

Red-backed Shrikes *Lanius collurio*: first record(s) for Afghanistan

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During a 12 month posting in Mazar-e-Sharif, Balkh province, northern Afghanistan, 29 May 2013–22 May 2014, PK carried out regular observations of birds, especially on the military base adjacent to the international airport. On 21 November 2013, he photographed a shrike perched on razor wire (Plate 1) at the far southwest corner of the perimeter fence of the base, at a distance of over 50 m. Although the photo is of poor quality, a combination of plumage features and structure suggest that the bird is an adult male Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*. It has a grey crown and nape, extending slightly onto the mantle, the rest of which appears chestnut. The flight feathers appear dark, the exact colour being impossible to determine. From the photo it is hard to make out the colour of the wing coverts but they appear chestnut like the mantle. No white patch is visible at the primary bases though a piece of wire could be hiding any such markings. There is a prominent black band from the base of the bill to the rear of the head, with a white throat and sides to the head. The rest of the underparts are pale peach in colour, though the undertail-coverts appear whitish. Most of the uppertail looks black but a white edge to the proximal half is visible. The rump looks pale grey. In structure and posture, it is a typical shrike. The only confusion species are male Turkestan Shrike *L. phoenicuroides* and Bay-backed Shrike *L. vittatus*. Male Turkestan Shrike would show a rufous crown fringed below by white, a greyish-brown mantle, a rufous tail and a white patch at the base of the primaries. In Bay-backed Shrike the black band would extend well over the forehead, the upperparts would be darker chestnut and the underparts would be whiter with rusty flanks. Even taking into account the wire, some of the large white bases to the primaries would be visible.

The possibility of hybrid origin also needs to be considered (Worfolk 2000). T Worfolk *in litt* considered that this could not be ruled out and commented that “The black mask doesn’t appear to extend at all onto the forehead, which is odd for Red-backed and the mantle colour appears a little darker, duller and less rufous than normal (of course this could be a result of the light or photographic settings). I’d also like a better view of the tail. It may well have been a perfectly normal *collurio* but, given the alarming number and variety of hybrids recorded in the Middle East, I’d rather be overcautious.” We agree that the quality of the photo is less than ideal for a first record, but consider that the sighting merits consideration as the first record of Red-backed Shrike for Afghanistan.

On 22 August 2014, MM photographed an adult male Red-backed Shrike in a garden in central Kabul (Plates 2 & 3). In these photographs the chestnut wing coverts, chestnut fringing to tertials, primaries and secondaries are all visible, helping to rule out Bay-backed Shrike. There is a very small white spot at the base of the primaries, which is shown by some Red-backed Shrikes (Ayé *et al* 2012). The bird appeared smaller and markedly shorter



Plate 1. Adult male Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*, Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan, 21 November 2013. © Peter Kaestner



Plate 2 (left). Adult male Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*, Kabul, Afghanistan, 22 August 2014. © Mark Mallalieu

Plate 3 (right). Adult male Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*, Kabul, Afghanistan, 22 August 2014. © Mark Mallalieu

tailed than Long-tailed Shrike *L. schach*, which is relatively common in Kabul on spring passage and in summer (MM pers obs). Worfolk *in litt* considered that this individual showed “no obvious signs of hybrid origin...a perfect black and white *collurio* tail, an extremely strong point in favour of a ‘pure’ Red-backed rather than a hybrid. The white primary patch appear to be quite common on eastern...Red-backed.” This individual was observed to catch a wasp *Vespa* sp.

The occurrence of Red-backed Shrike in Afghanistan is unsurprising. *Lanius collurio pallidifrons* breeds in central Siberia (Worfolk 2000) and autumn migrants occur in Pakistan and northwest India (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). The bird in Mazar-e-Sharif was seen on an apparently late date given that the main passage period in Sudan is late August–early October (Cramp 1993). However, autumn passage through Oman is late August–late November (Sergeant *et al* 2008) making the date of the Mazar-e-Sharif bird slightly less surprising. We can find no published records of this species for Afghanistan. None are cited by Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) and UNEP (2008) did not include the species in its bird list.

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