

Waco Tribune 14 Jan. 1982

Shrike is not a favorite among his fellow birds

The other morning I witnessed an interesting episode. I heard a cactus wren nearby fussing and scolding. Without much trouble, I located him in a nearby palo verde tree perched next to a shrike.

The wren had his tail feathers fanned out and was jumping up and down on the branch. He was looking under the shrike and over the shrike as if examining him and scolding all the while. The shrike just perched there as if he were a statue.

After a few minutes of this behavior the wren flew away. I was about to leave when three finches flew up and landed on a higher branch above the shrike. Shortly, three more finches arrived to support the first trio. The shrike moved not a muscle. This was getting interesting.

Next, a male cardinal flew up and perched on a branch below the shrike. After several minutes the cactus wren came back and resumed his place next to the shrike, again scolding and examining. Another wren, probably the first one's mate, landed on a near-



by branch. Mr. Joe Cool still didn't blink an eye. The tree was becoming crowded.

Next on the scene, a large curve-billed thrasher landed on a lower branch of the tree. He sat there for about two minutes. Suddenly, he flew up to where the shrike and wren were and displaced the wren who then moved up a branch. The thrasher, sitting very close to the shrike, finally ruffled Joe Cool's feathers and he flew off to a distant tree. The whole episode took about 20 minutes.

The shrike was obviously unwanted by the other birds. The cooperative behavior of

several species of birds grouping together in the tree is called "mobbing." Mobbing serves to warn that there is a predator near. The mobbing is distressing to the predator because it makes it more difficult for him to single out one victim.

The shrike which appears in our area is the loggerhead shrike. He is about 8 inches long and is predominately a beautiful soft grey color. Distinguishing features are a black tail, wings and a Lone Ranger-type black mask across the top of the bill and eyes. His bill is heavy, black and hooked. He likes to sit high on a tree, wire or pole so he can have a clear view in all directions. His diet consists of in-

sects, small rodents, lizards, small snakes and small birds. His first preference seems to be insects and he seems especially fond of grasshoppers. He is very good at picking bumble bees right out of the air.

Shrikes are sometimes known as "butcher birds" because of their practice of impaling their prey on sharp thorns, branches or barbed wire fences while eating it. The shrike does not indiscriminately kill and always eats what he kills. Studies with the shrike are showing that he has a very slow metabolism similar to that of a hawk rather than a songbird, under which he is classified. Thus, he can sit in one place for hours waiting for prey. Most of the shrikes wintering in our area are from as far north as Canada. However, we do have a few year-round residents. Those that stay here all year will begin nesting in March while the winter visitors will go to the northern homes to nest.

I am glad that I had the chance to see this adventure in my back yard and maybe you will be lucky enough to witness a "mob scene" in your yard.