

## A DESERT RACE OF THE GREAT GREY SHRIKE, NEW TO THE BRITISH ISLES

By KENNETH WILLIAMSON  
(Fair Isle Bird Observatory)

(Plate 41 left)

A FIRST-WINTER example of *Lanius excubitor pallidirostris*, variously known as Bogdanoff's Shrike (Dresser, 1895), Grimm's Grey Shrike (Dresser, 1902), and the Steppe Shrike (Edberg, 1954), was watched, trapped and examined in the hand at Fair Isle on 21st September 1956, the first occasion on which this form has been recognized in the British Isles.

With my daughter Hervör I was maintaining a watch over a group of Japanese mist-nets in crops and stubble on the afternoon of 21st September when a large and exceedingly pale grey shrike flew into the area and alighted on one of the mist-net supports. During the next hour we had it under constant observation, and were joined successively by R. F. Allison, M. F. M. Meiklejohn and (after the capture of the bird) H. A. Craw. At the Bird Observatory it was also seen by Miss Janet M. McLellan, my wife and G. Stansfield.

We found the bird remarkably confiding, and were able to get excellent close-up views and take down observations on plumage and field-characters. At first we tried to ensnare it in one or other of the nets, but it was too intent on making good vantage-points of the bamboo supports and their guys to give much hope of capture by this means. After half-an-hour or so it left the root-crops, to which it had descended from time to time for insects, and flew with deep undulations to the neighbourhood of the Haa, where there is a Heligoland trap. Eventually we were fortunate enough to catch it there—assisted by a small flock of Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) which “mobbed” the bird as it passed in front of the entrance.

It had a superficial resemblance in size, carriage and manner of flight to a Great Grey Shrike (*L. e. excubitor*), but was a much

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paler and cleaner grey, and far less wild than any Great Grey Shrike I have encountered. The under-parts were suffused with pinkish-buff, but the pale grey of the flank-feathers tended to smother the contrast between upper- and under-parts. The wing was beautifully variegated and a detailed description is given later, but it is perhaps worth noting here that the amount of white visible was greater than in *excubitor* and more reminiscent of the condition found in Lesser Grey Shrikes (*L. minor*) in 1955 (*antea*, vol. xlix, pp. 94-96). A white shoulder-patch was present as in *excubitor* (there is none in the Lesser Grey), but the head was very different: firstly, the broad black band behind the eye ended squarely, and was not gently rounded posteriorly as in the Great Grey; secondly, the lores were dusky, not black; and thirdly, the base of the bill was noticeably pale, appearing pale brown at a short distance, whereas the bill of the other is wholly black. The bird was provisionally identified as *pallidirostris* on this character coupled with the very pale coloration, and the identification was later confirmed in the laboratory with the aid of Dresser (1895, 1902), Hartert (1910) and Meinertzhagen (1954).

The shrike may well have been newly-arrived as 21st September was a fine day of moderate south-easterly wind, ahead of a weak cold front stretching from north to south of the British Isles. The weather-maps for midnight and 0600 hours (*Daily Weather Report of the Meteorological Office*, no. 34,637) show mist at several stations along the North Sea coasts of England, Holland, Denmark and southern Norway, and in many inland localities in western and middle Europe, the Continent being under the influence of a vast anticyclone which had been moving slowly eastwards since the 18th. During this period there had been a generally easterly airflow south of the high pressure centre from the Transcaspian region across middle and southern Europe and the northern shores of the Mediterranean basin.

#### DESCRIPTION

The whole of the upper-parts were pale french-grey, the rump having a slight yellowish tinge; the scapulars were slightly paler with their whitish tips forming a shoulder-band, suffused with yellowish. The chief feature of the head was the broad black band on the ear-coverts, square-cut posteriorly; some of these feathers had slight brownish fringes, the lores were dusky, and there was a narrow white eyestripe. The malar region, chin and throat were whitish, the breast and upper belly pinkish-buff, and the lower portions off-white with a greyish suffusion on the flanks.

*Wing*. Primaries blackish-brown, their basal halves white, and the three innermost tipped with white. Primary-coverts blackish-brown, the innermost with white tips. Secondaries blackish-brown with broad white tips and outer edges. Alula dark brown, the feathers fringed whitish. Greater coverts dark brown mottled

buffish towards the tips and fringed with white. Median coverts jet black, forming a bar across the mid-wing: these feathers appeared to be new in comparison with the other coverts, which were more abraded. Lesser coverts french-grey with dark tips obscured by yellowish fringes. Under wing-coverts and axillaries white.

*Tail.* The two outer pairs of feathers were white, the next pair black with white outer webs, white at the base and with broad white tips; the fourth pair was similar but with the white basal patch and tips reduced; the fifth pair was blackish-brown, and the middle pair dark brown.

*Bill.* The bill was horn-colour, the ridge of the culmen black, and both mandibles darkened perceptibly towards the tip, the underside of the lower mandible becoming black. There was a strong flesh-coloured tinge at the base of the bill, very pronounced in the field.

The tarsi were blackish-brown, the claws black.

*Wing-formula.* 3rd primary longest, 2nd 6 mm. shorter, 1st 41 mm. shorter, or 18 mm. longer than the primary-coverts. The feathers inwards of the 3rd were shorter than it by: 4th-3 mm.; 5th-7½ mm.; 6th-15 mm.; 7th-21 mm.; 8th-25 mm.; and 9th-29 mm. The outer webs of 3rd, 4th and 5th were emarginate. In comparison with the Great Grey Shrike it should be noted that the 3rd (not 3rd and 4th) provides the wing-point, and the 2nd is slightly longer than the 5th (not slightly shorter than the 6th): the emargination and position of 1st primary are the same. In the Lesser Grey Shrike the 3rd provides the wing-point, but the 2nd is only slightly shorter, the 1st does not extend beyond the primary-coverts, and only the 3rd and 4th are emarginate.

*Measurements.* Chord of wing, 112 mm.; bill from skull 19 mm. and 9½ mm. at its greatest depth; tarsus 33 mm. (apparently longer than in the Great Grey) and 3½ mm. thickness at the foot; tail, 105 mm. The bill-depth and tarsus thickness were taken with a Blake leg-gauge.

The bird weighed 60.65 gm. We have four weight-records for the typical race, viz. 48 gm., 64.17 gm., 58.07 gm. and 57.56 gm. and Weigold (1926) gives, for 4 examples of *excubitor*, 52-66 gm., average 60.3 gm.

*Field-characters.* The best field-characters are provided by the very pale grey appearance, without any strong contrast between upper- and under-parts; the abruptly squared termination of the broad black band behind the eye; and the noticeably pale base of the bill, which appears to be pale brown rather than flesh-colour at a short distance.

#### DISTRIBUTION

There is one previous record of this handsome shrike in western Europe, a male collected on the island of Utsira in south-west

Norway on 5th September 1953 (Edberg, 1954). This specimen is in the Stavanger Museum.

The Steppe Shrike inhabits deserts covered with thorn scrub, and feeds mainly on insects but also on small birds and mammals and possibly lizards. It breeds over most of the region between the Caspian and Aral Seas and the river-courses which run westwards from the mountainous country of Kirghizia and Tadzhikistan, the Syr Dar'ya and Amu Dar'ya. Bogdanov found it nesting in the northern Ust-Urt and the Mangyshlak Peninsula, but it was not known to nest on the European shore of the Caspian opposite until 1928, when Vorobiev found it fairly commonly in the steppe country along the east bank of the Volga to about 90 miles north-east of Astrakhan (*Ibis*, vol. 76, p. 161). Interesting details of its distribution in the Transcasian region are collated from the writings of Russian authors by Dresser (1895), and a summary has been given recently by Edberg (1954). Outside the breeding-season, this race is found over most of the arid countries of the Middle East and in north-east Africa (Meinertzhagen, 1954).

Among the material in the British Museum (Natural History) a male from 14,000 feet in the Pamirs (N.W. Kashmir) on 24th October 1897 is the easternmost example of typical *pallidirostris*. An immature female from South Arabia on 25th September 1899 is very similar to the Fair Isle bird, having new black median coverts and worn brown greater coverts edged with white. A male from the Sudan on 2nd January 1914 is more advanced in moult, the median and greater coverts and tertiaries being black, but the primaries and secondaries and primary coverts and alula being still unchanged. Other specimens of typical *pallidirostris* come from Abyssinia, Eritrea, Palestine (Gaza), Saudi Arabia and Persia (Luristan), but there is evidence from migrant and wintering shrikes occupying this vast region that *pallidirostris* intergrades with neighbouring races. December birds collected by H. W. Waite in the Punjab have very pale bills and generally pale plumage, but a head-stripe with the black prominent between the bill and eye, and they appear to be intergrades between *pallidirostris* and *lahtora*. Others with similar characteristics from localities on the River Tigris and in the Sudan suggest intermediacy between *pallidirostris* and *aucheri*, which itself intergrades with the more westerly *elegans*.

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H. A. Craw

A DESERT GREY SHRIKE—*Lanius excubitor pallidirostris*  
FAIR ISLE, 21ST SEPTEMBER 1956

Note the spread of white on the wing (cf. plate 39 lower), the general paleness and lack of contrast between crown and chin, the pale base to the bill, and the squarer-ended eye-patch which is also dusky rather than back on the lores (see page 246).