



# IDENTIFICATION PITFALLS AND ASSESSMENT PROBLEMS



This series, which started in January 1983 (*Brit. Birds* 76: 26-28), is not intended to cover all facets of the identification of the species concerned, but only the major sources of error likely to mislead the observer in the field or the person attempting to assess the written evidence. The species covered are mostly those which were formerly judged by the Rarities Committee\*, but which are now the responsibility of county and regional recorders and records committees; other species, both rarer and commoner than those, are also featured sometimes.

## 17. Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator*

The identification of an adult Woodchat Shrike should present very few problems, as there are almost no species with which it is likely to be confused (plate 70). Once the black mask on the forehead and face (on female, much reduced on forehead), the chestnut crown and nape, or the white rump in flight is seen, then the possibility of the bird being mistaken for a Masked Shrike *L. nubicus* is eliminated. The separation of juveniles and immatures, however, is considerably more problematic, as Woodchat, Red-backed *L. collurio* and Masked Shrikes are extremely similar in first-year plumage. When the BBRC decided to remove Woodchat Shrike from its list of species considered (with effect from January 1991), some reservations were expressed that the species was still a rarity in most of the UK and one with which there were possibilities for confusion with both commoner and much rarer species. After a prolonged discussion, the Committee concluded that, provided sufficiently good or detailed views are obtained and particular attention paid to the diagnostic areas of the plumage, then the possibilities of a misidentification are reduced. Records of Woodchat Shrike are now assessed on a county (or regional) basis.

With a good view, an immature shrike should be obvious from its size, shape, dull or drab plumage (lacking the bright colours of the adult) and bill. One of the characteristic features of shrikes is their habit of sitting somewhere prominent and surveying the ground below their vantage point. On any drive through southern Europe in summer or autumn, the roadside wires are rarely devoid of shrikes waiting and watching for their next meal. Woodchats, however, can also be remarkably elusive and remain hidden in the tops of bushes for a considerable length of time, often giving the false impression that they have gone. Several records in past Rarities Reports have shown gaps in the period of occurrence when it is more than likely that the bird was present throughout.

An immature Woodchat Shrike is often recognisable by its large-headed appearance, and the generally pale or grey-brown plumage with a (usually

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\*This paper, like those earlier in the series (*Brit. Birds* 76: 26-28, 78-80, 129-130, 203-206, 304-305, 342-346; 77: 412-415; 78: 97-102; 81: 126-134; 84: 145-148; 85: 21-24, 437-439, 491-494, 587-592; 87: 174-177; 88: 221-223), is a publication of the Rarities Committee, which is sponsored by *Carl Zeiss Ltd.*



**Plate 70. Typical view of a British Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator* in spring: Lundy, Devon, 12th May 1982 (*Brit. Birds* 76: 520) (*K. A. Mortimer*)**

well-defined) broad dark mask across the cheeks and ear-coverts. It has a broad white moustachial stripe, a finely barred crown and a pale brown to grey-brown mantle and back, but the scapulars show a broad band of pale whitish centres with a brown fringe to each feather breaking up or interrupting the band (see *Brit. Birds* 84: plate 273). The wings are brown or dark brown, but the greater coverts and tertials are broadly edged warm brown; the median coverts may have pale or whitish centres, as have some of the tips to the inner greater coverts, and the flight feathers are finely edged warm brown. The bases of the primaries are pale or whitish-buff and form a small panel; this is often obscured on the closed wing, but it shows better in flight when the bird drops to the ground to collect an item of food (note, however, that the west Mediterranean islands race *badius* has little or no pale colour at the base of the flight feathers). In flight, Woodchat Shrike also reveals a pale greyish rump which contrasts with the darker or browner upperparts and the tail.

The presence of the pale or whitish band across the scapulars and the paler general tone of the brown on the head and upperparts quickly eliminate



Plates 71 & 72. Left, juvenile Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator* moulting to first-winter, Marsden, Tyne & Wear, September 1983 (*Brit. Birds* 77: 554) (*T. I. Mills*); right, first-year Masked Shrike *Lanius nubicus*, Israel, October 1991 (*S. C. Votier*)

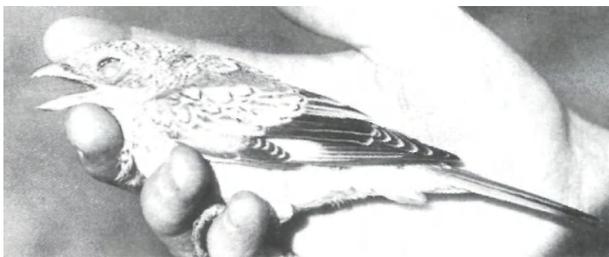


Plate 73. Juvenile Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator* of eastern race *niloticus*, Greece, autumn 1970 (*Peter Clement*)

immature Red-backed, which is warmer brown or light chestnut on the crown and upperparts. In fresh plumage, immature Red-backed can show some (a few) white tips to the median and greater coverts and upper scapulars, usually with a subterminal bar of black to each feather, but by mid autumn normally very little of this remains and the pale or white area is nowhere near

so extensive as on immature Woodchat, on which it spreads across the entire scapulars. In addition, the bases to the primaries are not pale on Red-backed and the rump is warm (almost rufous-) brown and uniform with the rest of the upperparts. Note that some Red-backed can retain a faint or palish scapular patch quite late into the autumn (see *Brit. Birds* 81: plate 213), and these could possibly be confused with duller immature Woodchats.

Especially in southeast Europe, the possibility of the bird being an immature Masked Shrike has to be considered. Masked Shrike can usually be told at a fairly casual glance by its slimmer shape and longer tail. Immature Masked is initially very similar to Woodchat, but the amount of white or pale colour shown on the scapulars, although variable, is generally less than on same-aged Woodchat and can be as few as three or four white-centred feathers. Immature Masked is generally greyer or darker grey, often has a white supercilium accentuating the dark ear-coverts, and lacks any pale or contrasting area on the rump; in flight, the large (almost triangular-shaped) patch of white at the base of the primaries shows well and is larger or more extensive than on Woodchat (except of the eastern race *niloticus*: compare plates 71, 72 and 73). The greater coverts are finely edged pale brown, and the flight feathers usually lack any pale or warm brown edges or fringes. More importantly, some, if not most, first-winter Maskeds (from about September onwards) show the pale or whitish forehead of the adult plumage, whereas this area on Woodchat remains dark.

Moult patterns of shrikes in autumn are complicated and not, at present, well understood. The fresh plumage of juveniles wears or abrades within the first three to four months of life to reduce the dark terminal or subterminal markings of the feathers, and some juvenile/first-winter Woodchats can appear darker than others, while the overlying darker scapulars can in certain instances obscure the amount of white showing. The white, whitish-buff or pale buff at the base of the primaries can also vary in extent or be hidden by the primary coverts. In late autumn, the nape of first-year Woodchats becomes tinged warm brown or rust-brown as the first-summer/adult plumage of the following spring begins to progress.

Woodchat Shrike has a southern European or southwest Palearctic distribution from Portugal, Spain and Morocco east, mostly through the northern Mediterranean countries, to southern Turkey, the Middle East and the southern Caspian region and through west Iran to the northern coast of the Gulf of Oman. In the north, the range extends to northern France, southern Belgium, north-central Germany, southern Poland and the former Czechoslovakia. The population in the north and west of the range has decreased markedly within the last two decades; the species previously bred in Luxemburg and the southern Netherlands, and large declines in breeding numbers have also been recorded in Belgium, the Czech Republic, Germany, Poland, Romania (now scarce), Slovakia and Switzerland. In the south, the range extends along the North African coast through northern Algeria to Tunisia and extreme coastal northern Libya around Tripoli and in Cyrenaica.

There is little marked variation among the races that is detectable in the field except in the case of *badius* and *niloticus*. Some evidence exists of variation in size, with smaller individuals in the west and larger ones in the east,

but this is not constant throughout as there are larger Woodchat Shrikes (in terms of wing length in millimetres) in southern France, and considerable individual variation is apparent from the effects of wear and moult. In addition to the lack of a pale or white area in the wing of *badius* (see above), adults of this race have a slightly darker chestnut cap and more extensive pale rump, and immatures are slightly darker grey-brown with heavier barring on the crown and underparts. Adult *niloticus* from the east of the range shows white at the base of the tail (merging with the pale whitish rump) and a large white patch at the base of the primaries, any buff on the underparts being usually restricted to the flanks; females of this race frequently lack any black on the face. Immatures of *niloticus* are paler or greyer on the underparts than those of other races. Intermediates occur in the Balkans and southeast Europe which show some (or less extensive) pale areas at the base of the tail, but which are otherwise indistinguishable from nominate adults. There have been claims of individuals of the race *badius*, mostly adults in spring, in Britain, but the Committee stated in 1987 that it was of the opinion that the characters of this race were not sufficiently well defined to distinguish it from some individuals of the nominate race.

During 1958-90 (the years in which Woodchat Shrike records were considered by the Committee), there were 480 records of this species in Britain and Ireland, of which approximately 48% (232) were of adults in spring and about 29% (137) of immatures in autumn; the remaining 23% (111) involved adults in autumn. The pattern shows a predominance of records on the South Coast and in East Anglia, but there are records from most East-Coast counties all the way to Shetland, and most inland counties south of a line from the Severn to The Wash have single records. Within that time, there were 50 records in Wales and 28 in Ireland. Most occurrences fell in the periods April to early June and late July to late October, but with extremes of 17th March 1990 (when there was a small-scale early invasion, with six records in that month) and 8th November 1978. Masked Shrike has yet to occur in Britain, but has been recorded as a vagrant in France, Spain (April 1991), Sweden (October 1984), Finland (October 1982), the former USSR, Malta, Algeria and Libya (*BWP* 7: 543).

Records of immature Woodchat Shrikes submitted to the BBRC have not always given sufficient emphasis to the plumage of the upperparts or the extent of the pale areas on the scapulars. In one or two cases, it was felt that, while the bird may well have been a Woodchat Shrike, the details supplied were sparse or poorly described and it was not possible to say that the identity had been established beyond question. Records of adults have, for obvious reasons, been less of a problem, since any competent description of a medium-sized black-and-white bird with a chestnut-brown crown should safely establish the species. It should also be emphasised, however, before any misleading impression is given, that records committees at both county and national level require as much detailed information as possible, both to be able to determine the species accurately and, importantly these days, to be sure that an escaped exotic has not been involved.

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