

The first confirmed breeding record of Bay-backed Shrike *Lanius vittatus* in the United Arab Emirates, with comments on field characters of juveniles

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Bay-backed Shrike *Lanius vittatus* breeds widely across the Indian subcontinent, from southeastern Iran, Afghanistan, and the terai of Nepal southwards, although is absent from Sri Lanka and northeastern India (Porter *et al* 1996, Grimmet *et al* 1999). It is a rare migrant in the United Arab Emirates and Oman, with most records from mid March to late April (Pedersen & Aspinall 2010, Eriksen *et al* 2010), although one of the Omani records refers to confirmed breeding (Harrison & Sargeant, 1995). Even so, the discovery of an adult Bay-backed Shrike feeding two juveniles at Masafi Wadi, Ras al Khaimah, UAE (25° 20' 40.55" N, 56° 10' 16.57" E) in June 2010 was unanticipated; the possibility of this was not discussed by Aspinall (2010) in a comprehensive review of breeding birds of the UAE. This short paper documents the 2010 breeding event, outlines field characters for juvenile Bay-backed Shrike and presents circumstantial evidence indicating that the species may, in fact, have bred in the UAE (or nearby) in 2009 as well.



Plate 1. Adult Bay-backed Shrike *Lanius vittatus*, Masafi Wadi, UAE, June 2010. © Mike Barth

DISCOVERY OF THE BIRDS IN 2010

On 7 June 2010, NM and WH visited Masafi Wadi to look for breeding Scrub Warblers *Scotocerca inquieta*. Having found these and observed them for some time, they then noted two interesting juvenile shrikes. The appearance of both birds seemed rather odd for the only locally breeding shrike (Southern Grey *L. meridionalis*) and this impression was confirmed when a striking adult Bay-backed Shrike appeared to feed them. NM and WH informed local birdwatchers, many of whom were able to observe the birds over subsequent days. These included OC who made detailed notes on 11 June, some of which are incorporated below. The family was last recorded 23 July, in exactly the same area where they had been discovered (Mark Smiles pers comm). The record has been accepted by the Emirates Bird Records Committee (EBRC).

Throughout the period of observation, only three individuals (the adult and two juveniles) were observed. Incidences of broods (in particular, late ones) being fed by only one parent (of either sex) have been reported for Red-backed Shrike *L. collurio* (Cramp & Perrins 1993). Bay-backed Shrikes are generally very difficult to sex but the western race *nargianus* (which, on geographic grounds, almost certainly accounts for all Arabian records) shows greater average differences between the sexes than nominate *vittatus*: females tend to be duller, greyer and with less striking colours (Lefranc & Worfolk 1997). Close examination of the adult (Plate 1) indicated that it exhibited a rather drab, dark (sooty) grey forehead and lores (contrasting with glossy black ear coverts) and a very



Plates 2–4. Juvenile Bay-backed Shrikes *Lanius vittatus*, Masafi Wadi, UAE, June 2010. © Mike Barth

white underside with a creamy-rust tinge limited to a small area of the breast side, perhaps suggesting that it was a female.

FIELD APPEARANCE OF THE JUVENILES

Photographs of the juveniles are presented in Plates 2 to 4. Literature consulted (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005, Harris & Franklin 2000, Lefranc & Worfolk 1997) suggested that juvenile Bay-backed Shrike is very similar to juvenile Red-backed Shrike. However, our observations do not support this and, for this reason, we present some comments on the field characters of juvenile Bay-backed Shrike.

Like the adult, both juveniles appeared structurally fairly distinct from both Red-backed and Turkestan Shrikes *L. phoenicuroides*. They were markedly short-winged (with just 4 primaries projecting beyond the tertials), very long-tailed (which was narrow at the base and slightly wider at tip) and had a rather large-headed, bulky appearance. Just like the adult, they regularly gave continual long, sweeping waves of the tail in a manner more reminiscent of Masked Shrike *L. nubicus* than any other congener. In combination, to an experienced observer, this created an overall jizz that was rather different to either Red-backed or Turkestan Shrike.

With regard to plumage, the juveniles differed from juvenile Red-backed Shrike, as described by Cramp & Perrins (1993), by a number of features that, used in combination, should allow confident separation of the two species. The overall effect is of a more variegated, contrasting bird than juvenile Red-backed. This is a consequence of the following plumage features:

A paler, greyer crown and nape contrasting with rather solid, blackish-brown ear coverts. (Overall effect much more subdued on Red-backed, due to the much warmer ground colour to the crown and nape, essentially concolorous with the mantle).

Much of the mantle appeared similar to the nape, with the scapulars forming contrastingly rather plain, warm brown panels on either side. (Again, Red-backed much more uniform).

Virtually unscaled white underparts that exhibited a creamy tinge. (Some—and often extensive—scaling is typical of Red-backed).

Median and lesser coverts were essentially milky-grey (with a prominent dark central crescent) and so appeared as a prominent pale ‘shoulder’ patch compared to the warmer, tawny-brown greater coverts. It seems unlikely that juvenile Red-backed will ever show this pattern.

Although images and descriptions of juvenile (as opposed to first winter) Turkestan Shrike are hard to come by, the plumage features described above, in combination, should also serve to distinguish juvenile Bay-backed Shrike from juvenile Turkestan Shrike. Of course, such considerations are academic when the birds are in the company of a parent but these features allowed a confident, retrospective identification of a lone juvenile Bay-backed Shrike photographed in the UAE in 2009 (see below).

BEHAVIOUR

On the morning of 11 June, all three birds were very active, ranging along their favoured wadi and flying up the shallow slope behind. At one point they crossed the ridge into an adjacent wadi before, eventually, returning. The adult was especially mobile, rarely staying still for long periods and covering up to 100 m on many flights. It generally utilised low *Acacia tortilis* trees as perches and seemed to have no preference for any part of the crown. The appearance of a Southern Grey Shrike precipitated immediate alarm and the adult was seen to mob the larger species by ‘floating’ over it on open, rounded wings and fully splayed tail, before abruptly dropping onto a nearby perch. This was repeated several times. Similar high, soaring flights were also made in pursuit of winged insects, which were then brought down and fed to the juveniles. Feeding occurred about once every 10 minutes and inevitably resulted in loud, harsh begging and much wing-fluttering from the young. The young were still vociferously begging for food on 23 July. Otherwise the birds were silent, apart from a dry, raspy, rather insect-like ‘churr’ given by the adult frequently before 07.00 h but not afterwards.

The juveniles were considerably less active than the adult and spent longer periods perching in shade. They were also regularly observed on the ground, where they readily perched on small boulders and low twigs for prolonged periods. Here they were seen

attempting to forage for themselves, although no evidence of success was observed. This was done by hopping from stone to stone with tails erect in a manner curiously reminiscent of a South African rockjumper *Chaetops*.

HABITAT AND ASSOCIATED SPECIES

The shrikes frequented an arid, narrow wadi running off the edge of a much larger, wider wadi. The altitude was 490 metres asl and the birds were less than 300 m from the main Masafi–Dibba road. The predominant vegetation comprised small scattered trees of *A. tortilis* and *Ziziphus spina-christi*. The only herbs evident (in mid-summer) were dried, sun-blasted examples of *Tephrosia appollinea* and *Euphorbia larica*. The nest was searched for but not found. However, as both juveniles showed traces of down (and one the remnants of a gape line) when they were discovered, the nest was presumably not far away. Other species observed nearby included Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse *Pterocles lichtensteinii*, Little Owl *Athene noctua*, Desert Lark *Ammomanes deserti*, Hume's Wheatear *Oenanthe albonigra*, Scrub Warbler and Southern Grey Shrike. Interestingly, a male Turkestan Shrike was located close by on 11 June; this is one of very few mid-summer records of this species in the UAE (T Pedersen pers comm).

PREVIOUS RECORDS OF BAY-BACKED SHRIKE IN THE UAE AND THE BREEDING RECORD FROM OMAN

Prior to this breeding record at Masafi, Bay-backed Shrike had been recorded 16 times in the UAE, 1970–2010. Eleven records were in spring, including nine 11 March–21 April (Pedersen & Aspinall 2010). It is probably no coincidence that this breeding record followed a particularly strong spring showing: there were three records of migrant Bay-backed Shrikes in the UAE in 2010, all of which were located within 40 km of Masafi. This compares with no previous records since 2006 and only one previous spring (1995) had more than one record. Spring 2010 was generally perceived as a relatively wet one locally and this may have encouraged migrant shrikes to settle and breed.

As mentioned above, Bay-backed Shrike has been recorded breeding once before in Arabia. This was in Musandam, Oman in 2004 (Harrison & Sargeant 2005, Jennings 2010, Eriksen *et al* 2010). There, a nest was found on 22 April with the female apparently incubating. The location, at 418 metres asl and with scattered *Z. spina-christi* and *A. tortilis* trees, was not dissimilar to Masafi Wadi.

DID BAY-BACKED SHRIKE BREED IN OR CLOSE TO THE UAE IN 2009?

While this paper was in preparation, Tommy Pedersen passed to OC some photographs of an unidentified juvenile shrike, purportedly Red-backed or Turkestan, as part of an unrelated discussion. The bird in question (Plate 5) was photographed at Kalba, on the east coast of the UAE, on 3 July 2009. After some thought, OC realised that this bird was not a good match for either juvenile



Plate 5. Juvenile Bay-backed Shrike *Lanius vittatus*, Kalba, UAE, July 2009. © Derrick Wilby

Red-backed or Turkestan Shrike and, in fact, was very similar to the juvenile Bay-backed Shrikes at Masafi. Comparison of photographs confirmed this, and the Kalba bird exhibited all features indicative of juvenile Bay-backed Shrike, as discussed above, and the record has now been accepted as Bay-backed by the EBRC. It is fascinating, although purely speculative, to consider the origins of this individual. Whilst probably unlikely to have originated from a nest exactly where it was photographed (at sea level), there are many wadis close to Kalba that are similar to Masafi Wadi and it is entirely conceivable that the bird was recorded as it dispersed away from a nearby natal site. It was still almost entirely in juvenile plumage. We have not been able to source data on the timing of the post-juvenile moult of Bay-backed Shrike but both Turkestan and Red-backed Shrike juveniles have a partial post-breeding moult that starts rapidly (within 3–4 weeks of fledging, and certainly before migration, Cramp & Perrins 1993). Assuming Bay-backed Shrike to be similar, the possibility of a bird from southern Iran reaching the UAE in such a plumage seems unlikely. Note that local breeding does not necessarily imply breeding in the UAE; Kalba is close to the Omani border beyond which there is also much suitable habitat.

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