

# Masked Shrike:

## new to Britain

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and Ken D. Shaw

**ABSTRACT** A juvenile Masked Shrike *Lanius nubicus* was present at Kilrenny Common, Fife, from 29th October to 14th November 2004. This constitutes the first record for Britain. The possible origin of the bird and the weather patterns immediately preceding its arrival are discussed.

The dream of finding a major rarity or a national 'first' touches the mind of most birders at sometime during their life. At around 11.00 hrs on 29th October 2004, TG discovered an unfamiliar shrike at Kilrenny Common, Fife. Like so many of us, TG patrols his local patch regularly, and in the past has found a handful of scarce migrants and rarities. Familiar with Great Grey *Lanius excubitor*, Red-backed *L. collurio* and Isabelline Shrikes *L. isabellinus*, he knew when faced with this unfamiliar shrike that he had something good, the worst-case scenario being a new bird for Fife!

The following morning, MO, AWL, TG and Willie Irvine were waiting expectantly on the Common just after dawn. To their relief, the bird was relocated around 09.00 hrs and they tentatively identified it as a juvenile Woodchat Shrike *L. senator*, although doubts were expressed that the bird did not look quite right. They put the news out as a Woodchat Shrike and by 10.00 hrs Ken Shaw (KDS) arrived. Looking at the bird through AWL's telescope, he immediately posed the question 'OK, why isn't it a Masked?' Over the next couple of hours KDS, AWL and MO, with the help of John S. Nadin, Willie McBay, Gerry Owens, Willie Irvine, Jeremy Squire, Rab Shand, Anne-Marie Smout and Nick Mutch, re-identified the bird as a juvenile Masked Shrike *L. nubicus* moulting into first-winter plumage. To establish the identification beyond all doubt, authorisation to trap the bird was sought, and obtained, from the BTO Ringing Unit. AWL and MO erected a mist-net and quickly caught the bird. After examination in the hand, they confirmed its identity as Masked Shrike. With the identification established and the news released,

a continuous stream of excited birders began to arrive, which developed into a flood over the following days. Fortunately, it was a most obliging bird, enabling most twitchers to see it without a prolonged wait, and was subsequently seen by several thousand observers during its protracted stay.

### Description

The following details were noted in the field:

#### Size, structure and overall appearance

A small shrike, with a proportionately long tail and short wings, more delicate than Woodchat Shrike. In flight, lighter and more buoyant than any other shrike we have seen in the UK. When perched, reminiscent of Pied Flycatcher *Ficedula hypoleuca*. Generally, a cold, grey, white and black bird, lacking any warm or rufous tones.

#### Upperparts

The crown and nape were barred grey and white. The ear-coverts were darker, forming an indistinct mask reminiscent of Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*. The lores and lower forehead were similar to the crown but paler, giving the bird an indistinct supercilium in front of the eye. The bird showed a vague off-white collar, which, at some angles, extended almost onto the nape. The hindneck and mantle were browner-grey than the head. The back and rump were greyer than the mantle, but all were strongly barred, with each feather having a single dark subterminal band. The bird did not show a pale rump. Some feathers were missing from the left side of the tail (these were later discovered to be regrowing when examined in the hand), but the remaining tail feathers were long and thin. The central rectrices were black, and the outer two tail feathers were white, with the white extending from base to tip.

The primaries and secondaries were black,

whereas the tertials were similarly dark although slightly browner. The tertials and secondaries were edged white, while the inner primaries and secondaries were also narrowly tipped white. The bird showed a large triangular white patch at the base of the primaries on the closed wing. The greater coverts had brownish centres with pale edges, but the remainder of the coverts were untidy, comprising a combination of prominent white feathers and greyish feathers. These white feathers formed an untidy white shoulder-patch.

#### Underparts

Entirely off-white, lacking any obvious darker fringes or scalloping that is usually typical of most juvenile shrikes. The bird showed a faintly darker moustachial mark. Similarly, a faint dark wash was present on the upper flanks/shoulder.

#### Bare parts

Legs and feet black. Bill proportionately longer, finer and less hooked than that of Woodchat Shrike. Although it often looked dark, in good light the upper mandible was greyish horn with a darker tip. The lower mandible was paler at the base and darker towards the tip. Eye dark.

**Table 1.** Biometric data of juvenile Masked Shrike *Lanius nubicus* trapped and ringed at Kilrenny, Fife, 30th October 2004. Tail difference measures the distance between central and outermost tail feathers. Bill depth and width measurements taken at distal edge of nostril. PC = longest primary covert; WP = wing point (i.e. longest primary). Primary projection measured from tip of longest tertial. Primaries numbered ascendantly. Fat-score scale 0–8 ('Kaiser' system), muscle-score scale 0–3.

Wing length	88 mm
Tail length	86 mm
Tail difference	14 mm
Tarsus	22.1 mm
Bill (skull)	17.2 mm
Bill depth	5.8 mm
Bill width	4.4 mm
Weight	19.2 g
Fat score	0
Muscle score	1
P1	PC +10 mm
P2	WP –8 mm
P3	WP
P4	WP
P5	WP –2 mm
P6	WP –4 mm
P7	WP –9 mm
P8	WP –11 mm
P9	WP –14 mm
P10	WP –17 mm
Primary projection	18 mm
Primaries emarginated	P3, P4, P5

#### Behaviour

Frequently seen flycatching and returning to the same or a nearby perch. Regularly dropped to pick prey items from the ground. While perched, frequently held wings slightly drooped, and often shuffled them and pumped its tail.

#### Measurements and wing structure

Biometrics taken when the bird was captured are summarised in Table 1.

#### Population, distribution and status

##### Breeding

Masked Shrike is a monotypic species, with the smallest distribution of the six shrike species breeding in the Western Palearctic, being confined to the eastern end of the Mediterranean, Asia Minor and locally within the Middle East. Within this region, the breeding range would appear to form three distinct population centres. The breeding range of the western population extends from western Turkey, north and west through Greece and into southern Bulgaria. A second breeding centre encompasses southeastern Turkey, including Cyprus, and south through the hill country fringing the coastal areas of Syria and Lebanon, to northern and central Israel. The third breeding area lies further to the east, extending from north-eastern Iraq southeast across south-western Iran (Vaurie 1959; Shirihai 1996; Hagemeyer & Blair 1997; Lefranc & Worfolk 1997). It seems possible that isolated breeding can also occur in suitable habitats in the adjoining areas of central Turkey and along the Euphrates River valley. Breeding appears to be restricted to three main habitat types. The species shows a strong preference for olive groves and orchards, but breeding also occurs in brushy pastures and woodlands, and in riverine woodlands (Moskat & Fuisz 2002).

Estimates of the number of breeding pairs in Europe include: Turkey, 30,000–90,000; Cyprus, 4,000–10,000; Greece, 500–2,000; Macedonia, 100–150; and Bulgaria, 50–100 (BirdLife International 2004). The species suffered a large decline between 1970 and 1990, but the populations in Cyprus, Bulgaria and Macedonia were stable or increased during 1990–2000, whereas those in Greece and the European stronghold of Turkey declined, the latter by more than 10%. Given the impact of ongoing habitat loss (Perktas 2004), together with increased hunting pressures, the top-end figures may now be considered to be optimistically high.

**Migration and wintering**

Post-breeding dispersal begins as early as mid July, sometimes as early as June, but autumn passage does not start until mid-August and appears to peak in the first half of September. At this time it can be particularly numerous on migration through the Middle East, although autumn passage appears to occur mainly through the eastern Mediterranean. Stragglers can still occur in Turkey until mid October (Lefranc & Worfolk 1997). Masked Shrike is a relatively short-distance migrant, wintering within

a narrow band of sub-Saharan Africa, extending from the headwaters of the River Niger in Mali, east through Chad to encompass most of Sudan and Ethiopia through to the Red Sea coastline, with a small and localised population wintering in western Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

**Recent European records to the north and west of the breeding range**

Although this is the first record of Masked Shrike in Britain, there have been two previous



Steve Young/Birdwatch

30. Juvenile Masked Shrike *Lanius nubicus*, Kilrenny Common, Fife, November 2004.

extralimital records in northwestern Europe, and both occurred in October. The first concerned a first-winter at Lemland, Lågskär, Finland, on 23rd October 1982, which was found dead the following day. The second bird, also a juvenile, occurred at Ottenby, Öland, Sweden, on 1st October 1984. Another first-winter was found near Lunzjita, Gozo, Malta, on 20th October 1985. Clearly, late-autumn vagrancy by Masked Shrike into western and northern Europe is not unprecedented.



Iain Leach

31. Juvenile Masked Shrike *Lanius nubicus*, Kilrenny Common, Fife, November 2004.

**Possible origins of the Kilrenny Masked Shrike**

The arrival of this bird coincided with a fall of migrants along the east coast of Scotland on 28th October, when species recorded in the East Neuk of Fife included Woodcock *Scolopax rusticicola*, Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*, Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*, Barred Warbler *Sylvia nisoria*, and 'eastern' Lesser Whitethroat, four Pallas's Warblers *Phylloscopus proregulus* and a Red-breasted Flycatcher *F. parva*. Elsewhere in eastern Scotland, the last few days of October saw the arrival of

many migrants, including a Lesser Grey Shrike *L. minor* at Newburgh, Northeast Scotland, on 31st.

### Weather situation

Assuming that the Masked Shrike arrived in Britain on 29th October, estimates of its migration track and likely speed of travel suggest an entirely natural reversed passage. This species is a nocturnal migrant, but it is difficult to judge precisely when this individual left its breeding area, since it was presumably off-passage during daylight hours.

An area of high pressure lay over the westernmost part of the breeding range from the third week of October. A light southerly airflow became established on 26th October, ahead of a weak area of low pressure over central Europe. A reversed heading at any time during the previous week, stimulated by the fine weather, would have put the bird under the influence of southeasterly winds which were strengthening over northwest Europe ahead of an explosively deepening depression approaching southwest Britain. This depression became more or less stationary between 27th and 29th October, maintaining a strong southeasterly airflow over Britain, which steadily penetrated eastwards into northwest Europe during 27th and 28th October. It seems likely that the Masked Shrike was caught up in this airflow, which, as it increased in strength, carried it across central

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and northwest Europe, and finally across the North Sea and into Fife.

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**EDITORIAL COMMENT** Colin Bradshaw, Chairman of the British Birds Rarities Committee, commented: ‘This excellent find was a straightforward bird for BBRC to assess. The bird was seen by hundreds of admirers once the news was broadcast, and the excellent photos, two of which are reproduced here, together with a detailed description of the bird in the hand, made life easy for us! It seemed almost inevitable that, when a Masked Shrike did eventually turn up in Britain, it would be an immature bird; this had the added bonus of giving many observers the chance to become familiar with the species in a plumage which they had previously not encountered.’

Eric Meek, Chairman of the British Ornithologists’ Union Records Committee, commented: ‘With records in the 1980s from Finland and Sweden, both also in October, it was probably only a matter of time before Masked Shrike was accepted onto the British List. The timing, east-coast locality and the fact that this species is unknown in captivity all made this a relatively easy decision for the BOURC. With Rüppell’s Warbler *Sylvia rueppelli* already an established vagrant to Britain, we eagerly await the arrival of an Olive-tree Warbler *Hippolais olivetorum* to complete the southeast European triumvirate!’