

The Widespread Invasion of Northern Shrikes (*Lanius excubitor*)

in Illinois in winter 1999/2000 with comments
on the species' non-breeding season demographics

by Steven D. Bailey

Northern Shrikes (*Lanius excubitor*) have been little studied over much of their circumboreal range, especially for the North American population (Davis 1937, Davis & Morrison 1988, Atkinson & Cade 1993). This fact is especially true of wintering birds in North America. Therefore, any findings on this species, even if anecdotal, are valuable additions to the natural history of Illinois' avifauna.

The incursion of Northern Shrikes in Illinois the winter 1999/2000 season may well have been one of the largest, if not the largest, in the state's history. Bohlen (1989) mentions no particularly large irruptions, but see Chapel (1999) and Graber et al. (1973). Based on the number of birds reported, the incursion is larger than any previous ones, including what was the largest documented invasion before this writing, in the winter of 1995/1996 (Danley 1996).

Even more noteworthy, however, is the extent to which the species penetrated the state. Observers reported at least 24 separate central Illinois records, and even one for southern Illinois in Madison County. If accepted by the Illinois Ornithological Records Committee, the Madison County record will be the south-



Immature Northern Shrike in a Downers Grove (DuPage County) backyard. 31 January 2000. Photo by Karen Fisher.

ernmost documented Northern Shrike for the state. Interestingly, an observer also reported a Northern Shrike for nearby St. Charles County, Missouri, (approximately 20 miles from the Madison County bird) from at least 12 December 1999 through 3 January 2000, an exceptional record (see Robbins and Easterla 1992). The Northern Shrike is considered hypothetical in the St. Louis, Missouri region. It is seldom observed as far

south as St. Louis, and the last report of the species for this region was on 19 February 1950 in St. Charles County (Webster Groves Nature Study Society 1998). However Mengel's (1965) reference to this species as "casual" for Kentucky, and specimen evidence for Tennessee (see Robinson 1990) suggest that birders in southern Illinois should not assume that every shrike is a Loggerhead.

The widespread nature of the 1999/2000 Northern Shrike invasion was also evident in other parts of the country. "The winter of 1999/2000 was one of the largest and most wide spread (invasions of Northern Shrike) on record," said

Matt Young, bird population studies researcher for the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. "We broke a record, seeing 9 just on the Ithaca Christmas Bird Count alone," he said. Researchers for the Lab's Birdsource program, utilizing volunteer reporters across the U.S., showed large numbers moving into the Northwest, Midwest, and even the extreme southwestern part of the species' range in central and southern New Mexico during November and December. Unfortunately no data were available for January and February when more southerly penetrations may have been noticed.