

FIELD NOTES FROM HERE AND THERE

Swan Song. In the two most recent field guides (NGS and Knopf) vocalizations of Mute Swan are described as: "variety of hisses and snorts" and "variety of low snorts, grunts, and hisses." On February 21, 1985, while taking my daily walk at the Arthur D. Little plant in Cambridge, I saw two of these birds apparently courting. The presumed male - because of its thicker neck and aggressiveness - repeatedly sounded a brief (quarter-second), pretty "krutt" with the "r" pronounced as in Spanish. The bird usually uttered this phrase after lifting its head from the water in which the pair was feeding. This vocalization was soft and low but with a rather sharp quality. It was unique to me; I cannot think of an analog.

Leif J. Robinson, Wellesley

Sound of the Mute and One Other Seldom Heard - Northern Shrike.

At Rantoul Pond in Ipswich, I paused one morning in March 1985 to check out the waterfowl. The usual pair of Mute Swans was at the front of the pond, where they have nested for years. Whether because of my presence or for other reasons, the cob swam toward me and began issuing a series of loud grunts, each preceded by a much higher-pitched whistle. The two sounds were contiguous, and the pattern was repeated several times at ten-second intervals or so. Then, to my surprise, the pen (female) began grunting; only in her case the whistle followed the grunt. The cob, apparently standing corrected, then changed his tune and put his whistle after the grunt. After a minute or two of tandem grunting, both swans ceased making noises.

At no time during the vocalizations did the two swans appear to be courting. In fact, they were some distance apart, the cob approaching me in the threat posture (wings arched above the back) while the pen stayed where she was. I can only surmise from the swans' behavior that the grunts were related to the defense of their territory - they were awesome sounds, but I can find nothing in the literature to back this up. The field guides do mention grunting, snorting, and hissing sounds but do not link them with behavior, and some of the life histories, such as Bent and Forbush, were written before the North American advent of the species. Readers having knowledge of or experience with "Mute" Swan vocalizations are invited to comment.

Several years ago, in late October, I heard a shrike singing from a tree top in the dunes at Crane Beach in Ipswich. Having no telescope and unable to get close enough to the bird to confidently identify it with binoculars, I noted the variety of calls, whistles, grunts, squeaks, and warbles and headed home to look it up.

What I learned from that episode was that if you ever hear a shrike making noise, don't leave until you have identified it visually, because you will never find a field guide, or any other book, that will enable you to identify it by sound. The guides variously describe shrike vocalizations in terms of "harsh tones," "musical notes," "shek-shek" calls, whistles, screams, squeaks, mews, trills, warbles, and infinite combinations of these. The songs are frequently compared to those of robins, catbirds, and Brown Thrashers.

Unfortunately, the differences in vocalizations between the Northern Shrike (Lanius excubitor) and the Loggerhead Shrike (Lanius ludovicianus) are nowhere clearly described, and, in all probability, are not very great. My favorite comment is in Richard Pough's Audubon Land Bird Guide (1949) where he states (for Loggerhead): "Calls and notes are similar to the northern's. No one seems to be familiar enough with both species to describe the differences" (p. 135).

As if that weren't frustrating enough, neither Peterson phonograph record (Eastern or Western) includes Northern Shrike, and the only Loggerhead "songs" on either one are two-note whistles. The 1983 National Geographic Society's set of recordings, Guide to Bird Sounds, keyed to their new field guide, leaves out many of the common songs in order to concentrate on "the sounds that are most helpful in finding and identifying elusive or confusing species" but then omits the shrikes entirely! Never let it be said that the new field guides and records are a panacea.

Having said all the above, I am not now in a position to tell you all you need to know about shrike vocalizations. I can tell you what one Northern Shrike said to me on one given day. And so far it is the only time I have with certainty heard a Northern Shrike speak.

On March 24, 1985, Ann Blaisdell, Ida Giriunas, and I observed a Northern Shrike on the back side of Crane Beach. The bird was brought to my attention by Mike DeRosa, the tern warden at the Crane Reservation, who had been banding near the boat-launching area. He had told me the day before that the shrike had killed a Song Sparrow that was caught in the mist net. When we arrived the morning of the twenty-fourth, we soon saw the shrike, and Mike, who was banding again, discovered that it had just killed another song sparrow. (In both cases the sparrow's neck was broken; the second victim had been hit so hard that the back of the skull was entirely devoid of feathers.) Soon afterward the shrike perched on an elevated branch and began . . . well, singing. We did not hear the entire gamut of noises, but there was a variety of one-, two-, and four-note calls and whistles. The four-note calls were raspy, whereas the shorter ones were somewhat more melodic. The different sounds were repeated in sequence to some extent without long pauses; for this reason the variety and the rather constant noise did remind one of a catbird, though the patterns were simpler. The bird sang for a couple of minutes, then flew off.

So there it is: a lot of background, a few sentences on the sounds. And that's about the way it is in the field! In twenty years I have heard two shrikes sound off. I don't recall having heard any Loggerheads in the south though I have seen many. I will consider myself very lucky if I hear another shrike within five years. No wonder no one is familiar enough with the songs of both species to tell the difference.

A final note about shrikes. Bent, in the account of the Northern Shrike in his Life Histories of North American Wagtails, Shrikes, Vireos, and Their Allies (1950), gives two instances of singing birds that proved, upon collection, to be females (p. 124). I take heart from this, because it doubles one's chances of hearing a shrike sing - although double zero is still zero, you might be thinking. In any event, I think it is safe to say that shrikes of any description are seldom heard vocalizing in

Massachusetts. Thus it behooves all of us to submit notes to this journal on such happy occurrences, as Ted Davis did in his article on long-term bird population studies [*Bird Observer*, 7 (December 1979): 223]. (Tedeven got to see a Northern Shrike cough up a pellet, which must be a still rarer event.) With the dearth of good information on shrike noises, every little bit helps.

Jim Berry, Ipswich

More Drinking. I would like to add a note to the observations of Mr. Komar in the February issue. Cardinals are not the only species to drink water droplets from trees; many birds including Blue Jays, juncos, and titmice have been observed to do this. On my Most Impressive List is a large flock of decorative Cedar Waxwings sipping at an ice-covered tree in early March. Even during drier weather, some birds, especially chickadees, are very fond of the sap dripping from a backyard maple - fluttering, hummingbird-style, to sip at a maple-flavored icicle. Next year, I may be tossing out pancakes!

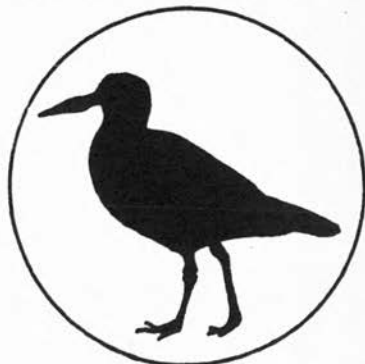
Dorothy L. Case, Needham

Aerial Combat. Who would think that a crow could compete effectively in the air - one on one - with a Sharpie! Eliot Taylor and I would now say it could, after watching a minute-long aerial battle on February 10, 1985. Over houses along Cape Ann's coast, the Sharpie stooped on the crow - and zinged right on by. Then the crow folded its wings and dropped toward the hawk, falling past it. Then the roles of "who's on top" were reversed, and the whole ballet began again. These sorties seemed very deliberate and fierce during the four or so altercations we watched.

Leif J. Robinson, Wellesley

MONOMOY ISLAND TOURS

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