

General Field Notes

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Fourth Northern Shrike Record from North Carolina

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While involved in the annual Christmas Bird Count at the Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge, Dare County, NC, December 29, 1994, I was asked by Carroll Richard, a non-participating birder, to identify an unfamiliar passerine species she had located. She pointed to a 30 ft. black cherry (*Prunus serotina*), approximately 30 yards distance, with an evergreen vine (*Smilax rotundifolia*) trailing upwards approximately 25 ft. The tree was leafless, but the mass of evergreen catbrier leaves near the top made locating the bird difficult.

There was 100% cloud cover and a steady NW wind, gusting to 25 mph; the temperature was in the low 40's. It was approximately 9:00 A.M.

Upon locating the bird, it was immediately obvious that it was a shrike, but very likely not a Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*). The hallmark large head and longish tail were clearly apparent. The bird was about the size of an American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*). Except for very dark wings and tail, one was given the impression of a light buff or tawny caste to the bird, especially the head, back and underparts. The bill was heavy and generally dark in color. Within 30 seconds, it flew west, bucking the wind, and disappeared behind the heavily-vegetated levee that separates North Pond from the Salt Flats. The undulating, woodpecker-like flight was noted.

My count partner, Ken Knapp, was signaled to help us relocate the animal. Approximately 30 minutes later, it reappeared, perched atop an adjacent thicket of wax myrtle (*Myrica cerifera*), approximately 50 yards from us. The bird was

facing into the wind. Our location afforded a profile view. Carefully examining it with a 30-power Nikon scope, the light buffy appearance was apparent to us and the other observers. The following field marks on the perched bird were also noted:

1. The wings and tail were dark with definite light-colored areas in the folded wing;
2. There was no facial mask, only an auricular patch, clearly darker than any other feathered area on the head. In the overcast light, no distinct color was discernable in the auricular patch;
3. The base of the lower mandible was lighter than the rest of the lower mandible; and
4. Very fine, dark horizontal bars were evident on the underparts.

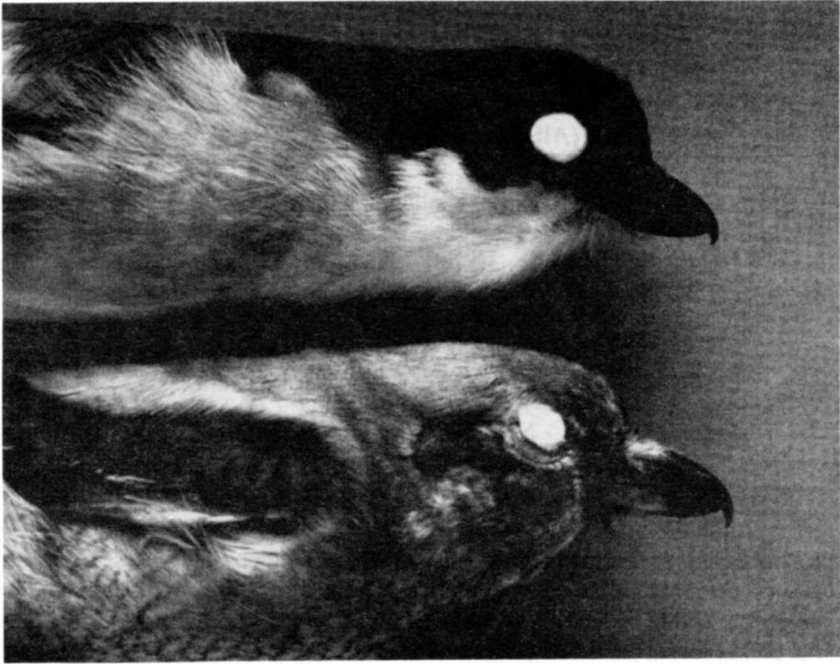
The shrike was in full view for 3-4 minutes. In addition to the author, the bird was carefully observed by Richard, Knapp, and Gordon Gridley. No vocalizations were noted by any of the observers. Later in the morning, Knapp encountered it again, briefly, approximately 300 yards to the east, along the same elevated levee. Observations at all three locations satisfied us that this was an immature Northern Shrike (*L. excubitor*).

Historically, there are few records for this species in North Carolina. Ironically, the oldest record, as noted in Pearson *et al.* (1942), was a specimen collected on Pea Island, December 9, 1909. Additionally, there are two records (no published details available) of Northern Shrike reported on Christmas Bird Counts near the Nathans Creek Community, Ashe County, in 1963 and 1964.

Not surprisingly, there are several more records from Virginia (Kain 1987), the distribution being fairly even from east to west: Coastal Plain - 3, Piedmont - 2, Mountains and Valleys - 2. Dates of occurrence in Virginia ranged from 24 November to 6 March. Only 1 record exists for the appearance of Northern Shrike in Tennessee (Robinson 1990). An immature bird was collected in Bristol, 10 November, 1964. There are no records for South Carolina or Georgia.

Discussion

With North Carolina probably the southern limit of the range of the Northern Shrike in eastern North America, few local observers would be expected to have had field experience with this shrike species. The accompanying photograph is of two shrike studyskins: (a) a Loggerhead Shrike from Wake County, N.C., and (b) the aforementioned specimen of Northern Shrike (FM 163,444) collected at Pea Island, Dare County, N.C., in 1909. Some of the characters we noted in the field are demonstrable in this photograph:



1. The vermiculations (horizontal barring) on the underparts of the Northern Shrike specimen;
2. Lack of well-defined facial mask on the Northern Shrike specimen;
3. Lighter-colored basal aspect of the Northern Shrike lower mandible; and
4. The longer, more prominently hooked beak on the Northern Shrike.

Acknowledgments

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Literature Cited

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