

August's mystery bird is a passerine of medium proportions with dark wings and a dark tail. Perhaps most outstanding is the bird's prominent dark mask and its stout bill with an obviously curved culmen (the ridge of the upper mandible from base to tip). The gray back has the suggestion of a white border above the folded wings, and the wings show a conspicuous spot of white.

Only two Massachusetts bird species possess this combination of features—Northern Shrike and Loggerhead Shrike. The Northern Mockingbird is quite similar; however, the dark on its face is confined to the lores, its eyes are light, its wings possess wing bars in addition to a white wing spot, and its slender, pointed bill is longer and more decurved than that of a shrike. The problem thus becomes one of distinguishing between two very similar shrike species.

The turned head of the pictured bird affords a fine look at two of the most useful field marks—the configuration of the black mask and the shape and coloration of the bill. A close look at the mask clearly shows it running from behind and well above the eye to the base of the bill and across the lower forehead. The bill, which appears relatively short and only slightly hooked at the tip, is all dark (except for a reflection of light off the upper mandible). In addition, there appears to be fairly high contrast between the gray of the back and the white areas above the wings. Collectively, these features identify the bird as a Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*). By comparison, the slightly larger and paler Northern Shrike in adult plumage displays a narrower mask that does not extend above the eye or connect over the lower forehead, and its longer bill has a pale base to the lower mandible and a more prominent hook on the upper mandible. Although the underparts are not visible in the photograph, Northern Shrikes typically have pale but distinct bars on the breast and flanks—a feature found on only the juvenile Loggerhead Shrikes.



The Loggerhead Shrike is a declining and very uncommon early spring and early fall migrant in Massachusetts. The species is most often found perched on phone wires, fences, and low bushes in open farm country in spring and in open areas along the coast in fall. The photo was taken in Colorado.

Photo by Wayne R. Petersen

AT A GLANCE

Photo by Christopher W. Leahy, courtesy of MAS



Can you identify this bird?

Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.

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