

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Loggerhead Shrike Predation on a Northern Pacific Rattlesnake

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The Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*) commonly inhabits open landscapes with scattered shrubs interspersed with grasses and forbs in grasslands, scrublands, steppes, deserts, prairies, and savannas throughout most of North America, including Mexico (Yosef 2020). The species is known for impaling prey on sharp objects, such as barbed wire, cacti, thorns, and yucca (Reid and Fulbright 1981, Yosef 2020). Once an item is impaled, the shrike typically flies off, leaving the item behind, possibly using impalement as a food cache method (Yosef and Pinshow 2005). Common prey items include invertebrates such as grasshoppers, crickets, and beetles, and vertebrates such as rodents, birds, amphibians, and reptiles (Cicero 1993, Clark 2011a, Yosef 2020). Here we describe a successful predation attempt on a rattlesnake.

At 08:05 on 20 March 2025, we were driving southbound on a dirt access road adjacent to the Tumey Hills, 27 km southwest of Mendota, Fresno County, CA (36.59931°N, -120.62260°W) at 242 m elevation. We saw a Loggerhead Shrike struggling with a snake in its bill while in flight. The shrike landed about 6 m in front of our vehicles, dropped the snake, and flew 3 m west to a nearby barbed wire fence to perch. We attempted to photograph the shrike, but it kept flying south down the fence line. We examined the snake and determined that it was a juvenile northern Pacific rattlesnake (*Crotalus oreganus*; Hansen and Shedd 2025), with a weight of 35 g and full head to tail length of 33 cm (Figure 1). While taking measurements, the snake coiled reflexively but did not attempt to strike. The temperature was 8.3° C (47° F) with overcast conditions and no breeze.

We left the snake on the side of the road in hopes that the shrike would return to retrieve it. The snake had severe head trauma (Figure 2). A similar account of head trauma in snake prey is reported by Clark (2011b). The Loggerhead Shrike punctures prey in the head and neck region by repeatedly striking the base of the head and the head with the sharp point of its bill (Chapman and Casto 1972).

Several snake species have been reported as Loggerhead Shrike prey, including racers (*Coluber* sp.), ring-necked snake (*Diadophis punctatus*), queen and crayfish snakes (*Regina* sp.), and various garter snakes (*Thamnophis* sp.) as summarized by Clark (2011a). One notable report is the predation on an eastern massasauga (*Sistrurus catenatus*) in New Mexico that was 41 cm long and weighed 33 g. (Chapman and Casto 1972). The Loggerhead Shrike there was flying 6 to 9 m above the ground with a snake in its bill, and upon being startled, dropped its prey and flew to a nearby wire. A juvenile Pacific gophersnake (*Pituophis catenifer catenifer*) reported as a prey attempt measured 35.5 cm long and weighed 13 g (Clark 2011b). The Loggerhead Shrike's weight range of 45–60 g (Yosef 2020) may make it challenging, but not impossible to subdue and transport snakes, and shrikes seem to target juveniles of larger species, or smaller species, such as the ring-necked snake.



Figure 1A. Juvenile northern Pacific rattlesnake as found after the Loggerhead Shrike dropped it on the dirt road. 1B. The juvenile northern Pacific rattlesnake after measurements were taken.



Figure 2. Close up of head trauma presumably inflicted on the juvenile northern Pacific rattlesnake by the Loggerhead Shrike to neutralize and subdue the snake.

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