

The Northern Shrike in Illinois:

Changing Status and Distribution of this Northern Visitor

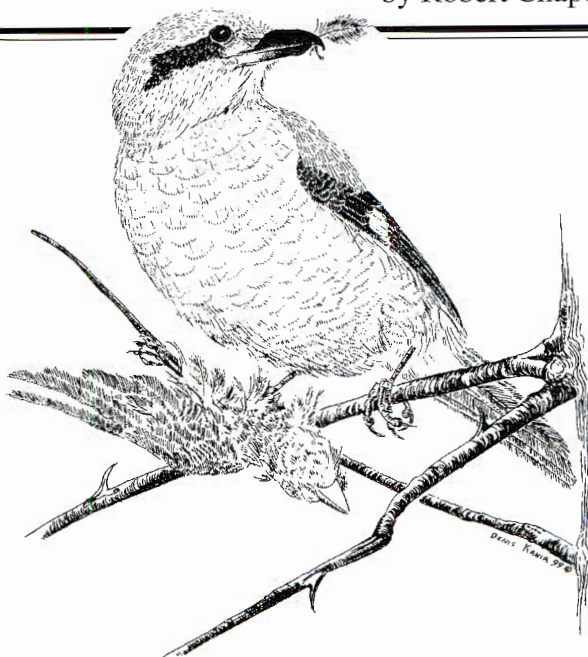
by Robert Chapel

On 6 January 1982, during a brief mild spell in one of Illinois' most severe winters, I ventured to Homer Lake in Champaign County. Driving down the road on the west side of the forest preserve, I spotted a shrike in a tree near the road. Never having seen a shrike in Champaign County in winter, I stopped suddenly, thereby becoming stuck in a mix of slush and mud, but having an excellent view of the shrike. I realized that this was not a Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*), but what I thought then was a much rarer Northern Shrike (*Lanius excubitor*), there having been only five previous central Illinois records at that time. While this was my first Northern Shrike in Illinois, little did I realize that I would eventually see two other Northern Shrikes in this very same spot in subsequent years.

The Northern Shrike has long been a highly sought-after species for most Illinois birders, because of its relative rarity as well as its striking appearance. It has traditionally been regarded as a very uncommon but regularly occurring species winter in northern Illinois, but very rare in central Illinois and accidentally in southern Illinois. For most Illinois birders, to see the Northern Shrike meant a winter birding expedition to the species' preferred fields with mixed shrubs and small trees in state's northern reaches. However, this may no longer be the case.

H. David Bohlen lists records before the 1980s of Northern Shrike from Urbana on 3 March 1963 and Chillicothe on 2 January 1971 (Annotated Checklist of the Birds of Illinois, Illinois State Museum, Popular Science Series, Vol. 1, 1978), and a 19th century record, 27 March 1896 from Fayette County in southern Illinois (1989). A few others were reported in *Illinois Audubon Bulletins*.

However, in the mid-1980s, observers began reporting Northern Shrikes nearly every year (see Appendix 1). In the winter of 1984-85, only one downstate bird was reported, without attribution, on the Centralia Christmas Bird Count in Marion County. The following season, eight Northern Shrikes were reported from DeWitt, Vermilion, Knox (2), Mason, and, Macon Counties and the Peoria-Tazewell Christmas Bird Count in central Illinois, and from Clinton County. Since then the species has been reported almost every winter (missing only 1989-90 and



Northern Shrike drawing by Denis Kania.

1996-97), with from 1 to 7 birds being reported.

While 1985-86 and 1995-96 appear to be invasion years, Northern Shrikes can be expected most years in central Illinois. As one would expect, the large majority of sightings are still from northern Illinois. However, the bulk of these sightings were from metropolitan Chicago and Rockford, which have large numbers of active birders.

I compiled a series of maps showing the winter distribution of Northern Shrike from 1983 to 1998. Included in this report is a map showing Northern Shrike winter distribution from 1983 to 1997 and one showing Loggerhead Shrike distribution for the same period. I have followed H. David Bohlen, and Smith & Parmalee before him in breaking the state into north, central, and south regions. The biggest concentration of Northern Shrike sightings is in northeast Illinois. Distribution appears more evenly spread throughout the remainder of northern Illinois and central Illinois, although few sightings have been reported in west-central Illinois. Even in northwestern Illinois, sightings of Northern Shrikes are sparse, although this may reflect a lack of birders to adequately cover the area.