

Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus* on Christmas Island, Indian Ocean

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Summary

This paper reports on sightings of a Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus* on Christmas Island, an Australian territory in the Indian Ocean. The bird was seen opposite the Christmas Island golf course in a coastal thicket (*Pandanus* sp.) from 28 December 1996 to 3 January 1997. The Birds Australia Rarities Committee (BARC, case number 299) has accepted this record as the first of this species in an Australian territory. Notes on its identification are presented.

Introduction

The Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus* is widespread and common in Asia, and is a regular migrant to Sumatra, Java and Bali in Indonesia during the austral summer (MacKinnon & Phillipps 1993). There have been several sightings from Europe including Britain (Levington *et al.* 1992), and from North America (Lefranc & Worfolk 1997). This species is most likely to be confused with the Isabelline or Rufous-tailed Shrike *L. isabellinus*, which occurs as a visitor to parts of Asia in the austral summer (Grimmett *et al.* 1999).

The sighting

A single bird was found by James Watson on 28 December 1996, opposite the Christmas Island (CI) golf course in a coastal thicket (*Pandanus* sp.) along the cliff-top. It was identified by all observers (Robert Farnes, Peter Lansley, Peter Milburn, Bill Watson and James Watson) as an adult Brown Shrike. It was last seen on 3 January 1997. The bird was photographed, but the image size was too small to allow identification of species. An adult bird, believed to be the same individual, was seen at the same site on 16 March 1997 by a tour group led by Phil Maher (pers. comm., April 1999).

Description of the bird

The bird was smaller and appreciably more slender than the local Island Thrush *Turdus poliocephalus*. It was mid brown above, whitish below. A black line, bordered above by a distinctive white supercilium, continued from the lores past each eye to the ear-coverts. The bill was short, hooked and black. The tail was of moderate length, reasonably attenuated from base to tip, and rounded at the tip. The bird was not heard to call.

The bird was observed from as close as 30 m, in good sunshine and cloudy-to-bright conditions. It was quite furtive and often difficult to observe, coming out only rarely from dense *Pandanus* to feed on open ground. Occasionally it perched in dead branches projecting above the *Pandanus* canopy.

Identification of species

The features that enabled the bird to be identified as an adult Brown Shrike are as follows:

The bird lacked any distinct contrast between its crown, mantle and back and its rump and tail. The Isabelline Shrike, particularly the subspecies *L.i. phoenicuroides*, has a contrast between a duller back and mantle and an obviously brighter chestnut or rufous tail and rump and, in some individuals, a brighter crown (Cramp & Perrins 1993, Lefranc & Worfolk 1997, Beaman & Madge 1998, Grimmett *et al.* 1999). The plain brown rather than chestnut- or russet-brown dorsum on the CI bird is most consistent with a subspecies of the Brown Shrike *L.c. confusus*. Cramp & Perrins (1993) noted that *L.c. cristatus* has a rusty tail, based on birds from southern Siberia in May. However, they also noted that the tail of the Isabelline Shrike is brighter rufous. The CI bird, with its plain brown tail and slightly brighter rump, could well have been *L.c. confusus* or perhaps *L.c. cristatus*, but was certainly not *L. isabellinus*.

A white spot or patch is normally present at the base of the primaries in adult male Isabelline Shrikes (Cramp & Perrins 1993, Lefranc & Worfolk 1997, Grimmett *et al.* 1999). Female and juvenile Isabelline Shrikes sometimes lack or have only an indistinct white patch at the base of the primaries and have barring or scaling, particularly on the sides of the throat, breast and flanks (Lefranc & Worfolk 1997, Grimmett *et al.* 1999). The bird that we observed had no such scaling, and it lacked a white patch at the base of the primaries. Furthermore, Pearson (2000), in discussing the subspecific variation of Isabelline Shrikes, noted that populations breeding in the Tarim Basin, north-western China, usually lack the white patch at the base of the primaries and have a brownish mask, incomplete on the lores, thus differing from the CI bird.

Only three species of Asian shrikes have a black mask and contrasting white supercilium in combination with unmarked upperparts—Brown, Isabelline and Bull-headed Shrike *L. bucephalus*. The CI bird did not have the grey mantle, grey uppertail-coverts or pink base to the lower mandible of the Bull-headed Shrike (Robson 2000). Female and juvenile Isabelline Shrikes have indistinct masks, with paler lores, as does nominate male *L.i. isabellinus* (Cramp & Perrins 1993, Lefranc & Worfolk 1997). The male Isabelline Shrike is ruled out on the tail colour and white primary patch as outlined above. Brown Shrikes usually have a more distinct white supercilium than Isabelline Shrikes (Grimmett *et al.* 1999). The characters of the CI bird closely fitted those of an adult Brown Shrike.

Apart from the plumage factors referred to above, the CI bird is more likely to be a Brown Shrike on the basis of known distribution. The Isabelline Shrike has never been recorded in South-East Asia (Andrew 1992, Kennedy *et al.* 2000, Robson 2000). It normally winters no closer to CI than India, and apparently has not been recorded south-east of Bangladesh (Grimmett *et al.* 1999, Robson 2000). Furthermore, it migrates south-west from its breeding grounds in central Asia towards north-western India and Africa (Lefranc & Worfolk 1997). By contrast, the Brown Shrike is one of three species of shrike regularly found in Indonesia. The other two, Tiger Shrike *L. tigrinus* and Long-tailed Shrike *L. schach*, both

differ in the colour of their upperparts, lack a distinct white supercilium (except female Tiger Shrike, which has a strongly marked mantle) and differ from Brown Shrike in tail length (MacKinnon & Phillipps 1993, Robson 2000).

Gender and age of bird

Juvenile Brown and Isabelline Shrikes are usually barred, often on the breast, flanks, crown and mantle. Juveniles of both these species lack a boldly contrasting mask and white supercilium (Cramp & Perrins 1993, Lefranc & Worfolk 1997, Grimmett *et al.* 1999, Robson 2000). Vermiculations on the flanks are usually present in female *L.c. cristatus*, but some female Brown Shrikes are very similar to males (Cramp & Perrins 1993, Lefranc & Worfolk 1997, Harris & Franklin 2000). On the basis of the distinct mask and supercilium, and the lack of scaling, barring or vermiculations, it is probable that the CI bird was an adult male.

Discussion

There is one earlier report of a Brown Shrike from CI, in April 1962 (Pearson 1966, Stokes 1988), which was not accepted for the Australian list by Christidis & Boles (1994). Two subsequent reports of this species on CI have been accepted: 20 November 1998 (BARC case no. 260, Palliser 2000), and 12–13 December 2001 (BARC case no. 329, Stafford 2002). Another bird, an adult, occurred there from 24 to 29 April 2000 (F.T.H. Smith pers. comm., July 2003). These records indicate that the Brown Shrike may be a regular visitor to CI.

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