

SHRIKES: LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Following the publication of James Baird's "Field Problem: Northern Versus Loggerhead Shrike," in our February 1987 issue, Eirik A. T. Blom expanded on Baird's description of bill color in the two species. The exchange was as follows.

Baird: The bill of the Northern Shrike is ... blackish with a light base to the lower mandible. The bill of the Loggerhead is ... all black.

Blom: Northern Shrikes are pale at the base of the bill, but only in fall and winter. The rest of the year the bill is all black.... From one-quarter to one-third of the base of the bill can be pale.... 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....

Baird response: [T]he point of the article ... was to minimize bill color ... and to encourage birders to look at the whole bird before making their identification.

Blom's letter of reply dated July 3, 1987, and delayed in the mail states that he (Blom) "was simply trying to add a small piece of information to an already excellent article."

...I did not "miss the point" nor could half a page of material be called "exhaustive." ...[T]he comments on bill color were incomplete. I merely attempted to expand on them, cribbing shamelessly from Zimmerman's work. My feeling was that no matter how diligently the author downplayed the importance of any single field mark, birdwatchers are likely to latch onto any character that *appears* to absolutely separate a difficult species pair. Without clarification some observers would say, "Well, it has a pale base to the bill, so it must be a Northern, no matter what the other characters suggest." Lest Jim or anyone else take offense at that, let me hasten to admit that I have fallen into that trap several times myself. We all struggle with the problem of feeling certain of our identification, and that makes any field mark interpreted as being diagnostic especially seductive.

An excellent recent example is the mystery photograph of a grebe in the October 1986 issue of *Birding*. The red wash on the neck and breast caused many of the best field birders in the country (including the identification editor) to identify it as a Horned. Now a revisionist movement is picking up steam, fueled in part by a note in the latest *Dutch Birding* describing an Eared Grebe with red on the neck and breast. Suddenly other characters *suggestive* of Eared are being given credence. No matter what it turns out to be, the story illustrates the tendency of *all* birdwatchers to embrace single "diagnostic" field marks.