



Media Release

Farmers Enhancing Habitat for Loggerhead Shrike

September 2, 2010
For immediate release

Prepared by Nancy Tilt for the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association

“Save the farmer, save the bird,” says Ralph Armstrong when talking of his involvement with the Eastern Loggerhead Shrike Recovery Program. The Loggerhead Shrike is listed as a species at risk under Ontario's Endangered Species Act (2007).

Loggerhead Shrike are a grey and black robin-sized bird, the only predatory song bird whose diet includes small birds and rodents, in addition to grasshoppers and other large insects. Loggerhead Shrike depend on short grassland habitat that exists on shallow soil covering limestone plains, where thin vegetation allows easy foraging for prey. These grasslands also offer pasture for grazing cattle, and grazing is one of the main means of keeping such areas open for good shrike habitat.

Armstrong, Don Yeomans and George Druery are all farmers who have participated in the Recovery Program for Loggerhead Shrike since the early 1990's.

Limestone plains exist in five areas within Ontario. Armstrong and Yeomans farm near Newburgh on the Napanee Plain in eastern Ontario. Druery farms on the Carden Plain near Kirkfield north of Lindsay. Limestone plains are also prevalent on Manitoulin Island, the Bruce Peninsula and in the vicinity of Smiths Falls.

Yeomans and Armstrong are retired dairy farmers. Yeomans has continued farming as a cash cropper and manager of a beef herd. Armstrong has a cow-calf beef operation. With recent difficulties in the cattle industry and fewer small herds of cattle on pasture, much of the short grassland habitat is reverting to shrubland.

Recovery efforts for shrike have focussed on keeping cattle on pasture in the limestone plains, wherever possible. Stewardship activities, facilitated by various cost-share funding initiatives, have included removal of invading woody vegetation, fencing to facilitate cattle grazing and installation of alternate water sources.

Yeomans had leased land across the road from his farm for pasturing his dairy cattle. When the land was sold to Nature Conservancy Canada and developed as a nature reserve, he continued leasing it and now manages 25 beef cattle on the 120-acre property for another farmer. With funding accessed through Wildlife Preservation Canada (WPC), Red Cedar that had begun to invade the property were thinned and piled to open the grassland. A solar-powered water source for cattle was also installed.

Yeomans has found it a win-win situation. “I like having something unique happening on property that I'm working. Volunteer assistance through local naturalist groups with the thinning activities has gone a long way in making improvements that benefit both shrike and pasturing cattle. We need more of that kind of cooperation.”

After leaving dairy farming, Armstrong also continued pasturing his land with beef cattle, managing an Angus-Charolais cow-calf operation, with 60 cows on 600 acres. “Loggerhead Shrike were frequent visitors on our family’s farm as I was growing up. They’ve been absent from our land for a while now, but they do nest on land next to us.” Armstrong hopes that by maintaining short grassland habitat on his property, the possibility exists for their return to land historically used. Red Cedar is also invasive on Armstrong’s property, so stewardship activities have included thinning and piling there as well.

On the Carden Plain there are more stakeholders—quarry operations, real estate interests, naturalists...as well as farmers. There was local concern that the presence of a species at risk, such as Loggerhead Shrike, would impact property rights of landowners and what they would be able to do on their properties.

This concern resulted in development of the Integrated Carden Conservation Strategy involving various local interest groups. John Kinghorn, a cattle rancher representing agricultural interests, notes, “The ultimate outcome was that the various groups found they had more in common than different and that more could be accomplished by working together than apart.”

George Druery owns 300 acres, and leases 1000 on the Carden Plain. He has a cow-calf operation with 85 cows and maintains 900 acres of pasture land. It was on land he leases that Loggerhead Shrike were first found at the start of the recovery effort. WPC's monitoring programs have recorded shrike nesting there every year since.

Loggerhead Shrike impale their prey on thorny shrubs such as hawthorn. However, hawthorn is an invasive species on the Carden Plain. In 2008 with stewardship funding received from several partners through Couchiching Conservancy, Druery thinned hawthorn on 6 hectares of his own land to improve shrike habitat adjacent to the historic site. He bulldozed selected hawthorn, then frost-seeded bare ground with a mixture of orchard grass, trefoil, red clover and oats as a nurse crop. Once established, cattle were turned in to graze. Druery hopes to participate in future projects involving more hawthorn thinning as well as fencing.

Nine wild breeding pairs of Loggerhead Shrike were observed on the Napanee Plain according to 2009 WPC surveys. On the Carden Plain the tally was 18 breeding pairs. This is the largest the population has been in the last seven years, and perhaps more importantly represents an increasing trend over the last four years.

Stewardship funding has been an essential incentive to accomplishing much of the habitat improvement. “It’s hard to justify the time and expense for work that doesn’t show a reasonable return on economic investment in the short term,” says Yeomans. Druery adds, “The financial incentive helped folks see the shrike as more of a benefit than a liability. The green movement can work in your favour. A unique or rare species is an asset to your property. The Loggerhead Shrike is a good example of a win-win situation.” And as Kinghorn puts it, “There is mutual benefit in maintaining short grassland habitats for both the cattle industry and a species at risk.”

The Species At Risk Farm Incentive Program (SARFIP) 2010-2011 is a new cost-share program funded through the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Government of Canada. The program reimburses farmers for up to 50% of eligible costs to establish BMPs including Upland and Riparian Habitat Management, Erosion Control Structures in Riparian Zones, Shelterbelt and Native Vegetation Establishment, and Resource Planning. To qualify for funding, eligible Ontario farm businesses require a peer-reviewed Third Edition Environmental Farm Plan.

The program is delivered locally through Program Representatives from the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association. Guidance and technical advice for SARFIP projects may also be obtained through watershed specialists at Conservation Authorities, or the local Stewardship Coordinator with Ontario Stewardship.