

First record of Masked Shrike *Lanius nubicus* in Armenia

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The global breeding distribution of Masked Shrike *Lanius nubicus* covers Mesopotamia, Syria, Iran, Palestine, Israel, the southern Balkan peninsula and Asia Minor (including Cyprus), the wintering grounds being in NE Africa and southern Arabia (Dementyev 1954, Sokolov 1986, Mullarney *et al* 1999). It has a global population estimated to be 20 000–50 000 individuals and there is evidence of a population decline (Harris & Franklin 2000). In the Soviet Union territories, the first record of the species was in SE Turkmen SSR (Dementyev 1954).

On 30 May 2007, FXM, MA and Sylva Adamian observed on the southeastern slopes of Mount Aragats a pair of Masked Shrikes, the first record of this species in Armenia. Our group had been birding at altitudes between c700 m and c3000 m asl from 10.00 am mainly in the vicinity of Byurakan and Antaratut villages. These villages are situated up to c1500–1700 m asl in an area of melon fields, vineyards, orchards and poplar trees. The more arid areas mostly contain wild rose *Rosa* sp bushes and a variety of dry mountain-steppe grasses and herbs (wormwood *Artemisia absinthium* is dominant). Byurakan astronomical observatory and Amberd meteorological station are sited at c1560 m and c2060 m asl respectively on the drier slopes above the villages.

About 200–250 m SE of Amberd meteorological station, there are two stands of dried-out and insect-infested acacia *Acacia pubina pseudocaucasica* trees (an introduced species) at c2050 m asl in an open grassy area scattered with boulders and wild rose bushes *Rosa canina*. The acacia stands are about 100 m from the lower edge of nearby oak woodland while the closest natural upper treeline here is above 2200 m asl. In this area at c16.00 h, FXM observed, from a distance of about 50 m, a bird with black and white markings perching in a shrike-like manner on top of one of the acacia trees. The bird dropped down abruptly, caught something and flew to the next tree. In flight, the bird's behaviour and appearance were reminiscent of Woodchat Shrike *L. senator*. When the bird alighted, however, it allowed lengthy, clear views using binoculars and after discussion we identified it as a Masked Shrike, a species with which FXM is very familiar having visited the southern Arava valley in Israel on around ten occasions in spring. The relatively subdued black coloration on the upperparts and the less intense orange wash on the flanks suggested strongly that this was a female.

Some 15 minutes later a second bird appeared and joined the female. By this time we had set up a telescope and were able to enjoy very clear, prolonged views of both birds at distances down to 20 m at times. The more intense black on the upperparts of the second bird, the white on the forehead, the black mask and the richer orange coloration on the flanks were typical of male Masked Shrike, illustrated nicely inside and, rather conveniently, on the cover of our field guide (Porter *et al* 1996).

Unfortunately, at about 17.30 h, after much excitement studying the birds, a relatively sudden and severe storm began, forcing our group to abandon birding for the day. Conditions prior to this had been good, with little wind and 4/8 cloud cover providing excellent viewing conditions. FXM and MA returned on 7 June and spent four or five hours searching for the birds but were unable to locate them.

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