

Field Identification of Shrikes

by
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Although there are about 65 species of shrikes in the world, only two are found in Canada, the Northern Shrike (*Lanius excubitor*) and the Loggerhead Shrike (*L. ludovicianus*). Both are grayish-colored birds with black and white wings and tails. The only Ontario birds of similar size and color likely to be confused with them is the Northern Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*), which also has white outer-tail feathers and a white patch on the wings that flashes prominently in flight. But the shrikes have proportionately shorter tails, shorter, stouter and strongly hooked bills and prominent black masks that instantly distinguish them from other birds. They may also be identified by their behaviour. They fly with an undulating flight, swoop upward to a perch when landing, tend to perch at the tops of trees in exposed situations, and hold their bodies in a rather horizontal position when perched.

While the shrikes are easy to distinguish from other birds, they are sufficiently similar to each other that specific identification is not always

easy. The Northern Shrike is a summer inhabitant of muskeg or open woodlands near treeline across Canada. Formerly it was not considered to breed in Ontario, but a few summer records during the previous decade indicate that it also breeds sparingly, probably all along the northern edge of the province, and along James Bay as far south as the Moose River.

The Loggerhead Shrike, on the other hand, is a summer resident in the southern fringes of the country from the western prairies to the Maritimes, where open country with scattered trees and shrubs or brushy fencerows and hedgerows provide nesting cover. In Ontario, they are usually found only as far north as the Rainy River area and Thunder Bay in the west, or Sault Ste. Marie and Sudbury in the east. A shrike found in the southern portions of Ontario in summer then, can reasonably be assumed to be a Loggerhead Shrike. Any shrike seen north of Moosonee in summer probably could be considered a Northern Shrike. [Eds. Note. Loggerhead Shrikes have bred once at Churchill, Manitoba.]

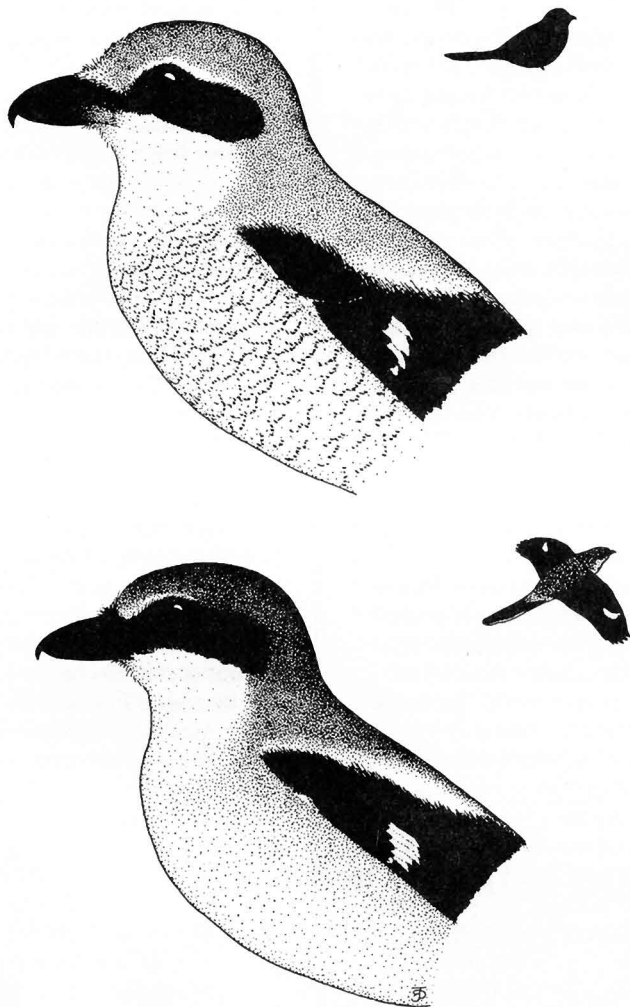


Fig. 1. Drawings of Northern (above) and Loggerhead (below) Shrikes showing identification features and size differences. The Northern Shrike is 23 to 36 cm long (wing 108-120 mm) and the Loggerhead Shrike is 20 to 23 cm long (wing 91-102 mm).

Both species of shrikes show seasonal movements. Loggerhead Shrikes usually have left the province for the south by mid-September but a few may linger even as late as December. Northern Shrikes ordinarily

would not arrive in the breeding range of Loggerhead Shrikes before late October but some may be earlier. Thus, during the autumn, both could be seen in southern Ontario. Likewise in March and April particularly,

Loggerhead Shrikes may return to the province before the other species has departed to the north. An ability to distinguish these two similar species will add greatly to anyone's confidence of field identification. Several features can be used to identify them but most of these must be used with caution.

The Northern Shrike is almost the size of a Robin while the Loggerhead Shrike is somewhat smaller. But they are sufficiently similar in size that unless the two are together, it is difficult to identify them on the basis of size alone (Fig. 1). The gray color of the back of the Loggerhead Shrike is darker than that of the Northern Shrike. This again would perhaps be useful only if the two were together. There is very little white above the black mask on the Loggerhead Shrike and it is largely confined to the area in front of the eye. Thus, the rear part of the mask shows little contrast to the crown color. In the Northern Shrike, however, most of the white over the mask is behind the eye, creating a strong contrast between the mask and the light gray head.

In front of the eye, the black mask of the Loggerhead Shrike covers more area, but again this is only a relative difference. The black also extends across the forehead over the bill; the forehead of the Northern Shrike should appear white as there is no black feathering over the bill. However, the Loggerhead Shrike's black bill and the minimum amount of black feathering on the forehead may be very small, making it difficult to distinguish between the feathers behind the bill and the bill itself. A further complication occurs because there are often a number of

white feathers above the narrow black forehead which make the forehead appear unusually light. Very careful observation is necessary if this feature is used.

Some field guides indicate that the head of the Loggerhead Shrike is noticeably darker than the back, but in Ontario this is not the case. The back is seldom lighter than the head. Adult Northern Shrikes, unlike the Loggerhead Shrike, may show some light edgings to the wing coverts. However, edgings may be worn and be so small that they are scarcely visible even at close range.

Two of the best features to distinguish these species are the bill (mandible) color and barring on the breast. Northern Shrikes have a pale-colored lower mandible near the base, whereas Loggerhead Shrikes have completely black bills. The ROM has several specimens of the Loggerhead Shrike with a similar pale base to the lower mandible, but all of these were taken in the south or western U.S.A. or in western Canada. These may be young of the year that have maintained the typical bill color of a juvenile while acquiring an adult plumage. In Ontario, I have not seen any Loggerhead Shrikes in adult plumage with a pale base to the lower mandible. I think you can be very certain that if the base of the bill is pale, the bird is a Northern Shrike.

The breast of the Loggerhead Shrike is basically an unbarred and very pale gray color. At very close range it might be possible to see some very faint, nearly straight, transverse gray bars on the sides of the upper breast of some individuals, but these bars are scarcely darker than the overall breast color. The

breast of the Northern Shrike is almost white, with numerous bars. These bars are dark (not gray), are wavy, and usually cover most of the breast and belly. You may have to be relatively close to the bird to see this barring as it is not very distinct. Also, I have seen adult Northern Shrikes with virtually no barring, but any shrike with dark bars will be a Northern Shrike.

The preceding characteristics require a relatively close look at the birds. There is one aspect of behaviour, however, that is visible at a long distance and seems to be a very useful identification feature. When perched, the Northern Shrike repeatedly flicks its tail up. The Loggerhead Shrike apparently never does this, but holds its tail stiff. Is this a rule with no exceptions?

One additional problem is distinguishing juvenile birds but this presents little difficulty. The young Loggerhead Shrikes molt from juvenal plumage by the end of the

summer and thus during the migration period look like adults. The young Northern Shrikes retain a juvenal plumage for most of the winter. In this plumage, they are patterned as an adult but appear to be more of a light brown rather than gray color. The barring on the breast is heavier and extends up over the throat to the bill. Any brownish-looking shrike seen outside the summer season is sure to be a Northern Shrike. If in doubt, check the throat, which is an unbarred white in the juvenile Loggerhead Shrike.

In summary, the key points used to distinguish Northern and Loggerhead Shrikes in the field include: the presence or absence of tail flicking, the presence or absence of barring on the breast, the color of the base of the lower mandible, the amount of black or white on the forehead over the bill, and the extent of white behind the eye over the mask.



**Plan now to take part
in all OFO activities this
spring/summer/autumn:**

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22-28 September • Moosonee Field Trip
1 October • Lake Ontario Pelagic Trip
22/23 October • Annual General Meeting
— London

See pp. 39-40 for details