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Endangered bird made a mysterious comeback this year

Scientists are still learning why they counted record numbers of Eastern loggerhead shrike

LG

By **Leah Gerber** Record Reporter
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GUELPH — This year the Eastern loggerhead shrike, a critically endangered Ontario bird, made a comeback.

Scientists with Wildlife Preservation Canada counted almost 80 wild juveniles, says Hazel Wheeler, lead biologist with the Eastern loggerhead shrike recovery program with Wildlife Preservation Canada.

“It was almost 10 years ago since we’ve seen numbers like these,” she said. “Usually it’s more like 30 to 50.”

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This comes as a relief since last year, due to issues from the pandemic, staff were only able to release seven birds. Typically, the team aims to release 100 each season.

Issues included having to keep only one staff member at each of the field locations, they were unable to breed any birds at partner facilities located in the United States, and the facilities they did have access to, including the Toronto Zoo or the African Lion Safari, rely heavily on attendance for their budgets.

“Everyone was feeling the pinch last year,” Wheeler said.

This year the program was able to run a little bit closer to normal capacity. The team produced about 60 fledglings and was able to release 40 of them.

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The Eastern loggerhead shrike is a unique bird. A little smaller than a robin, this predatory songbird hunts small rodents and insects by scanning the landscape. Once it has its prey, it impales the prey on a thorn or something sharp before ripping it apart.

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Since Wildlife Preservation Canada began this program in the early 2000s, at least 1,300 birds have successfully been released.

The Eastern loggerhead shrike was once prevalent across Canada from Manitoba to New Brunswick. Now it can only be found reliably in two locations in Ontario: Napanee and the Carden Plain.

Wheeler said the program is helping to augment the wild population of birds, which is holding more or less steady at about 25 breeding pairs, or a precarious 50 to 60 birds, left in the country.

She said that some years they've seen that up to 40 per cent of the wild-born juveniles had at least one captive-bred parent. Some years up to 30 per cent of the birds observed in the wild are from the captive breeding program.

The team isn't sure why this year there were so many wild-born juveniles. Wheeler thinks it could be weather-related.

Wildlife Preservation Canada, headquartered in Guelph, runs a conservation breeding program with various partners in Ontario and in U.S. to breed the birds in captivity, and then release them.

With the advances in technology, and using radio tags, the program's scientists track where the birds go when they migrate, to a point.

They have seen the birds go to Virginia, and they seem to have a migratory path through Pennsylvania. One of the Ontario captive-bred

birds was found in North Carolina, Wheeler said, the furthest south they've ever seen their birds.

The team is also working to create a species conservation plan to address the various threats to the bird's survival, more holistically.

This means gathering not only scientists and conservation workers, but landowners, farmers, aggregate operations, renewable energy developers and any other group that might be impacted by measures to ensure the survival of the Eastern loggerhead shrike.

Everyone needs to be at the table to work together, ensure there is broad participation, and implement a plan, Wheeler said.

This work has been impacted by the pandemic, but the group has managed to work remotely and host information sessions over Zoom.

The group is also working to identify the biggest threats to the birds.

Improving the ability of young birds to survive the winter might be the best way to increase Ontario's wild population, Wheeler said. Habitat conservation is always a major issue as well.

Eastern loggerhead shrikes rely on very specific habitat to survive. They need open space with short grass, the right kind and amount of cover, as well as sharp or thorny objects, such as branches, to be able to impale their prey.

Wheeler said they are making headway toward creating a conservation plan that includes many of the important stakeholders to work together to save this bird.

LG

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