

## MORE ON SHRIKE IDENTIFICATION

I read with enjoyment the article on shrike identification in the February 1987 issue of *Bird Observer*. It was an interesting and well-done piece, but I must disagree in part with the comments about bill color.

The article says that the bill of the Northern Shrike is "blackish with a light base to the lower mandible." It says the bill of the Loggerhead Shrike is "all black." Both statements are partly true, part of the time. Variation in bill color leaves considerable room for confusion, however.

Northern Shrikes are pale at the base of the bill, but **only in the fall and winter**. The rest of the year the bill is all black. Northerns may acquire the all-black bill by March. If the pale area becomes progressively smaller throughout the winter, it may be quite small and hard to see by mid- or late winter. The amount of pale at the base of the bill is apparently quite variable. From one-quarter to one-third of the base of the bill can be pale, and it can involve both mandibles or just the lower.

Loggerhead Shrikes also have a **pale base to the lower mandible in the fall and early winter**. It is usually smaller, covering one-quarter or less of the lower mandible but can be readily visible through binoculars at up to forty or fifty yards.

Unfortunately, bill color is cited as one of the few absolutely diagnostic characters in shrike identification, and an observer, seeing pale at the base of the bill in fall or early winter or an all-black bill from mid-winter on, may ignore other characters. Bill color is at best a suggestive character and should be used with caution and with full knowledge of the variation in both species.

The information on bill color first came to my attention in the fine article by Dale Zimmerman in the September 1955 issue of the *Wilson Bulletin*.

Eirik A. T. Blom

**AUTHOR'S RESPONSE.** J. Baird writes in response that although E. A. T. Blom's exhaustive comments about bill coloration are edifying, it seems that he missed the point of the article, which was to minimize bill color (only one of seven characters discussed, if bill shape is included) and to encourage birders to look at the whole bird before making their identification.

**Eirik A. T. Blom** together with Jon L. Dunn has been Chief Consultant for both editions of the *National Geographic Society Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. **James Baird**, now Vice President of the Massachusetts Audubon Society, was for 25 years head of the Natural History Services (later Conservation Department) of the Society.