

Red-backed, Brown, Isabelline and Red-tailed Shrike in Gujarat

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Recent DNA, morphological and vocal studies have resulted in taxonomic changes in shrikes (*Laniidae*). Details about taxonomy, morphological characteristics and identification of Red-backed Shrike (*Lanius collurio*), Brown Shrike (*Lanius cristatus*), Isabelline Shrike (*Lanius isabellinus*) and Red-tailed Shrike (*Lanius phoenicuroides*) are given in Pearson (2000), Worfolk (2000), Harris & Franklin (2000) and Lefranc & Worfolk (2013), which are widely used reference guides. These changes have been incorporated in the latest reference books for India, namely Grimmett *et al.* (2011) and Rasmussen & Anderton (2012), wherein Isabelline Shrike and Red-tailed Shrike are now treated as separate species.

All four of the above species occur in Gujarat. Hence their current status and distribution, along with taxonomic details, is discussed below. Since identification is many times difficult, especially of first-winter birds, Worfolk (2000), along with Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) and Lefranc & Worfolk (2013) was mainly used for identification, and expert opinion taken for some difficult individuals. A host of features are usually required to be studied for separating these species.

Red-backed Shrike



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Fig 1: Red-backed Shrike

Red-backed Shrike breeds in the west and central Palearctic and winters in Africa, and the eastern sub-species *kobylini* occurs here; it is unclear if the nominate *collurio* occurs in India (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). However some authorities like Cramp & Perrins (1993), Worfolk (2000) and Yosef *et al.* (2012) consider that the Red-backed Shrike is best treated as monotypic.

For Gujarat, Grimmett *et al.* (2011) show only isolated records for Kachchh and Saurashtra, while Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) show it as a passage migrant in Kachchh, but give in text as 'mainly south Gujarat', which is erroneous as there are no records from south Gujarat. Ali (1955) collected specimens in Kachchh, and stated it as 'a not uncommon passage migrant', but did not note it in Saurashtra or south Gujarat.

Red-backed Shrike is a regular autumn passage migrant in Gujarat and seen from late August / early September till about mid - November. It is easily seen in Kachchh, but is scarcer in Saurashtra and north Gujarat. It is common in Banni and Naliya in Kachchh. Outside of these areas, Khachar (1996) noted it in Hingolghadh, near Rajkot, and it has been recorded from Little Rann of Kachchh and surrounding areas (*pers. observ.*, one individual on 3 November 2011, images on birding websites like www.orientalbirdimages.org, www.indianaturewatch.net), from Patan (in north Gujarat) and in Poshitra, near Dwarka, Jamnagar District (*pers. observ.*, three individuals on 21 September 2014, **Fig 1**). Sightings have been recently reported from Rajkot and Junagadh (Shamshersingh & Shukla 2016). It could be more widespread but is probably overlooked. More observations outside Kachchh would help in understanding its distribution in other areas in Gujarat. There are unconfirmed reports of Red-backed Shrike in December /January from the state, and may represent overwintering birds, but this can be proved if there are regular, documented sightings in the future. There is only one (probable) record of Red-backed Shrike during spring (return) passage (Ali 1955), and it seems it does not occur in Gujarat during spring passage.

Brown Shrike (*L. cristatus cristatus*)



Fig 2: Brown Shrike

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The nominate Brown Shrike (*L. c. cristatus*) breeds in eastern Siberia, from the Russian Altai and the Ob river, eastwards through northern and eastern Mongolia (where it is sympatric with *isabellinus*) to the Pacific and is a winter visitor in India, mainly to eastern India (Worfolk 2000, Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).

Only two isolated winter records of Brown Shrike are shown for Gujarat (Kazmierczak 2000, Grimmett *et al.* 2011), while Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) do not show its occurrence in Gujarat. Ali (1955) collected two specimens from the Dang

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forest area in south Gujarat and noted that it was not seen elsewhere in Gujarat, Saurashtra or Kachchh. The same two records are probably shown in the above mentioned reference texts for Gujarat. Himmatsinhji (1995)

recorded it in Kachchh, though considered the identification as tentative, and remarked that it would be interesting to know if there are confirmed sightings in north Gujarat and Saurashtra.

I have noted Brown Shrike three times in the last few years (**Fig 2**) and there have been other sightings recently from Gujarat. I have tried to collect as many records (photographs) posted on different birding websites, to get an idea of its status and distribution in Gujarat.

As can be seen from the records given in the table, Brown Shrike is a rare winter migrant to Gujarat. Sightings in all the winter months are indicative that there are at least some individuals wintering in Gujarat. In the winters of 2015-2016, and 2016-2017, more birds were noted here; a sighting near Bhuj, Kachchh (Parekh 2016), from Jamnagar on 6 December 2016 (Maulik Varu, *pers. comm.*) and from Girnar Wildlife Sanctuary, Junagadh, in January 2016 (Naman Doshi, *pers. comm.*). An adult was photographed in Naliya, Kachchh, on 12 September 2016 (Punit Mehta, *eBird*) and a first-winter individual was noted near Porbandar on 25 December 2016 (*pers. observ.*). Since there have been many sightings here, in almost all parts of the state, it can be said that this extends its range eastwards towards Gujarat.

It is possible that the Brown Shrike is overlooked due to identification difficulties. There are many photos of shrikes from Gujarat posted on birding websites as Brown Shrikes. However, most of them are misidentified. I have also not considered sightings posted on 'eBird' without photos. I have taken only sightings where the identification is confirmed with photographs. My personal observation is that the Brown Shrike is a rare, but regular, winter migrant to Gujarat, with at least a few individuals wintering here.

Brown Shrike (*L. c. lucionensis*) (Philippine Shrike)



Fig 2a: Philippine Shrike

Jaysukh Parekh (Suman)

Also known as 'Philippine Shrike', it breeds throughout eastern China, south to Guangdong and west to Sichuan, Japan and Korea and winters in south eastern China, Philippines, Indonesia, and in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Sri Lanka in the Indian subcontinent (Worfolk 2000). It is a regular migrant to south India (Mohapatra & Santharam

Sightings of Brown Shrike in Gujarat

Map Reference No	Location	Date	Observer
1	Galkund, Dang Forest, S Gujarat Chikhli, near Surat, S Gujarat	20 April 1946 25 March 1948	Ali (1955)
2	Bhuj and Mandvi, Kachchh	Unknown (winter)	Himmatsinhji (1995)
3	Near Morbi	21 October 2008	Author's Sighting
4	Near Charakhla, Jamnagar	20 December 2009	Maulik Varu, K V Zala; <i>in litt</i>
5	Near Morbi	3 February 2011	Author's Sighting
6	Randarda, near Rajkot	15 January 2012	Ashok Mashru; <i>in litt</i>
7	Greater Rann of Kachchh	30 November 2012	Mishra (2012); OBI
8	Velavadar National Park, near Bhavnagar	4 December 2013	Saikia (2013); OBI
9	Banni Grassland, Greater Rann of Kachchh	5 December 2013	Tiwari (2013); IBC
10	Velavadar National Park, near Bhavnagar	4 January 2014	Kharade (2014); OBI
11	Saladi, near Amreli	28 December 2014	Author's Sighting
12	Velavadar National Park, near Bhavnagar	1 January 2015	Esha Munshi; <i>eBird</i>

OBI: www.orientalbirdimages.org, IBC: www.ibc.lynxeds.com

1992, Balachandran & Alagar 1994, Balachandran & Sehgal 2008), especially to the south-east coast of India (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). It is not known to occur in Gujarat.

On 11 March 2012, I noted a Philippine Shrike near Shivilakha Dam, near Bhachau, in eastern Kachchh (23° 25' N 73° 38' E). A brief description as noted in the field is given below:

'An adult Shrike with black mask (thin in front of the eye) and faint supercilium above eye, lavender-grayish head and nape, brown back and tail, whitish throat, and faintly rufous washed underparts. The bill was blackish with a paler base to lower mandible (probably a female?)'.

The lavender-grayish head and nape was very distinctive and contrasted with the brown back, and was immediately obvious in the field, and hence it could be identified as a Philippine Shrike. The similar *cristatus* Brown Shrike has a brown head while Isabelline Shrike (*arenarius* and *isabellinus*) would not show lavender-grayish head. Though seen well with binoculars, I could only get a record photograph from a considerable distance as the bird was very wary and did not allow close approach. However, a Philippine Shrike has been noted and also photographed in November 2012 in Kachchh (Parekh 2012), and the photo is given here (Fig 2a).

These records are well west of its normal wintering range, and are the westernmost sightings of the Philippine Shrike known so far for India, and it seems to be a vagrant to Gujarat. These are the only two records reported from Gujarat till now.

Isabelline Shrike



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Fig 3: Isabelline Shrike - *arenarius*

The taxonomy of Isabelline Shrike is complicated. There are three sub species recognized for the Isabelline Shrike; *arenarius*, *isabellinus* and *tsaidamensis* (Yosef & ISWG 2008). The taxon breeding in Mongolia is now *isabellinus* (previously known as *speculigerus*) while *arenarius* (previously *isabellinus*) breeds in the Tarim basin, China (Worfolk 2000).

Birds wintering in India are mainly *arenarius*, while *isabellinus* is not definitely known for our region (Rasmussen & Anderton

2012). This taxonomic uncertainty is reflected in the comments made by Ali (1955) for Isabelline Shrike specimens collected in Gujarat, and to some extent in Abdulali (1976).

Worfolk (2000) explains in detail the taxonomy of Isabelline Shrike, alluding to Pearson (2000), who pointed out the new taxonomic nomenclature. This nomenclature was contested by Panov (2009), who prefers to follow the old nomenclature for Isabelline Shrike (namely *L. i. isabellinus*, *L. i. speculigerus* and *L. i. tsaidamensis*), pointing out errors in Pearson (2000). But further research on the type series (Pearson *et al.* 2012) confirms that the nomenclature given by Pearson (2000) is correct. Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) also follow this nomenclature and the same is followed here.

The situation in Gujarat regarding Isabelline Shrike complex is as follows:

arenarius: also known as 'Chinese Shrike', this taxon is a very common winter migrant to Gujarat. It is seen in almost the entire state in suitable habitat. A majority of Isabelline Shrikes seen here are of the *arenarius* type, which has pale lores and plumage, brownish wings not contrasting with mantle and pale rufous tail. The white primary patch is usually not present, but sometimes a small patch may be seen. Underpart colour usually ranges from a faint rufous to sometimes a more strongly washed orange, but many birds seem to have almost pure whitish underparts. Another feature seen here is that some individuals have completely gray upperparts with almost no sandy-brown coloration.

Hence, there is a lot of individual variation seen in the *arenarius* type birds occurring here. Some examples are given below:

A typical individual seen near Amreli, on 28 December 2014, with pale base to bill, pale lores, pale rufous underparts, sandy grey-brown mantle and greater coverts, slightly rufous ear coverts. This type of individuals are very common here (Fig 3).

Another *arenarius* type individual with very diffuse mask, grey brown mantle and wings, rufous rump and tail with faint barring (Fig 4). Tail barring is sometimes present (Small 2000) but is not usually noted in the individuals here. Seen in Little Rann of Kachchh on 19 October 2014.

A more strongly marked individual, with pale lores, grey-brown upperparts, buffish supercilium, strongly marked flanks and wings with a small white primary patch (Fig 5), seen in Little Rann of Kachchh on 22 December 2013.

isabellinus: Also known as 'Daurian Shrike', this taxon is given as 'not definitely known for the region' (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). It has a uniform appearance, with sandier upperside and buffish underparts, a complete face mask,

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pointed wings, reddish tail and white primary patch. The wings are blackish and contrast with the mantle. Supercilium and ear coverts are buffish, and flanks are often richly orange toned.

Though rare, *isabellinus* type individuals, with complete black mask, larger white primary patch and strongly rufous underparts are seen in Gujarat, examples of which are given below:

1. An individual in the northern part of Little Rann of Kachchh on 1 February 2014 (**Fig 6**) showed a complete black mask, sandy upperparts, strongly rufous flanks and tail, blackish wings with white primary patch, which is very similar to *isabellinus*.
2. Another individual seen on 14 January 2016 in Little Rann of Kachchh (**Fig 7**) had a complete face mask, reddish tail, white primary patch, sandy upperparts and pale rufous underparts, which was similar to *isabellinus*. However,



Fig 4: Isabelline Shrike - *arenarius*



Fig 5: Isabelline Shrike - *arenarius*

though seen well, I could get a photograph only from the front.

There are some photographs posted on birding websites (OBI, IBC) from Gujarat, in which individuals similar to *isabellinus* can be seen. Since *isabellinus* breeds from the Russian Altai, through northern China and Mongolia, and winters in Saudi Arabia and eastern to central Africa (Worfolk 2000), it is quite possible that some birds may straggle to Gujarat. Also there is a continuous cline from *isabellinus* to *arenarius* (van Duivendijk 2011), and it is possible that birds from entire range may be occurring here. Thus, it can be said that *isabellinus* type individuals do occur here but whether they are winter visitors or passage migrants/vagrants is not known.

***tsaidamensis*:** Breeding in northern China (Qinghai) and described as similar to *arenarius* but larger, it is more similar to *isabellinus*, and the wintering area of this taxon is not known (Worfolk 2000). However, phenotypes of male *tsaidamensis* in Plate 2 in Panov (2009) are similar to *arenarius* but larger, with pale plumage and pale lores, dark bill and creamish underparts with restricted rufous, but with a larger white primary patch. Hence, there are differences in the description



Fig 6: Isabelline Shrike - *isabellinus*



Fig 7: Isabelline Shrike - *isabellinus*

given for this taxon. But specimens of *tsaidamensis* in the St. Petersburg Museum, Russia, show that this taxon is very similar to *arenarius*, but significantly larger, with a prominent white primary patch (Lars Svensson, *in litt.*). Though this form is said to be non-valid (Small 2000), it is accepted by Yosef & ISWG (2008) and Gill & Donsker (2015), who, along with Pearson (2000), give its wintering range as India and Pakistan. This is somewhat surprising as there have been no published records in recent literature (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012) of this taxon wintering here. In Gujarat, some *arenarius* type Isabelline Shrikes seen here are very dull in plumage, do seem to be noticeably large in size and have a white primary patch, which is similar to *tsaidamensis*, but this can only be proven if the birds are trapped and morphometric measurements are taken.

On 25 December 2015, a large, pale Isabelline Shrike with a prominent primary patch, pale lores and restricted rufous on underparts was photographed (**Fig 8**) in the Banni area in Greater Rann of Kachchh. This individual was similar to a *tsaidamensis* type Isabelline Shrike, and differs from *arenarius* by its larger white primary patch, larger size and very pale plumage as given in Panov (2009). Expert opinion was taken for this bird; Lars Svensson commenting that this individual fits well with *tsaidamensis*. He further stated that two parent birds of this sub species seen by him in Tibet, China, looked the same. This is probably the first photographic documentation of this taxon in India. The sub-specific identity of such birds can be further confirmed by trapping and measuring these individuals. Hence, this taxon is best considered to be 'data deficient' for Gujarat at present and further study is needed to ascertain its status here.

Red-tailed Shrike (*L. phoenicuroides*)

Also known as 'Turkestan Shrike', it was split from Isabelline Shrike and is now considered as an independent species based on differences in morphology, vocalisations, behaviour and migration routes (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). This treatment is also favoured by Panov (2009), who gives references from various Russian sources for treating this as an independent species. It is also accepted as a separate species by Gill & Donsker (2015).

Red-tailed Shrike is generally described as having striking head pattern with white supercilium and throat, solid black lores, blackish wings, rufous crown with grey brown mantle and dark rufous tail (Worfolk 2000). The contrast of rufous crown with grey-brown mantle is considered diagnostic.

The status of Red-tailed Shrike in India is interesting. While it is shown as an autumn passage in Gujarat by Grimmett *et al.* (2011) and Rasmussen & Anderton (2012), the latter authors



Fig 8: Isabelline Shrike - *tsaidamensis*

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state that 'birds reported from extreme western India (mostly Kachchh) are closer to Isabelline Shrike; pure *phoenicuroides* winter extralimittally'. A specimen collected from Radhanpur (north Gujarat) in January is stated to be closer to *isabellinus* (Abdulali 1976). A question mark regarding its occurrence for Gujarat is shown in the breeding and distribution map (see Figure 1) in Worfolk (2000), while Grimmett *et al.* (2011) state 'small numbers migrate through NW subcontinent'.

I carried out surveys in Saurashtra and Kachchh during passage migration season in September / October in the past three years to specifically search for Red-tailed Shrikes. Though I remember seeing 2-3 individuals of probable Red-tailed Shrikes in Kachchh before 2008, I had noted it as Isabelline Shrike, without going into detailed sub-specific identification at that time. There is a recent record of a Red-tailed Shrike from Kachchh in September (Tewari 2015). Small numbers are known to migrate through Kachchh (Jugal Tiwari, *pers. comm.*), with a recent record in September 2016 (Tiwari 2016). I also searched websites like orientalbirdimages.org, www.indianaturewatch.net and www.ibt.lynxeds.com to find Red-tailed Shrike sightings from Gujarat, but failed to find any other photographs of it.

In the last three years, I saw three Red-tailed Shrikes, which were seen in September, during autumn passage. These individuals were identified on the basis of the criteria given in Worfolk (2000) and Rasmussen & Anderton (2012). Of these, one was seen in Saurashtra and two in Kachchh. One Red-tailed Shrike was seen in a scrub forest near Morbi in September 2014, photographed (**Fig 9**) and could be identified based on its typical face pattern; showing pure whitish supercilium and throat, solid black mask with black lores (meeting over the bill), rufous crown, whitish underparts, sandy-grayish brown upperparts, and blackish wings with a white primary patch (which was more visible when seen in flight). The identification was confirmed by Tim Worfolk

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(*in litt.*), who agreed that it was similar to a *phoenicuroides*. I observed another individual, a first-winter bird, in Khadir, Kachchh, on 5 September 2015. The individuals seen here are similar to *phoenicuroides* rather than *isabellinus*. So, it seems that the Red-tailed Shrike is a rare autumn passage migrant in Gujarat, and further records can prove this.



Fig 9: Red-tailed Shrike - *phoenicurooides*

Red-tailed Shrike (*L. phoenicurooides*) 'karelini' morph

The 'karelini' morph of the Red-tailed Shrike has grey upperparts and crown (with no contrast and is usually pale plumaged), white supercilium and throat, whitish underparts and a rufous tail. It is treated as a hybrid between *phoenicurooides* and *collurio* (Panov 2009) but some authorities consider it to be a valid sub-species of Red-tailed Shrike (van Duivendijk 2011).

The 'karelini' morph birds dominate in the lowland areas north and west of Lake Balkash, Kazakhstan, while the '*phoenicurooides*-type' birds occur in the mountain areas south and east of Lake Balkash (Wassink & Oreel 2007). This morph is not known to occur in India and is not illustrated in either Grimmett *et al.* (2011) or Rasmussen & Anderton (2012), and also not described in these texts.

On 14 September 2014, I went for bird watching to a scrub forest near Morbi, Gujarat (22° 43' N 71° 07' E). It is locally known as 'Jambudiya Vidi' and is a typical scrub forest interspersed with grassland. At around 16:00 hrs, I observed a shrike which had pale, concolorous brown-grayish crown and upperparts, prominent white supercilium and throat, black mask, blackish wings with large primary patch, reddish tail and whitish underparts (Fig 10, 11). I identified it as a 'karelini' morph Red-tailed Shrike, based on the lack of rufous on crown, brownish-grey upperparts and the colour of the underparts, which appeared to me as white in the field, although subsequent examination of the images revealed a slight pinkish-buff wash to the breast and flanks. Since I had never seen such an individual here, and it is not known to occur in

this area, but breeds in Kazakhstan, I sent the images to Arend Wassink, author of 'Birds of Kazakhstan'. He confirmed that it was a 'karelini' type individual.



Fig 10: Red-tailed Shrike - *karelini* morph



Fig 11: Red-tailed Shrike - *karelini* morph

This sighting of a 'karelini' type individual from Gujarat is surprising and has not been reported before from India. This location lies east of its normal passage migration route and it is possible that some individuals may be taking an easterly route to their wintering grounds, thus passing through Gujarat.

Hence, Red-tailed Shrike of both types – *phoenicurooides* and *karelini* – occur in Gujarat. This is significant considering that Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) do not give pure *phoenicurooides* as occurring here and the sighting of a 'karelini' morph individual is a first for India. Thus, it can be confirmed that a few Red-tailed Shrikes do occur in Gujarat, probably as rare autumn passage migrants.

Conclusion

These shrikes, in general, are difficult to identify and are especially confusing in first-winter plumages. That this group represents an identification challenge can be shown by the fact that in Plate 8, in Collar & Inskipp (2012), the individual shown as an adult Turkestan Shrike from Bengaluru, Karnataka, is misidentified, and it is an adult Brown Shrike of the *cristatus* subspecies. Thus, there are many cases of mistaken identification in these species, which can also be seen in various shrike photos posted on the internet on birding websites.

Further confusion is sometimes caused by nomenclature, as the Isabelline Shrike was earlier known as 'Rufous-tailed Shrike', a name which is similar to 'Red-tailed Shrike', though both are now separate species. Hence, birdwatchers are urged to use the names used here to avoid confusion arising due to similar sounding names.

For Gujarat, further study is needed to understand the ecology and habitats of Isabelline Shrikes wintering here. Ideally, some individuals should be trapped, and measurements taken, to know the sub-specific identity of the birds wintering here, as it seems all three sub-species of Isabelline Shrike occur in Gujarat. Red-backed, and Red-tailed Shrikes are autumn passage migrants in Gujarat and more sightings will help in understanding their distribution here. Brown Shrike is a rare winter visitor, with scattered records across the state and could be regular in well wooded areas, while the Philippine Shrike is a vagrant to Gujarat.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Lars Svensson for his help. I thank Arend Wassink and Tim Worfolk for helping with identification. I also thank Jugal Tiwari, Maulik Varu, Kapilsinh Zala, Ashok Mashru and Naman Doshi for their help and for sharing their sightings and Jaysukh Parekh 'Suman' for contributing the image.

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