

Feral February Episode 14 – The killing shrike

Description

Throughout the month of February, which I am calling “Feral February,” I am going to do something a little bit different – I’m going to create a series of theme posts every week day about my favourite things in the world: Animals.

Today’s animal is the shrike.

I have had many discussions over the years about which animals I like better than others, and while I like them all, everyone has their favourites – even me. And as fascinating as birds are, they aren’t my favourites, except for condors, vultures and other birds of prey (like eagles, falcons, etc.). But then I found out about shrikes.

Shrikes are small-to medium-sized birds (averaging 12 inches or 30cm in length) that don’t look like anything beyond your normal perching bird, like finches, warblers and the like. But they have a catch, and their hooked bill gives the first hint, with its toothlike point at the end of the upper part. They also possess strong legs and incredibly sharp claws, which mean they are predators.

Shrikes hunt insects, small lizards, birds and rodents like any other predators, but it is what they do afterwards that is so extraordinary. If the prey is too big to eat in one bite, several shrike species will transport the prey to a larder (a place to store food) made up of thorns or barbed wire, which they will then use to impale their prey. This allows the bird to secure the prey and rip it into manageable pieces, giving rise to the nickname “butcher bird” that all shrikes have.



A great grey shrike with an impaled mouse. Photo courtesy of Marek Szczepanek. [Source](#).

Most shrikes live in Europe, Africa and Asia, with two species occurring in North America – the great grey and loggerhead shrikes – and during courtship; the male will perform a mating dance, which includes mimicking skewering prey on thorns.

Daily dose of trivia:

Some shrikes, like the great grey shrike, impale insects that have noxious chemicals inside. Eating such an insect or animal would make the bird sick and leave it open to predation itself, or even death. However, the shrike leaves the prey impaled for a few days, allowing the chemicals inside the dead animal to degrade enough that the meat becomes safe to eat. The great grey shrike has even been observed attacking poisonous toads and skinning them in order to protect the meat from becoming contaminated by the toxic skin secretions.

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