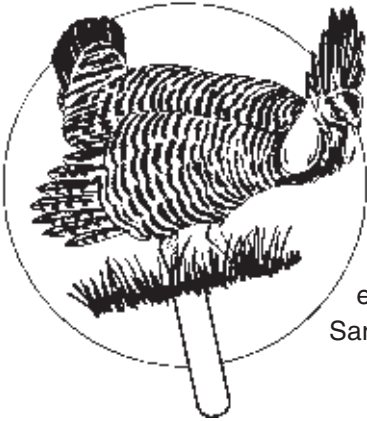


# ACTIVITY PAGE

## One Bird Short of a Flock

### *The Strange Mystery of the Mutating Habitat*

This one-act play will present information about threatened and endangered species and may be performed with a small cast and simple habitat backdrops. Assemble a crew of students to research backdrop visuals for the habitat settings used in the play: prairie; urban; fence row with thorny trees; and wetland. The backdrops may be painted on over-sized paper and might incorporate cardboard cutouts or other extras. The four species illustrations included should be colored, glued to pieces of poster board, cut out, and then attached to wooden paint stirrers or other supports for use as "puppets" as the play unfolds. The props suggested throughout the play may be gathered by a crew of students, or the use of the items could be pantomimed by the cast. For younger children, or to provide roles for the entire class, the following division of labor is recommended: three students design each habitat setting; four students play birds; three to four students split the roles of Sara, Juan and the Narrator.



#### **Characters:**

Sara, a student and Conservation Private Eye  
Juan, a student and Conservation Private Eye  
Narrator

#### **Birds:**

a greater prairie-chicken - endangered  
a peregrine falcon - threatened  
a loggerhead shrike - endangered  
a black tern - endangered

The stage is set to reveal a desk or table and two chairs at the front right of the stage. Front and center are two more chairs, placed side to side and facing forward. The four habitat backdrop scenes should be placed in different locations around the stage area or throughout the classroom. The play opens with Sara sitting at the desk or table, looking over the pages of a report in a file folder with a large red question mark on it. The Narrator stands stage left and introduces the scene.

**NARRATOR:** Welcome to the district offices of those ace investigators, the Conservation Private Eyes. Their natural curiosity makes them forever on the lookout for weird happenings in the world around them. Let's listen in as another mystery begins to unfold...

**SARA** (*shaking her head and speaking to herself*): This is positively frightening! Some of our finest feathered friends are threatened and endangered—right here in our very own state. I think we'd better get to the bottom of this problem with a little Conservation Private Eye research. (*Sara pushes a button on the phone and calls to her associate.*) Juan, could you come in here pronto, please. We've got a case to investigate!

**NARRATOR:** Sara has just discovered that of the 9,900 species of birds in the world, more than 1,240 species listed are endangered, threatened or vulnerable. As of 2010, the state of Illinois has 25 endangered bird species and five bird species that are considered threatened. Sara is very concerned.

(*Juan enters and sits down at the desk.*)

**JUAN:** What's the word, partner? I just heard that you're very concerned about something.

**SARA:** The word is "endangered" and that's what has me concerned. There are threatened and endangered birds right here in our home state. We've got to find out why!

**JUAN:** Birds in danger? Someone is making threats against birds? You'd think people would pick on something their own size. Why would anyone threaten to beat up a bird?

**SARA** (*patiently*): No one is beating up birds. "Threatened" means that a bird species has the potential to become endangered, and "endangered" means there's a potential for extinction. Extinction means that a species would be gone from the earth forever!

**JUAN:** That's right! I remember reading the file on the passenger pigeon. There were once millions of them, but the last one died in North America in 1914. What's causing the problem today? Which birds are in trouble?

**SARA:** Well, this file from Headquarters specifically mentions—among others—the greater prairie-chicken, peregrine falcon, loggerhead shrike and black tern. It seems that the areas where these birds live are changing. Something is happening to their homes!

**NARRATOR:** Sara and Juan's mission, should they decide to accept it, is to find out what is happening to the birds' homes.

**JUAN:** Yikes! Holy mutating habitat! I think we should go see for ourselves!

**SARA:** You're right, let's get our equipment and get going. I'll bring the project file.  
(*Sara and Juan gather their binoculars, camera and notebooks and walk center stage to the two chairs.*)

**JUAN:** Binoculars, camera, notebooks, pencils and pens. Check. Check. Check. Check and check. We're ready.  
(*looking around*) Where's the car?

**SARA:** This (*pointing to the two chairs*) is our car. Get in. I'll drive. (*Sara sits down and appears to be starting the car, placing her hands on the "wheel."*)

**JUAN:** Get in what? (*sitting down*) Looks like a couple of chairs to me.  
(*Sara begins to "drive" as Juan looks around in confusion.*)

**NARRATOR:** And so the well-meaning investigators begin their journey—by car—(*said loudly and in Juan's direction*) to their first destination.

(*Sara takes her hands from the "wheel" and begins to look through the project file.*)

**JUAN** (*looking over*): Hey! Watch where you're going! Keep your hands on the wheel!

**SARA** (*shaking her head*): We've stopped. I think we're there. (*Sara stands up and steps out of the car, looking first at her file and then around her.*)

**JUAN** (*standing up*): We're there? How fast did you drive? And where's "there?"

**SARA** (*almost to herself*): According to these maps from Headquarters, this is clue #1. All of this land around us was once a prairie.

**JUAN:** Looks like farm land now to me. I think it was those cows by the barn over there (*pointing*) that clued me in.

**SARA** (*thoughtfully, not really looking*): Yes. I see. (*to Juan*) We're very close to a specially managed prairie wildlife sanctuary. Let's take a look.

(*Sara and Juan walk toward the prairie habitat backdrop and hear a low "booming" sound. The prairie-chicken puppet appears from behind the backdrop.*)

**SARA:** Look over there! *(Sara and Juan crouch down. Sara uses the binoculars as Juan takes a few pictures.)*

**JUAN:** A prairie-chicken! I got a couple of great shots for the file.

**SARA:** Excellent! We're lucky to see one. The file says there are about 200 left in Illinois.

**JUAN** *(standing up):* All of the land around for miles was once prairie.....

**SARA** *(standing up):* I hope we can help to preserve the prairies that we have left. *(A "booming" sound again comes from behind the backdrop as the prairie-chicken puppet reappears.)*

**JUAN:** That sounds like a booming agreement.

*(Sara and Juan begin to walk back to their "car," Sara is looking over the project file as she walks. They stop at the car just as the Narrator finishes speaking.)*

**NARRATOR:** Sara and Juan would later learn that unregulated hunting, increased predation and other factors also contributed to the prairie-chicken's decline. *(dramatically)* The mystery was deeper than even they dared realize!

**JUAN** *(pointing to the Narrator):* Whoa! I think that guy was hanging out back at the office talking to himself, and I think he just said something about prairie-chickens! I get the feeling other factors might also have contributed to the prairie-chicken's decline. Maybe he knows something. Should we go talk to him?

**SARA** *(losing patience):* Get a clue. Characters in a play generally don't talk to the Narrator. Let's go. *(Sara sits down in the "car" and prepares to drive.)*

**JUAN** *(sitting down):* A play?! Well, that explains the car. *(to himself)* Should have just told me in the first place. Would have saved a lot of confusion. I wonder if my name is really Juan...

**NARRATOR:** And so Sara and....whatever-his-name is....*(Juan turns around to look at the Narrator, apparently alarmed)*....Sara and Juan continue on their trip. They soon turn onto a country lane and begin to drive past fence rows surrounded by thorny shrubs and trees. They stop and observe the location of clue #2.

**JUAN:** Fence rows surrounded by thorny shrubs and trees! Didn't I read something about that habitat in the file?

**SARA:** You're right! It's the habitat of the loggerhead shrike. There's one over there! *(Points to the fence row habitat backdrop where the loggerhead shrike puppet appears.)*

**JUAN** *(looking through binoculars):* I can see the thorns on the branches. These binoculars make them seem so close they almost don't look real...Oh, now I see him. Wow! He's chowing down on a huge grasshopper he just stuck onto a big thorn. Tasty! Bug-on-a-stick!

**SARA** *(looking up):* There's another shrike perched alone on that telephone wire. *(Picks up the camera and photographs the loggerhead shrike.)* We'll file that photo under "endangered." We'd better hurry, we've got a couple of more stops to make.

**JUAN:** Before we go, I've been meaning to ask...Do people in plays ever eat? *(Sara begins to "drive.")*

**NARRATOR:** Without time to even pause for food...

**JUAN** *(sarcastically):* Oh great!

**NARRATOR:** ....Our ace investigators continue on their way to the next habitat setting and clue #3. The land begins to change as minutes give way to hours and the Conservation Private Eyes finally arrive at another destination.

**SARA** (*stops "driving" and looks at the file*): We should be near one of the low-lying, water-filled areas that the black tern calls home.

**JUAN**: This land looks a little wet. (pointing to the wetland backdrop) A wetland!

**SARA**: That's right. That's where we might be able to spot a black tern. (*Sara and Juan get out of the car and begin to look around, walking toward the wetland habitat.*)

**SARA** (*stopping to look up into the "sky" with the binoculars*): I don't see one anywhere. (*addressing the audience*) Excuse me, has anyone out there seen a black tern around anywhere?

**JUAN** (*loudly*): I can't talk to the Narrator, but you can talk to the audience?!?!?

**SARA**: There he is. Shhh! You'll scare him away. (*The black tern puppet appears from behind the wetland backdrop.*)

**JUAN** (*aiming the camera at the black tern*): Got him! I guess this black tern was lucky to even find a wetland habitat to nest in. The report said wetlands have been drained and converted to agricultural and industrial uses for years.

**SARA**: Right again. None of these different habitat areas just disappear over night. It's been happening for generations. But our generation can work to make sure we conserve the natural resources we have left!

**JUAN**: Can we undo what's been done?

**SARA**: We can try. Let's go to the city. We can report in at Headquarters, and I'll show you what I mean.

(*Sara and Juan walk back and get into the car. Sara begins to drive.*)

**NARRATOR**: And so the Conservation Private Eyes hit the road one last time--looking for clue #4. They head north-east and soon arrive in our state's largest city.

**JUAN** (*singing*): Chicago! Chicago!

**SARA**: We'll park here and walk around a bit. It's hard to look up when you're driving.

(*Sara and Juan get out of the car and walk toward the urban habitat backdrop.*)

**JUAN**: You'd think all of the birds in a city this big would be endangered! Isn't pollution a problem? And there are giant glass buildings all over the place! Talk about flight hazards!

**SARA**: Well, those things are sometimes a problem for birds that live in urban areas, but one species that was in trouble has managed to adapt to life in the big city. Let me know if you see a bird you think is....

**JUAN** (*Points at the peregrine falcon puppet which appears from behind the backdrop. The bird appears to swoop and dive.*): Look! A peregrine falcon!

**SARA**: Yes! (*Looking at the file.*) The peregrine falcon was once very close to extinction. Much of its natural food supply was contaminated by the pesticide DDT, but human action and protection helped the species survive. Now some live in cities and roost on the ledges of buildings!

**JUAN**: I guess they just adore a penthouse view.

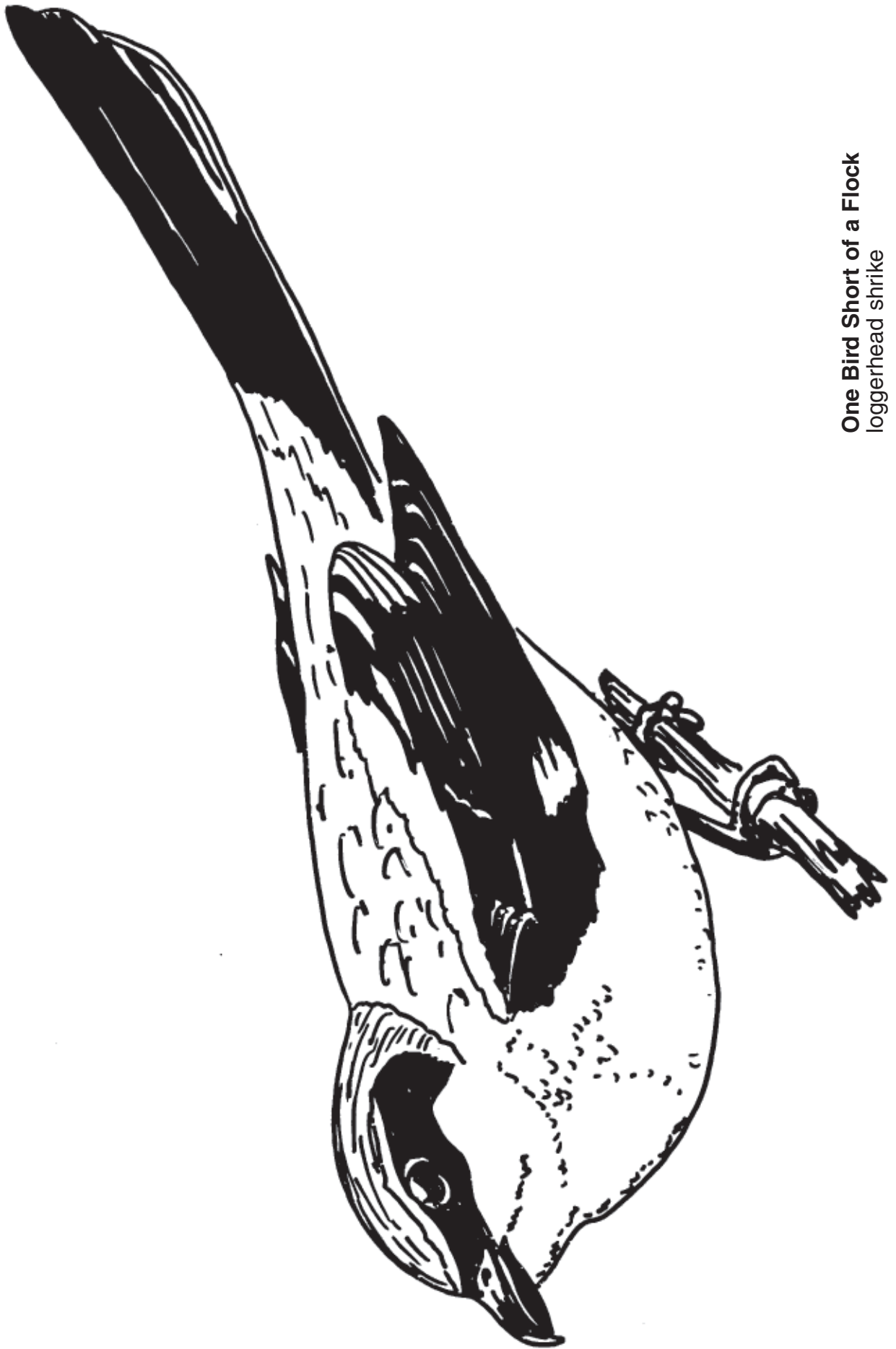
**SARA**: And I guess the mystery of the mutating habitat isn't such a mystery after all. Our four clues add up to the fact that people are responsible for the loss and destruction of these habitats, and only people can help preserve and protect what we have left. You know, we really were very lucky to have seen all of these kinds of birds.

**JUAN:** The greater prairie-chicken, loggerhead shrike, black tern and peregrine falcon. I'm sure all of them—and all of the other threatened and endangered species—would work to preserve their habitats if they could, but since they're sort of busy surviving, it's up to you and me.

**SARA:** It's up to everyone.

**NARRATOR** (*Sara, Juan and the four puppeteers join the Narrator at center stage.*): There are many things everyone can do to help. Provide food and shelter or habitat for birds in your neighborhood. Help inform your friends and family about the environment and the birds of your community, state and the world. Study different organizations working to preserve habitats and birds or working to clean up the environment. Make it your mission to get informed and get involved.

Illinois Endangered Species Protection Board. 2010. *Checklist of endangered and threatened animals and plants of Illinois*. <http://dnr.state.il.us/ESPB/2010%20Checklist%20FINAL%20for%20webpage%20082010.pdf> Illinois Department of Natural Resources, Springfield, Illinois.

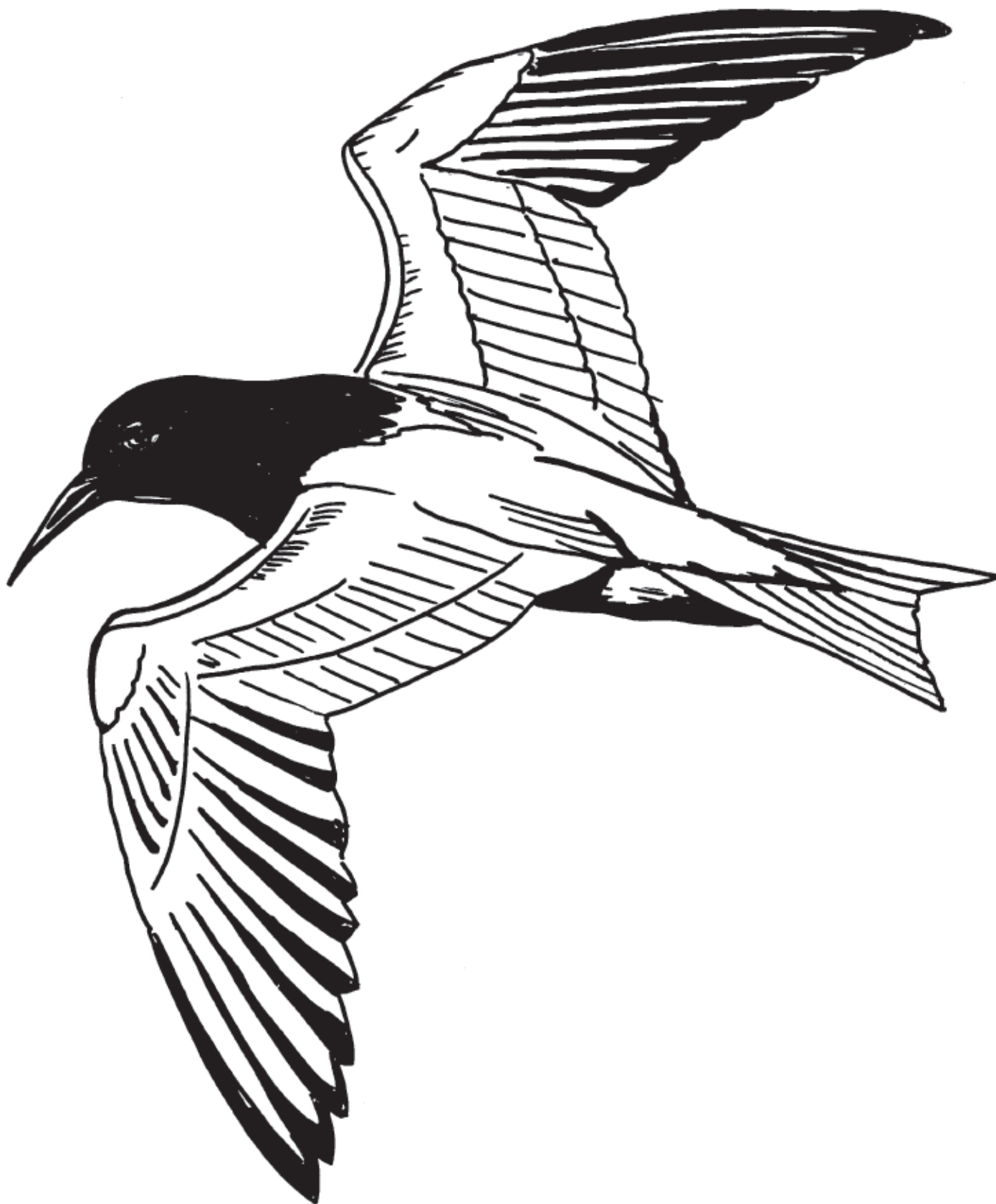


**One Bird Short of a Flock**  
loggerhead shrike

**One Bird Short of a Flock**  
greater prairie-chicken



**One Bird Short of a Flock**  
black tern



**One Bird Short of a Flock**  
peregrine falcon

