



## The Brown Shrike in County Kerry

Jill Crosher

On Monday morning, 22nd November 1999, I was off down to the Post Office at Ballyferriter, County Kerry, to collect our post. There was a little light flashing in my mind saying 'Take your binoculars', but I shrugged it off and set out. It is a lovely walk along the hillside, with a rising moor on the left and drystone walled fields leading down to the sea, with Mount Brandon as a backdrop, on the right. Choughs, Ravens, flocks of finches and various birds of prey make this a constantly interesting landscape.

I was barely into my stride before I saw the bird that was to change the shape of the next three weeks. Perched on a twig and showing the typical profile and black mask, it was clearly a shrike. Disturbed by my approach, it took flight and presented a clean brown back. I ran back to the house and shouted up to my husband, Ian: "There's a rare bird". I grabbed the binoculars and my latest bird book, Lars Jonsson's *Birds of Europe*. (A friend had recently looked pityingly at my 1972 Collins guide and suggested that, living here where I might find anything, I should invest in something more grown up.)

When I went back to the spot, the bird was gone, so I strolled on down to Ballyferriter, flicking through the shrike pages. After I had taken the post home and had a cup of coffee, I decided to have another look for the bird and,

as I stepped out of the house, there it was, right beside my own garden.

Its appearance puzzled me, however: it did not seem to fit anything in the field guide. Perhaps it was a form of immature or winter plumage Red-backed Shrike that I did not know. By now, Ian was involved too, the telescope was set up and all the books were open. 'Lars Jonsson' shows only half an Isabelline Shrike, the head and shoulders, so the rest is guesswork. It was very intriguing. We had another cup of coffee.

By about midday, I could not resist phoning BirdWatch Ireland. I am secretary of the smallest and newest group, the West Kerry branch. We are not madly proficient as birdwatchers, but we have a lovely time out together in one of Europe's loveliest landscapes, and we do try. I chatted to Sinead McDonnell for a while and asked if there was anyone with a moment to run through the difference between Red-backed and Isabelline Shrike for me. Dick Coombes said that a Red-backed would be a first for Kerry (whoopie!) and an Isabelline a first for Ireland ... so it is probably a Red-backed. Real details were necessary, however: evidence of any vermiculations and details of the tail and the mask definition. Crucial debates between the three of us centred on establishing the redness or otherwise of the tail, the brownness of the wing, the brownness or greyness of the

Plates 1 & 2. Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus*, Ballyferriter, County Kerry, Ireland, November 1999 (Paul Gale). The first for Ireland. Note the pale forehead, grey supercilia and pale tawny wash to the crown and nape. The upperparts are warm chestnut-brown, as are the rump and tail. Another photograph of the bird appears on page 436.



head and the presence or absence of any white mark in the wing. These are all relative when you are working on new ground but, in the end, we insisted that this was an adult bird with a black mask and clean plumage. If that was the case, it really could not be a Red-backed Shrike.

It was a pity that there was no-one nearby to give us a hand. As dusk fell, Seamus Enright from Tralee arrived, but he was too late to see the bird. He came in for tea and offered to show us some shrike pictures in his book. Here was a whole Isabelline which was very like our bird, but what about this Brown Shrike? Having presumably assessed that we were not both totally unreliable, he suggested that someone might come out the next day.

At 7.45 the next morning, two cars were parked by the gate. The man with the longest list in Ireland was said to be there. I had no idea what that meant, but this event was clearly no longer under my control. We stood chatting in my cabbage patch. It was quite interesting and sociable, as one would expect in Ireland.

Eventually, I pointed out that the bird was out there on a briar if they would care to look. By 10.00am, we were a small group; an hour later, we were a gathering. The observations drifted back and forth: it was too pale for a Red-backed shrike and too dark for an Isabelline; there was no white wing spot; the head was toned slightly grey; the tail was not so red. When the books came out, they knew there was trouble!

I missed some of the action by going shopping but, when I returned, the idea of it being a Brown Shrike was gaining favour against the odds. The safe money seemed to be on it being an Isabelline, but there was enough heavyweight opinion behind it being a Brown for a serious twitch to be on the cards. The Western Palearctic was being mentioned. I went down to the village to talk to the Gard (police) and made the first of many reassuring visits to my farmer neighbours.

The next morning, Wednesday, ornithologists even I had heard of before were here. They were members of the Irish rarities committee and anybody who was anybody in Irish birds, plus the odd English birder. The tension was considerable, but at about midday they took me to one side and gravely announced the news: in the next few minutes they were going to agree that it *was* a Brown Shrike.

Worryingly, I was advised not to worry. The impending twitchers have a code of conduct. The fields and walls will not be touched and the cars will be parked in the village, as requested.

#### Description

The bird was clearly a small shrike, with the typical habits of that family – perching on walls, briars and thistles and making short, pouncing flight to the ground. Its most striking feature was its bold black mask, which was very clear and prominently edged with white. In my field notes, I noted a gentle plumage gradation above the dark bill, from white to very pale grey to sand-coloured on the crown, to dull, mid brown on the back. The whole crown seemed to be able to take on a greyer or sandier hue depending on the light. There were no markings on the wing, apart from the rather darker brown tone of the primaries. The tail was quite long and slightly warmer brown than the back, with paler outer feathers. The pale underparts were washed with sandy-gold, most strongly so on the flanks. The legs were sturdy and dark grey.

The bird took up a southeast facing territory of about 150 × 150 metres: drystone walls enclosing untreated rough pasture with briars encroaching provided its hunting ground. As the sun moved round or the wind changed direction, it changed its hunting position to the warmer more sheltered walls or to a small belt of conifers and fuschias. Spectacularly, it would also pose on the magnificent standing stones against the scenic backdrop. From here, it would drop down, often spending a few moments on the ground to take beetles. It also took insects from the crevices in the walls, and was reported to have chased a Goldcrest on one occasion. Every so often, it would regurgitate a black pellet.

My next two weeks dissolved into an exhausting routine. I would check the bird daily and note the weather forecast and endlessly explain to the local people what the twitch was all about. We tried to welcome the visiting birders and virtually all of them responded positively, and did a great deal to introduce the school children and local callers to the event. Many of these encounters were charming and satisfying. It was hard work, but we had only been in this house for a couple of months and I did not want to risk the unusual influx of visitors causing any bad feeling. In the end, it did not. After the bird had gone, the warm letters of thanks from some of the visitors and the continued links with Irish, English and American birdwatchers became a terrific source of pleasure. I hope, too, that many of the local people will even have benefitted from the day the bird came.

*Jill Crosher, Ballyferriter, Co. Kerry.*

The ageing and sexing of the Kerry bird is complicated by the fact that adult Brown Shrikes may undergo both a post-breeding and a winter moult, and that first-years may begin to moult out of their barred juvenile plumage even before their first set of rectrices and remiges are fully grown (although the winter moult does not usually begin before February). Evidently 'the moult strategy of this species is extremely complex and variable ... and more research is required to map the range of variation' (Svensson 1992). With its striking black mask and almost unbarred plumage, the Kerry Brown Shrike does appear to be an adult. Although the pale base to the bill, the unusual narrowness of the black mask before the eye and the fine scalloping on the rear flanks (as well as the bleached outermost left tail feather) could be taken as signs of immaturity, the first three of these features are also quoted as female characters (Lefranc & Worfolk 1997), while apparently adult males often acquire a pale-based bill and limited underparts barring in winter (Tim Worfolk *in litt.*).

Svensson (1992), Cramp & Perrins (1993) and Lefranc & Worfolk (1997) all recognise four races of Brown Shrike: nominate *cristatus* (which breeds across northeast Asia and in Mongolia, and winters from Pakistan and India to Thailand), *superciliosus* (which breeds in Japan and winters mainly in Vietnam and the Sunda Islands), *confusus* (which breeds in eastern Asia and winters mainly on the Malayan Peninsula and Sumatra), and *lucionensis* (which breeds in N. China and winters mainly on the Philippines).

The racial identification of the Kerry Brown Shrike is a matter of some debate, not least because it did not match any of the illustrations in any of the appropriate field guides or handbooks. In essence, compared to Tim Worfolk's excellent plate in Lefranc & Worfolk (1997), it had obviously greyish-toned sides to the crown, quite like *lucionensis*, but warm chestnut-

brown upperparts more like *cristatus*. Despite most closely resembling *lucionensis* (the other three races being more rufous-crowned), it showed a distinct tawny wash to the crown and nape which, viewed from behind, merged into warm brown upperparts. The form *lucionensis* is typically described as having a greyer crown and nape and greyer-brown upperparts than this. BWP (Cramp & Simmons 1993) states that *confusus* intergrades with both *cristatus* and *lucionensis*, though it is highly likely that *confusus* simply represents the intergradation of the grey *lucionensis* with the warm brown *cristatus* (Tim Worfolk *in litt.*). The most convenient explanation for the appearance of the Kerry bird is that it could be an intergrade between *lucionensis* and *confusus/cristatus* (Tim Worfolk *in litt.*). The breeding ranges of *lucionensis* and *cristatus* meet near the border between northern China and Mongolia.

Nominate *cristatus* is a very long distance migrant and it is perhaps surprising that it has not been recorded more frequently in Europe (there are only two previous European records of Brown Shrike; although both were thought to be *cristatus*, neither was subspecifically identified for certain). The form *lucionensis* breeds south and east of *cristatus*, but it is still a long-distance migrant (it is even longer-winged than *cristatus*). It winters south to the Philippines, Borneo and Sulawesi, but has even reached New Guinea (Irian Jaya), is the common form on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Lefranc & Worfolk, 1993) and even crosses the Bay of Bengal to winter on Sri Lanka (Grimmett, Inskipp & Inskipp 1998). If one supported the vagrancy theory advanced by Keith Vinicombe (Vinicombe & Cottridge 1996), a reverse migrant of this form (especially an individual from the northwestern part of the range, where any intergradation with *cristatus* might be expected to occur) might reasonably be expected to track across central

Plate 3. Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus cristatus*, Nepal, January 1997 (Tim Loseby). This bird is typical of the form *cristatus*. Note the brightness of the crown.



Plate 4. Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus lucionensis*, Mai Po, Hong Kong, May 1991 (Peter Kennerley). Note the ash-grey head and greyish-brown upperparts which typify this form.





Plate 5. Adult Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus*, Mai Po, Hong Kong, China, October 1999 (Paul Leader). This bird is on passage, but assigning any individual bird to race away from the breeding grounds – on migration or on its wintering grounds – can be fraught with difficulties. This individual most closely resembles *lucionensis*, or an inter-grade. Where had it bred and where might it winter?

Asia and into the Barents Sea. From north of Norway, the strong winds that were so much a feature of the autumn would logically deposit such a waif in western Ireland. The fact that the Kerry Brown Shrike arrived so late in the autumn arguably further supports this theory.

Students of passerine rarities in Britain can attest to the fact that shrikes are unusual in that many of the vagrants that arrive here are adults; this applies to autumn Lesser Grey Shrikes, for example, while no less than eight of the 46 autumn records of Isabelline Shrikes have been adults and Britain's only Brown Shrike (at Grutness, Shetland, from 30th September until 2nd October 1985) was also an adult.

A glance at the global vagrancy pattern of Brown Shrike shows that it is a truly remarkable wanderer, with out-of-range individuals having been found as far afield as Alaska (5, including one at Sitka coincidentally on 26th–30th November 1999), California (2), Scotland, Denmark (a first-winter trapped at Falster on 15th October 1988), Nova Scotia and, now, Ireland. A vagrant from the area where the ranges of *cristatus* and *lucionensis* meet would be the furthest travelled from the east of any bird so far recorded in Western Europe. However, this area, which is only about 500 miles east of Lake Baikal, is just 'one step' further away than the breeding area of Yellow-browed Bunting.

The Nova Scotia record is particularly interesting in that it too was a late autumn arrival (from 23rd November until 1st December 1997), and it appeared to be in an adult plumage that showed some similarities to this latest bird in Kerry. It too had a pale forehead and grey sides to the crown, although the tawny wash on its central crown and nape brighter

than the Irish individual and it was tentatively assigned to the *cristatus/confusus* form (Foxall & McLaren 1998). Both birds showed a narrow mask in front of the eye, faint barring on the lower flanks and a pale grey base to the bill, as well as a brown back and slightly rufous rump and tail. Interestingly, although this Canadian bird was thought most likely to have travelled to the eastern seaboard of North America via Alaska, the putative route described above for the Kerry bird might also take a Brown Shrike to Nova Scotia, via Iceland (or vice versa).

Brown Shrike is very rare in captivity. It takes only one to escape, of course, but no imports into Britain at all were traced for the extensive *Birding World* survey in 1993 (Clement & Gantlett 1993) or by the BOURC in the same year (Hume 1993) and only one small consignment ever is known to have been imported into Denmark (about eight birds, apparently both adult and first-winter *cristatus*, in autumn 1994). There have been no recent advertisements for the species in *Cage & Aviary Birds* and the main importers of softbills into Britain know of no recent importations of the species. The Irish bird showed no sign at all of having been in confinement, but was at the right time and in the right place (mirroring the autumn's Siberian and White's Thrushes on Scilly and Eyebrowed Thrush off North Wales) for a wild bird.

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Eds.

