

## Landowners with Shrike Cash in on Payment Program

By Ron Reid

Last summer, careful monitoring of Loggerhead Shrikes on the Carden Alvar documented a total of 13 nests. Whether that number is good news or bad depends largely on your point of view. For biologists working to save this endangered species, the good news is that at least a few birds continue to breed in the wild. The bad news is that Carden has the largest remaining group of nest sites in the province, with no signs of any increase in numbers.

Like all birds, Loggerhead Shrikes make their own choices about where to nest. We know that they need live hawthorns, so they can protect their eggs and young from crows and other predators in the thorny thickness of the centre of these small trees. Shrike also make use of the thorns to skewer the grasshoppers, beetles, and small rodents that make up their prey. We know too that Shrike like short grass to hunt for their food, so the rocky pastures of Carden are ideal habitat.

Beyond that, it's up to the birds to choose their perfect nest site for the summer. Last year, three pairs selected sites on the conservation lands in Cameron Ranch and Windmill Ranch, where cattle grazing is being continued to help maintain their habitat. Four pairs chose lands owned by quarry companies, even though one company is attempting to discourage Shrikes by ending cattle grazing and letting the grass grow long. The remaining six nests were located on private lands with active cattle ranching.

For the first time in 2011, those private landowners could benefit from a pilot program being delivered by Couchiching Conservancy, with funding provided by the Gosling Foundation. This program recognizes that providing critical habitat for an endangered species creates benefits for the overall public good by helping that species survive, but does not bring any direct benefit to the landowner. In fact, for many landowners it creates concerns instead, as they worry about how endangered species regulations may affect their freedom to use their land and eventually to sell it for other uses.

To balance the scales at least in part, the Conservancy offered landowners around Shrike nests an annual payment of \$20 per acre. Since the birds are known to forage within about 400 metres of their nest site, any Shrike habitat within that distance could qualify for payment, even if the nest was located on a neighbour's property. Among the 13 landowners who qualified, five chose to participate in the program, with payments totalling \$3500 split among these owners.

So with payments averaging \$700, why would the other landowners decide not to be part of the program? Sometimes the reason appears to be a fear that accepting payment will somehow lock them into future government regulations; sometimes it may just be natural caution about something new.

The program does ask landowners to promise to keep their land in active grazing for the following year, to leave the nest site undisturbed during breeding season, and to allow access for biologists to monitor nests and band young birds if possible. We don't think those conditions are especially difficult, but we certainly respect the rights of individual landowners to decide as they wish.

The landowner payment program is a three-year trial, which we hope will become permanent after that trial period. In 2012, we are looking at the possibility of expanding it to other sites where Shrikes have nested anytime in the past five years, to recognize that the birds do tend to move around among nesting sites from year to year. In any case, the key factor in deciding whether to continue is landowner acceptance. If most landowners decide not to participate in the pilot program, chances are good that we will allocate our limited funds towards other conservation projects.

Landowner payment programs for ecological benefits are becoming increasingly common around the world, in places as different as rural England and the rainforests of Latin America. But for the most part, those programs are still in the experimental stage, and we are all learning as we go about their effectiveness. For Shrike habitats on the Carden Alvar, our program is very much an experiment, and we hope that a little fine-tuning in future years will help it grow.