

The status of the Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio* in Afghanistan

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Summary: Unpublished evidence from 1970 and recent documented observations clarify the status of the Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio* in Afghanistan. The species is as a regular passage migrant in small numbers across most of the country.

INTRODUCTION

The two most recent and comprehensive avian field guides covering Afghanistan, either as part of South Asia (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), or Central Asia (Ayé *et al* 2012), do not mention Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio* as belonging to the country's avifauna. This omission is surprising considering that the country is within the migration flyway of the easternmost Asian populations, between the area lying north-east of Tomsk, Russia, and linking the rivers Ob and Yenisey, and their winter range in eastern and southern Africa (Lefranc & Worfolk 1997). During migration, Siberian birds cross Kazakhstan and Iran and those from the extreme eastern part of the range pass, in small numbers, through western Pakistan and northern Gujarat in India (Lefranc & Worfolk 1997). However, what appears as an oddity may result from misidentifications related to the complex taxonomic history of the *collurio/isabellinus/phoenicuroides* group (Lefranc & Worfolk 1997, Worfolk 2000). Moreover, a lack of reporting typifies this country, which has received little attention from ornithologists, with uncertainty surrounding reported records.

RESULTS

Twentieth-century records

There is no mention of Red-backed Shrike (nominate *collurio*) in Hugh Whistler's compilation of the avifauna of Afghanistan (Whistler 1944, 1945a, b, c, d), or in the *Third Danish Expedition to Central Asia* in 1947-1949 (Paludan 1959). Nor does it appear in the PhD dissertation of Alain Puget on the birds of north-east Afghanistan (Puget 1969). These are the three most comprehensive ornithological compilations for Afghanistan and its north-eastern quarter in the twentieth century. Between the mid-1960s and the onset of the Soviet-Afghan war in 1979, there were several publications resulting from short trips and observational studies (see Appendix 1). These provide limited supporting notes on new records, and therefore Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) cite them cautiously. Among these reports, we found only one mention of the species in Afghanistan, in Viellard (1969), who observed a male *L. c. kobylini* (Crimea to Iran; Lefranc & Worfolk 1997) in late April 1969, south of Herat city, Herat Province. However, the author could not rule out a possible hybrid *kobylini* x *phoenicuroides* or an atypical *phoenicuroides*. In August-September 1970, the Oxford University expedition, attended by at least five ornithologists, studied the resident and migratory avifauna of Band-e-Amir, Bamyan Province. SP, the expedition's leader, released an unpublished report (Pimm 2008) that confirmed the presence of Red-backed Shrike. They also reported that three subspecies of the "red-tailed shrike" group *isabellinus/phoenicuroides/speculigerus* (see photos in Voous, 1979), nowadays classified respectively as Turkestan Shrike *L. phoenicuroides* and Isabelline Shrike *L. isabellinus* (Ayé *et al* 2012), appeared in 'respectable' numbers in Band-e-Amir. The team and SP mist-netted and ringed 146 shrikes, including four Red-backed Shrikes, one possible hybrid Red-backed Shrike x "red-tailed shrike" (Table 1) and 141 "red-tailed shrikes" (*L.*

isabellinus/phoenicuroides/speculigerus). Interestingly all Red-backed Shrikes were adults or in second calendar year age groups. These may migrate earlier than first-winter/juvenile birds (Lefranc & Worfolk 1997). Based on these records, a literature review, and his field observations, Steve Madge, who participated in the expedition, proposed unambiguously in his provisional checklist of the birds of Afghanistan the status of passage migrant for the nominate Red-backed Shrike *L. c. collurio*, migratory breeder for *L. phoenicuroides*, and winter visitor for *L. isabellinus* (S Madge in litt). Separate from this expedition but the same year, Tim Inskipp and colleagues reported in an annotated bird list three Red-backed Shrikes seen between Delaram and Kandahar on 24 September 1970, and one additional specimen between Ghazni and Kabul on 25 September 1970. They did not detail whether Red-backed Shrike referred specifically to *L. collurio* or included *phoenicuroides* and *isabellinus* subspecies/races. Seven years later, Carol Inskipp and Tim Inskipp reported again seeing one Red-backed Shrike between Farah Rud and Delaram on 19 September 1977. During the Soviet-Afghan war (1979-1989) and the subsequent protracted civil wars (1989-2001), ornithologists rarely visited the country, and the avifauna remained largely unstudied.

Table 1. Summary of biometrical data of Red-backed Shrikes *Lanius collurio* ringed in Band-e-Amir, Bamyan, Afghanistan by Stuart Pimm in August 1970. Wing length measured as maximum chord. Wing-tip shapes show length of primary 3 (p3) compared to primary 4 (p4). Primaries numbered ascendent.

Ring no.	Date	Sex	Age	Weight (g)	Wing length (mm)	Tail length (mm)	Wing-tip shape
AB45332	14-Aug-70	Male	2nd	32	100	-	-
AB45343	15-Aug-70	Male	Ad	27	90	79	-
AB45476*	22-Aug-70	-	Ad	31	96	81	p3>p4
AB45557	25-Aug-70	Male	Ad	26	91	-	p3>p4
AB45586	27-Aug-70	-	Ad	30	91	77	p3=p4
Reference for <i>Lanius collurio</i> (Worfolk, 2000)					87-100	69-79	p3 (p4)

*Recorded as 'possible hybrid'.

Twenty-first-century records

On 26 September 2002, during the post-conflict environmental assessment mission commissioned by the UNEP, Anthony Fitzherbert reported with limited documentation and no photographs a single Red-backed Shrike in buckthorn thickets by the Pamir River in Wakhan District of Badakhshan Province (Anon 2003). On 8 October 2009, while posted in Camp Bastion military base in Helmand province in Afghanistan, Richard Seargent photographed an adult male Red-backed Shrike in a marshy area within the base (Mallalieu & Seargent 2016). This observation is the first unequivocal record of this species in Afghanistan. It predates that made by Anssi Kulberg, who reported seeing a bird in Bamyan Province in September 2012 but could not photograph it (pers comm in Mallalieu & Seargent 2016), then by Peter Kaestner, who photographed an adult male on 21 November 2013 at Mazar-e Sharif airport military base (Mallalieu & Kaestner 2015). Finally, Mark Mallalieu also photographed an adult male in a garden in central Kabul on 22 August 2014 (Mallalieu & Kaestner 2015).

The Wildlife Conservation Society has been present continuously in the Wakhan district of Afghanistan (which became a national park in 2014) since 2006. It has also

recorded Red-backed Shrikes in this area. On 18 September 2011, two birds seen in the riparian thickets near Goz Khun village were recorded as ‘possible’ Red-backed Shrikes. They could not be photographed, and confirmation was not possible because of the crepuscular conditions. Then on 12 September 2017, a specimen in first-winter plumage was observed and photographed in willow trees and sea buckthorn thickets surrounding a wheat field along the Panj River in mid-Wakhan valley (Plate 1), followed by two first-winter birds in grassy areas and sea buckthorn thickets near the Qila-e Panja village (about 50 km to the east) between 15 and 19 September 2017 (Plate 2), and again two first-winter birds in riparian vegetation in lower Istimoch, Big Pamir, on 7 and 9 October 2017. By the end of 2017, the local WCS team was well acquainted with this species and reported three



Plate 1. Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio* in first-winter plumage (heavily barred on the back) near cultivated land, Wakhan National Park, Badakhshan Province, 12 September 2017. © AM Rajabi / WCS



Plate 2. Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio* in first-winter plumage (note long wing, barred back, greyish nape, poorly marked supercilium and typical rusty/chestnut ear-coverts), in sea buckthorn thickets, Wakhan National Park, Badakhshan Province, Afghanistan, 17 September 2017. © AM Rajabi / WCS



Plate 3. Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio* in first-winter plumage, long-winged, heavily barred above with contrastingly greyer nape, Wakhan National Park, Badakhshan Province, Afghanistan, 19 September 2019. © AM Rajabi / WCS

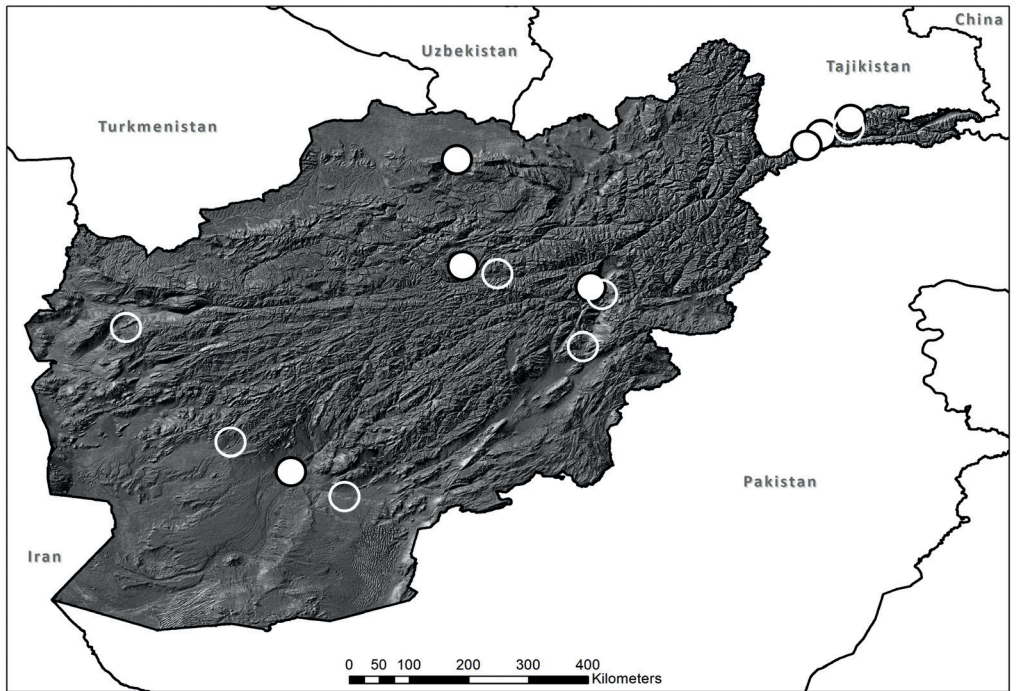


Figure 1. Shaded relief map of Afghanistan showing locations of documented (filled circles) and undocumented/unconfirmed (open circles) records of Red-backed Shrikes in Afghanistan for the last 52 years.

additional sightings, including two first-winter birds (Plate 3) between the villages of Khandud and Sargez in the Wakhan Valley, on 8, 9 and 19 September 2019.

CONCLUSIONS

In Afghanistan, almost all observations were between August and early October. These dates correspond to the documented autumn migration period for the species across most of its range (Lefranc & Worfolk 1997), including through Pakistan (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). The November observation is unusually late for the species, although autumn passage through Oman extends to late November (Sargeant *et al* 2008).

Little has been published on the ornithology of Afghanistan. Nevertheless, unpublished evidence and recent documented observations support the Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio* as a regular autumn passage migrant in small numbers across most of Afghanistan (Fig. 1). Even so, observations remain few and scattered. We should view this from the perspective of the scarcity of experienced birdwatchers in the country. Noticeably the species' occurrence was reported in areas of protracted detection efforts during the autumn migration period, such as in Kabul, in military bases and Wakhan National Park. It is likely that the species also crosses Afghanistan during spring migration, although confirmed spring observations are lacking so far. Also, the recently reported summer extension of the *koblyni* subspecies in the north-east of Iran (Aliabadian *et al* 2011) certainly warrants further consideration of the possibility of Red-backed Shrikes breeding in the north-westernmost part of Afghanistan, an area rarely visited by ornithologists.

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Appendix 1. List of searched literature for records of Red-backed Shrikes in the mid 1960s to 1979 in Afghanistan.

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