention in Ottawa on 30 September 2006. Photo by Ron Pittaway.

he was fascinated by nesting Yellow Warblers and chased by Red-winged Blackbirds, but he didn't know much about birds until someone gave him a Golden Guide and an old pair of army binoculars. He now had the tools needed to find birds and identify them. Ken's mother was from Saskatchewan, so every summer, the family went there on vacation and Ken was attracted to the prairie pot-holes full of waterfowl. Later, a ninth grade biology teacher influenced the course of his life by forming a nature and birding club. Travelling in the old school station wagon, the teacher and students regularly visited woods, prairies and marshes, including camping at Minnesota's Itasca Park at the headwaters of the Mississippi River, where they saw Great Blue Herons at rookeries and waterbirds. Finally, in second year premeds at Luther College in Iowa, Ken took an ecology and field biology course, and while studying spring waterfowl migration, realized he didn't want to be a doctor. The switch to bird ecology, a subject he was much happier pursuing, formed the basis of his formal training in ornithology and his future career.

Ken did his doctorate in 1980 at Queen's University in Kingston on the ecology and evolutionary biology of the Snow Goose in northern Manitoba. This led to a job as District Biologist at Moosonee with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR) where Ken was responsible for an immense area of the Hudson Bay Lowland

and northern coast. Ken lived in Moosonee with his wife Diana and children from 1982 to 1987. Their son, Eddy, was born on 11 April 1983 at the Moose Factory Hospital just when the geese started their return, and their daughter, Katherine, was born there as well on 11 June 1985 when the geese are hatching, and has forever had to bear her father's absence on her birthday. Currently, Ken is the Waterfowl and Wetlands Research Scientist with the OMNR at the main office in Peterborough. Every spring and summer, he returns to the Hudson Bay Lowland to continue long-term studies of waterfowl, shorebirds, wetlands, vegetation and climate change.

For 26 years, Ken has been active in the study and conservation of Ontario's waterbirds and wetlands. He has published over 60 papers in peer-reviewed journals such as the *Auk*, *Condor*, *Wilson Bulletin* and *Canadian Field-Naturalist*, plus over 15 articles in popular journals and 10 technical papers, for a total of over 85 publications.

Ken is a keen birder who has been an OFO member since 1989. He regularly provides information to OFO, and is a consultant to the editors of *Ontario Birds* and *OFO News*. He has written nine authoritative articles in OFO publications. His first was "Ross's Gull: New to Ontario" in the December 1984 issue of *Ontario Birds*, where he described finding Ontario's first Ross's Gull in May 1983 at

Moosonee. His most popular article, gaining international interest, was "Cackling Goose, NOT new to Ontario" in the February 2005 issue of *OFO News*. Ken spoke about "Ontario Geese" at the 1998 OFO Annual Convention in Burlington. Recognized as an authority on goose identification, he provides expert opinion on photographs and specimens, and answers internet queries on birding listservs.

Ken was very active in the first Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas from 1981 to 1985 as an atlaser, Coordinator of Moosonee Region 43, a reviewer of species accounts, and author of the Bufflehead species account. He supported and organized birders atlasling in northern Ontario. During the second Breeding Bird Atlas, 2001-2005, and ongoing, Ken participated on the Technical Committee, the Publication Committee and the Point Count Committee. He is writing several species accounts and is scientific editor of the waterfowl section. In his position at the OMNR, he facilitated atlas field work in remote northern Ontario, getting observers in by plane and helicopter, and arranging camps and accommodation. He was again Coordinator of Moosonee Region 43, sharing the duties this time with Don Sutherland.

Ken is the Ontario government's representative on committees overseeing the management and conservation of waterfowl and shorebirds. Currently he is on 16 provincial and

national committees, and eight international committees such as the Mississippi Flyway Council and Arctic Goose Joint Venture, international groups facilitating management and research of North American waterfowl, and the Marbled Godwit Continental Working Group. Ken's diverse interest in birds is reflected in his membership on the Ontario Shorebird Conservation Plan committee and participation in Ontario Landbird Conservation planning committees.

He is active in conservation and research organizations such as Bird Studies Canada (BSC), where he has been a director and member of the Executive Committee, Chair of the National Science Advisory Council, and Chair of Long Point Bird Observatory.

Ken belongs to nature and ornithological organizations and clubs including the American Ornithologists' Union, the Society of Canadian Ornithologists, the Waterbird Society, the Brodie Club in Toronto and the Brereton Field Naturalists Club in Barrie where he lives.

Ken is an associate faculty member at the University of Toronto and adjunct faculty member at Trent University and City University of New York, where many graduate and undergrad students have benefited from his mentorship and encouragement. After several years of gathering general information, he initiated a more intensive study of Marbled Godwits

on Akimiski Island in James Bay in 2006 because so little is known about this breeding population.

Every spring and summer Ken returns to Polar Bear Provincial Park, the Hudson Bay Lowland and Akimiski Island to conduct fieldwork on Canada Geese, Snow Geese, waterfowl, shorebirds, climate change and vegetation. Around camp and at the staff house in Moosonee, he demonstrates by example, working long hours in the field, entering data late into the evening, and completing his share of chores. When Ken is in camp,

there is always an atmosphere of work and fun. With a glint in his eye, he tells a story-a-day about close encounters with Polar Bears in the field and around the camp.

Ken Abraham is a worthy recipient of OFO's 2006 Distinguished Ornithologist Award for his outstanding and authoritative contributions to the scientific study of birds in Ontario and Canada, for being a resource to OFO and the Ontario birding community, and for his research, which has resulted in many publications and significant increase in new knowledge of birds.

Representative Publications

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Jean Iron, 9 Lichen Place, Toronto, Ontario M3A 1X3

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