

SOME BIRD CHARACTERISTICS

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THE SHRIKE

This bird is variously known as the Butcher Bird, English Jay, Mouse Hawk, Winter Butcher and Summer Butcher.

It is one of the strangest of all our birds. Naturalists were long undecided where to place it, whether as an accipitrine or a Pica. That is, was he a hawk or a crow? He had the characteristics of both and lacked some of the essential features of both. For instance, he had all the courage, the fierceness and boldness of the hawks, but he had the feet of the magpie and the jay.

The upper mandible was notched and hooked like the hawks, but he had no grasping talons. He was a blood-thirsty killer like the hawks, but like the crows, jays and magpies, who secrete their food, he impales his prey on a thorn, barbed-wire fence, or hangs it by the head in a crotch or fork of a tree.

Then again he looks much like the southern mockingbird, builds a nest like one and in the same localities. Also he is an imitator; uses the notes of other birds as the mockingbird does, but does this to lure birds to his vicinity, that he may catch and kill them. So where did he belong?

Some ornithologists of the old world still insists that as he is a bird of prey, he should be classed with the raptores or hawks and owls. Then there was another trouble, he also looked much like the kingbirds and other flycatchers and like the king-

bird he would fight bravely and put to flight the biggest eagle, hawk or crow that came within his territory or menaced his baby birds that he was conducting about the fences and hedges, and so the merry war went on.

Finally it was decided that he did not properly belong any of these families and it was decided to give him a place to himself, the Larridae and a cousinship to the Vireos and Waxwings and there he will stay.

There are seven species of this bird in North America, over 100 in the world, two only to be found in Illinois and central states; these are the Winter or Northern Shrike and the Summer or Migrant Shrike.

These two species look very much alike except that the winter one is a little larger and with less black on back and wings. They are about as large as the Robin Redbreast. They are never very numerous, but in a winter drive of eight or ten miles, I often see one perched on a telephone wire facing the north and apparently oblivious of the coldest weather.

They sometimes come into the towns in pursuit of the House-sparrow, which, when they capture, they scalp, tear the skull open, feed on the brains and then hang the body up on a thorn or by the head in the forks of a limb.

If their killing propensities were confined to this sparrow alone, we might wish their shadows would never grow less. It has been thought the impaling process of birds, mice, grasshoppers, etc., is done for the purpose of afterwards coming back for another feast, but repeated observations have never shown them doing this. It is a cruel, strange trait that is inexplicable.

The shrike is an early nester, often in early March. The winter variety leaves early for the far north, and its place is taken by the summer species which nests with us. No attempt is made for concealment. A lone osage, orange or crab-apple tree by the side of the road where every passerby can see it, is a favorite location.

The nest on the outside is a rough looking affair, composed of many sticks and thorns, but lined with fine grasses and the

softiest downiest feathers that can be found. Eggs almost invariably six, grayish white and spotted with various shades of brown.

Later in the season, when the young have left the nest, it is a most interesting sight to see the parent birds with the six little chuckle-headed young ones lined up on a barbed-wire fence teaching them to catch grasshoppers. They are quite fearless when nesting, and I have had my hand severely pinched by the mother bird for daring to put it in her nest.

One winter time while driving along the road over in the Spoon-river country, a young farmer who was getting out his shock corn, called to me to "come over and see this mouse-hawk catch mice." I needed no second invitation, and going over watched the proceedings. The farmer would tear down a shock and a mouse would scamper from it across the snow to take refuge in another shock. The shrike that was perched in the top of a small tree, a full hundred yards away, would come as straight as a bullet, catch the mouse, beat it on the hard snow, toss it up in the air, catch it in a new place and hammer it some more, and then fly away with it across the river which was near by.

In a few minutes it would be back again, ready to repeat the performance. After seeing it kill two or three mice, I determined to take a hand, and when the next mouse raced across the snow, I gave chase to it, but the shrike was right on hand and not to be daunted by my presence. It was nip and tuck between the two of us, which would get the mouse but tuck won, flying right between my feet, catching up the rodent and after the pounding process, flew with it across the river where it had carried the others.

I now resolved as the stream was well frozen over, to cross and see what was being done with all these mice. A little way back from the bank, in the thick woods, I found a honey-locust tree with more than a dozen mice impaled on its sharp thorns. All seemed to be intact and the thorn in nearly all seemed to be through the throat.

It will sometimes make a dash at a caged bird hung in a window and lose its life.

A bold, fearless, cruel, rapacious bird, but on account of the great number of mice, grasshoppers, beetles, etc., which it destroys, believed to do much more good than harm and should not be wantonly destroyed.

THE PROTHONOTARY WARBLER.

This beautiful little bird is often called the Golden Swamp Warbler. Its mission seems to be to add a bit of cheer and color to the dark swamps and desolate places of the rivers and lakes. It is a deep orange-yellow except the wings and tail, which are a slaty blue. The female is not so intensely colored. The notes are a clear ringing tweet, weet, weet, out of all proportion to the size of the bird.

They will not be found in the parks or towns or wooded hills. They frequent no localities except rivers and lakes and swamps of willows and buttonwoods and borders of pools, only rarely do they nest over the water of a running stream. They associate with the tree swallows, grackles and red-wing blackbirds nesting in the same localities. Sometimes a grackle or a Jennie Wren will be found in the same tree, the Grackles occupying an open cavity higher up, while the warbler will choose one down nearer the water.

The male is extremely jealous of intrusion by others of his own tribe, upon his immediate premises he will scrap valorously if one of them comes near his chosen domicile, though he does not seem to object to the presence of other birds.

The Thompson Lake country on the Illinois river is headquarters for these strange warblers, strange because they stand almost alone in their habit of nesting in the holes of old stumps, snags and dead trees, almost always just a few feet above the water which sometimes rises and destroys their nests. They are queer too, because of the material used in constructing their nests, which, when it can be obtained is made almost exclusively from green moss that grows around the base of willow trees standing in the water or mud. If a high stage of water covers up this material, they will use instead, fine blades of grasses. However when the moss can be found, nothing else is used.

The cavity selected is most times one made by the downy woodpecker or chickadee, but sometimes cavities in live trees are used, mortices and knot holes in bridge piling and railroad trestles are used. The highest nest I have ever observed in many years observation, was one about twelve feet up in a little pecan tree, but rarely are they over six feet above water. The hole selected in the tree is packed full of the moss to within five or six inches of the opening, and then a cup-like depression is hollowed out to hold the eggs. The usual set of eggs is six, though sometimes only five. In my time I have seen three nests containing seven eggs.

The eggs are the most beautiful of all the bird families, almost round, smooth and glassy, creamy white, thickly spotted all over with reddish brown spots. They are hardly colony nesters as are the red-winged blackbirds and some others, but are restricted in their habitat and around Thompson, Mud-Grass, and the other lakes of this region, a pair will be found nesting every hundred yards or so if suitable conditions can be found.

On account of their frequenting old willows, dead snags, thunder-brush, etc., they are peculiarly the prey of the bird loving snakes, such as the Bull, King, Black Racer and Ring snakes, all of whom love a dinner of bird eggs or young birds.

The writer has often while pushing his boat around under the low growing willows and old snags and rapping on their hollow trunks had these reptiles come rushing out of a hole, fall into the boat and go scampering over feet and legs into the water. An investigation would usually result in finding a Prothonotaries nest with contents destroyed except sometimes a lone egg or young bird. Occasionally they do not vacate so readily, especially the bull snake, who will hang stubbornly to his possession and fight to the last, or till the stub is torn to pieces when he will reluctantly take to the water.

North of the latitude of Chicago these beautiful warblers become scarce, though to the south they breed sparingly clear to the gulf and winter in Central America.

Their food habits are entirely insectivorous and worm eating, and doing no harm but much good.