

Shrike is feared by other birds

By ART BRIGGS-JUDE

One of the more interesting but less appreciated birds to occasionally show up at a bird feeding station these days is the shrike.

Though a songbird in appearance, it's a predator by design, following the flocks of seed-eating birds wherever they congregate. That this gathering is the result of your daily handouts makes no difference to this hardy bird.

In reality, the shrike is only carrying out one of wildlife's basic ground rules: In the process of removing the weak and diseased, the flock is also dispersed, lessening the burden on existing food

sources in that area.

Still, from our human point of view, it's difficult not to cheer for the little chickadee when we see it being pursued around the shrubbery by this determined predator.

There's no doubt that one of these sinister flyers has arrived in your neighborhood when you notice your backyard birds acting more nervous than usual. Sometimes, as the flock of wintering goldfinches and siskins flares away, a flash of black and white plumage will speed hawk-like into the undulating formation.

If unsuccessful in its quest, the shrike will perch on a nearby limb

and scan the landscape for the next possible target. From such a position, you may be able to study some of the bird's unique features: the black face mask stopping at the base of the bill, the black wings and tail, the light shell-like flecking on the gray sides and flanks, and the black hooked upper mandible.

Incidentally, it is this heavy-hooked bill that the shrike uses to strike its prey down.

When rendered helpless, the victim is airlifted by means of this same hooked beak to a nearby thorn, forked twig, or twist of barbed wire. Here the shrike impales its quarry in much the same way as a butcher hangs his meat. Little wonder then that this bold

flyer is aptly referred to as the butcher bird.

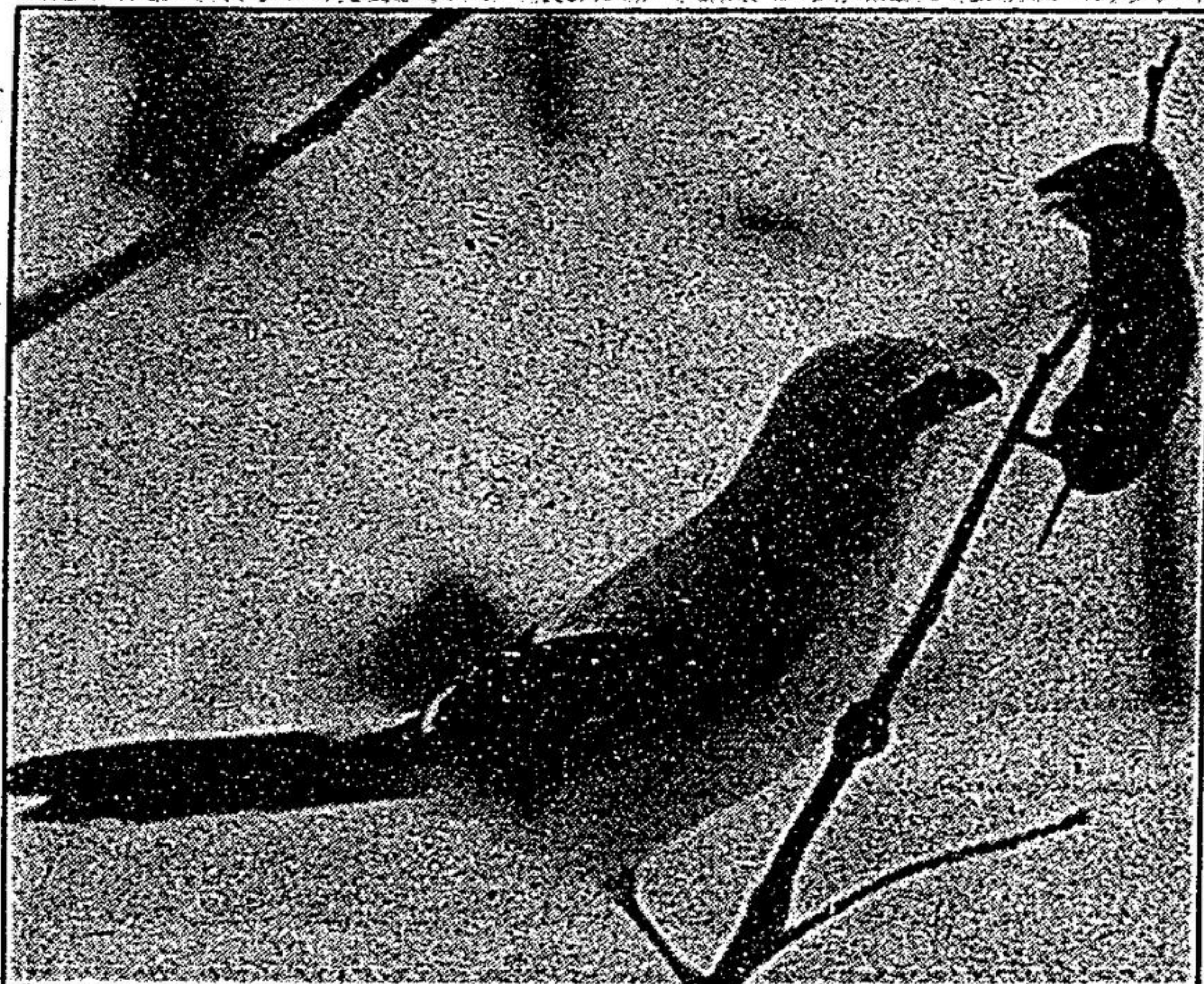
A few years ago as I watched a flock of cedar waxwings feed in a clump of highbush cranberry, a shrike dove into the startled group and flattened one of the crested birds.

On another occasion, while walking through an old apple orchard, I spotted a butcher bird perched on a dead branch above a brush pile. When it paid me little heed and kept cocking its head toward this heap of cuttings, I decided to wait and see what the bird had in mind.

Presently, it darted down and began hovering over the pile, moving from one side to the other. Soon I was able to make out a

mouse scurrying around the outer edge of the clump. As long as the little rodent stayed under cover it was safe, so the shrike was trying to scare it out into the open.

It was then I noticed a freshly impaled meadow mouse on the wire fence beside me, proving the scare tactics had already been successful. But if the shrike had procured one cache of food, why was it so keen on taking a second victim?



A northern shrike or 'butcher bird' checks out its meat supply. — Art Briggs-Jude

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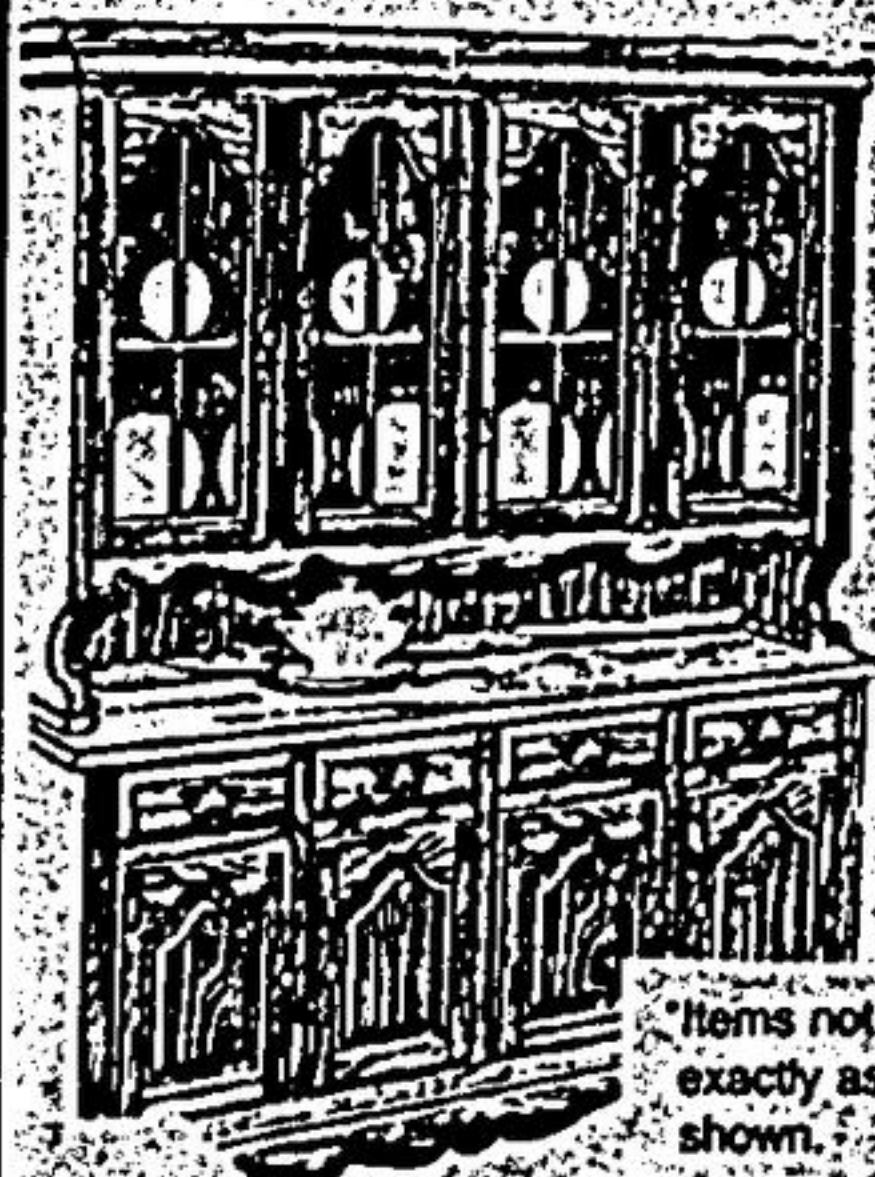


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