

Masked Shrike near Vyara: an intriguing first record for India

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The Masked Shrike (*Lanius nubicus*) is a small, pied shrike, breeding from southern Europe to western Iran, and wintering in Africa (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). It has a small breeding range, from the eastern Mediterranean, further east till Iran, and probably in southern Turkmenistan and north-east Afghanistan. All populations are migratory, and mainly winter in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the eastern part of the continent in Ethiopia, Sudan and eastern Chad, while a small population winters in SW Arabia (Lefranc & Worfolk 1997, Yosef & ISWG 2017).

The Masked Shrike is not known to occur in India, and it is given as 'possible either as a summer visitor or vagrant on migration to extreme NW of region' (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). There are no records of the species from India, and it is not included in the latest checklists of birds of Gujarat (Ganpule 2016), and the birds of India (Praveen *et al.* 2017).

On 18 December 2016, I was bird watching in the Govaldev area (21° 02' N 73° 22' E) of Kaanjan village, near Vyara (Dist: Tapi, south Gujarat). The habitat is a typical forest. Here, I spotted a shrike which I could not recognise. It had white forehead and supercilium, black crown, and black facial mask over the lores, eyes and ear coverts. It had black mantle and wings, but white scapulars. The underparts were white, with rufous flanks. I could get good views of the bird and I took some photos. I tried to identify it but could not do so. I saw the bird in this area 3-4 times in three weeks, with the last sighting on 8 January 2017, and took more than 45 images. Since I could not identify it, I did not realise the importance of this sighting. I sent the images to a few friends for identification. The images were widely circulated, and it was identified much later in one of the birding groups as a Masked Shrike. I was very surprised when the identification was confirmed. It was very exciting for me to see this bird here.

[The photos show all the diagnostic features of the Masked Shrike and there is no doubt that it is indeed a Masked Shrike. It is probably a male based on its plumage, and its sighting in south Gujarat is

very intriguing. However, it should be noted that the species is prone to vagrancy, with vagrants appearing from time to time outside their breeding and wintering areas, or normal migration routes; individuals have been seen as far west as Libya, in France, Spain, and even in Finland and Sweden, and recently in Germany, Holland and UK (Lefranc & Worfolk 1997, Yosef & ISWG 2017). However, vagrants have not been noted towards the east (in Pakistan or India) of its known range. This sighting in late December and early January is indicative of the bird being a vagrant during late autumn passage. It should be noted that there is a recent record of a Woodchat Shrike (*Lanius senator*), a species with a somewhat similar range and migration route, from Maharashtra, in September 2013 (Nandgaonkar 2013), which was also the first record of that species for India.

Since there was no previous record of the Masked Shrike from India, our editorial board decided to verify and confirm the sighting. Jugal Patel, from Bardoli, and Dr. Sunil Moteria, from Rajkot, checked and confirmed the location and the photos of this bird. As stated by the observer, they saw that there were more than 45 images of this individual taken by the observer, and the original images were checked (EXIF data) and confirmed by them. Hence, there remained no doubt regarding the sighting and it was decided to accept this record. This seems to be an extraordinary case of vagrancy, similar to the record of the Woodchat Shrike from Maharashtra.

The Masked Shrike is an addition to the avifauna of Gujarat, and also India, and is the first documented sighting of the species from the Indian Subcontinent.

We are very thankful to Jugal Patel and Dr. Sunil Moteria for all their help – Eds]

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