

IDENTIFICATION AID
LOGGERHEAD vs. NORTHERN SHRIKES
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During most of the year, when a birder comes across a shrike, its identification is not a problem. However, between November and March, shrike identification becomes fairly difficult since both species may be present. Separating the two species in the field is further complicated for several reasons. For instance, the field guides emphasize the wrong characteristics as will be discussed below. While the correct identification of shrikes has existed in the literature since 1955 (Zimmerman, 1955), even the newest field guide (Peterson, 1980) continues to emphasize misleading and incorrect field marks. Secondly, most of the distinguishing field marks consist of relative differences between the two species. Unless an observer has experience with both species or a direct comparison is possible, use of these field marks can be tricky.

As mentioned in all field guides, identification of immature northern shrikes (Lanius excubitor) is easy. The upperparts of these shrikes are brown or rusty-brown throughout most of the winter while adult northern and all loggerhead shrikes (L. ludovicianus) have gray upperparts. By March, through feather wear and the prenuptial molt, immature northern may be similar to the adults.

Incorrect Field Marks

For some unknown reason, the field guides always emphasize coloration of the lower mandible, a field mark difficult to accurately determine except under good conditions. For the record, northern shrikes have a light base of its lower mandible throughout most of the winter. However, its bill becomes entirely dark in early spring as the breeding season approaches. Bill coloration is more variable in loggerhead shrikes. This species may have an all dark bill or the base of its lower mandible may also be light. While most of the light-mandibled loggerheads I have seen are during the breeding season, winter birds may also have light lower bills. While I would always note bill color of any shrike if it were visible, it certainly is not worth disturbing the birds to get close enough to see this field mark.

Barring on the breast is also emphasized as a definitive field mark. However, this characteristic is quite variable in both species. Breast barrings may be indistinct or absent in some northern while they may be quite distinct in some loggerheads, especially immatures in early winter. This characteristic exhibits considerable overlap between the two species and is not useful at any time.

Shape of the black mask is also emphasized as a field mark. According to most field guides, the black mask ends at the base of the bill in the northern shrike but continues across the base in the loggerhead. However, loggerheads may also have interrupted masks ending at the base of the bill. Hence this field mark also is not always reliable.

Distinguishing Field Marks

Fortunately, there are several distinguishing characteristics that do not require field experience with both species. The most obvious difference is that northern shrikes have a narrow but distinct white line separating the black mask

from the gray crown. Loggerheads lack this white line, the gray crown meets the black mask. This difference is best illustrated in Robbins, et al., (1966). For birds with interrupted masks, also note the coloration immediately above the upper mandible. On northern shrikes, this area is white while it is gray on loggerheads.

The other distinguishing field marks require some field experience with both species in order to be useful. Northern shrikes have a longer relatively heavier bill. They also have relatively larger and longer heads in proportion to body size. These differences are most noticeable when direct comparisons are possible (which almost never occurs in Ohio); they may be imperceptible on solitary birds. Differences in upperpart coloration may be more useful, especially when lighting conditions are good. Northern shrikes are a lighter silver-gray on the crown and upperparts while loggerheads are a darker medium gray. To me, these differences are most noticeable on the head. The amount of contrast between the lighter crown and black mask is more distinct on the northern shrike.

Several behavioral differences may be useful although these traits should be used in conjunction with the previously mentioned field marks. Loggerheads tend to perch lower in the vegetation. When flying from perch to perch, they frequently drop down and fly at ground level. On the other hand, northern shrikes tend to perch higher and frequently fly directly from perch to perch. Northern shrikes frequently hover like American kestrels (*Falco sparverius*). Loggerheads hover very rarely; when they do hover, it is usually only for brief moments.

Distribution in Ohio

Northern shrikes normally first appear in northern Ohio during late November. However, the earliest record I can find is 24 October (Trautman and Trautman, 1968). They are usually present through late February and early March; the latest spring date is 9 April (Campbell, 1968). As a general rule of thumb, between the end of March and early November, any shrike seen in Ohio is most likely a loggerhead.

Winter distribution patterns of these two species tend to be different. Northern shrikes are regularly observed only along the Lake Erie plain (those counties bordering Lake Erie as well as the flat terrain composing most of northwestern Ohio). There are very few records elsewhere in the state. Any northern shrike identified away from the lake plain should be examined quite critically. Loggerheads are quite rare in this portion of Ohio during the winter (or during the summer for that matter). In central and southern Ohio, any winter shrike is most likely a loggerhead although all winter shrikes in all portions of the state should be carefully examined and accurately identified.

Literature Cited

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