

## Large Hawk Cuckoo....

scrutinized, especially in the winter, as there is a possibility that a few birds could turn out to be Large Hawk Cuckoos. Birders should be aware of the occurrence of this species in Gujarat, especially in forests and well wooded areas in the winter, and familiarize themselves with the features of both hawk cuckoos – the Common Hawk Cuckoo and the Large Hawk Cuckoo, for correct identification.

### Acknowledgements

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## Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator* or Masked Shrike *Lanius nubicus*? Sighting of an unusual shrike in Velavadar National Park

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We visited Blackbuck National Park, Velavadar, near Bhavanagar, on 23 October 2017. It is the largest roosting ground for harriers (*Circus* sp.) and it is quite well known for their spectacular evening roosting numbers. We observed harriers in large numbers and many other species of birds. While birding in the area, we observed one juvenile shrike (*Lanius* sp.) perched on a tree cage. We initially identified it as an Isabelline Shrike (*Lanius isabellinus*) and the photos were uploaded on the OBI website.

Later, we got an email from Prasad Ganpule regarding the identification of this shrike. He suspected that the images

which were uploaded on the OBI website were either of a juvenile Woodchat Shrike (*Lanius senator*) or a juvenile Masked Shrike (*Lanius nubicus*). We sent high resolution images and a video of the same bird for identification. It was later identified as either a juvenile Woodchat Shrike or a juvenile Masked Shrike by experts but the identification could not be concluded. This sighting also shows that the identification of juvenile shrikes is often very difficult and some birds cannot be conclusively identified even when photos and video is available.



Pankaj Maheria

[A brief description of the individual is as follows: a juvenile shrike, aged by the dark scaling to upperparts. It had creamish underparts,

with scaling on the breast sides and flanks. A large, prominent white primary patch was seen. Whitish scapulars were apparent and the rump was pale. The tail was in moult, brownish in colour and one adult-type tail feather was growing, which was black, with white band on distal end. It had a blackish mask, with barred crown and a fairly strong bill. In the video, it was seen that the tail was flicked up and down.

The common (in Gujarat) Bay-backed Shrike (*Lanius vittatus*) was ruled out since the upperparts looked too greyish, the tail was maybe too dark and the white primary patch too prominent; these features were different from a juvenile Bay-backed Shrike. The prominent white primary patch in juvenile plumage which was seen in this individual is usually shown by Masked Shrike and Woodchat Shrike; this patch is only shown by juvenile Bay-backed Shrike when the wings are in worn plumage. However, identification of juvenile shrikes is quite difficult. To confirm the identification, the photographs and video was sent to Tim Worfolk, who has extensively studies shrikes. He replied (in litt, email dated 7 October 2019) that 'It is looking more like a Woodchat Shrike based on the video; the shape/structure looks better than in photos and it appears to have quite a bit of white at the base of the tail and the upper-tail coverts look pale (should be dark on Masked Shrike). If Woodchat Shrike, then the most likely subspecies to occur is *niloticus*, which is typically much further advanced in moult (more adult like) than this by late October but perhaps, this a particularly late moulting individual? Sorry I cannot be more certain; I really do not think there is enough to make a definite identification given the rarity of both Woodchat Shrike and Masked Shrike in India'.

We also took the opinion of Lars Svensson. He informed (in litt, email dated 7 May 2020) that 'the bird has a rather long and narrow tail, slim bill, much white on edges of outer webs of secondaries and tertials, greyish upperparts without any hint of rufous tinge, prominently white barring on centres of feathers visible on crown and mantle, all leading to the conclusion that it is a juvenile Masked Shrike. So, quite a rare record for India I imagine.

It is interesting to speculate about when it was hatched. To keep the juvenile plumage for almost a year does not seem very likely. But tail-feathers seem quite worn at tips, so it is definitely not hatched this year. Maybe a very late brood last year, but it is aberrant in having inhibited moult for so long as this bird apparently has. Odd'.

Hence, the identification was not conclusive since expert opinion differed. Van Duivendijk (2011) stated that the Masked Shrike 'often holds tail downwards and flicks it up and down' and this behaviour is not shown by the Woodchat Shrike. This up-down tail flicking was seen in this individual. It is possible that the tail was flicked to maintain its balance on the perch but this behaviour is indicative of Masked Shrike. Shirihai & Svensson (2018) stated that

'juvenile Masked is basically a grey-and-white bird (brown element subordinate) whereas Woodchat has obvious rufous and ochre-brown elements, notably on tertials and greater coverts, often also on nape'. This individual did not look distinctly grey-and-white, and it was difficult to judge the plumage tone since the plumage looked worn. Both experts opined that the moult in this bird was delayed and this individual looked quite odd.

Since expert opinion was not conclusive, this record is treated as a Woodchat Shrike/Masked Shrike. Both Masked Shrike and Woodchat Shrikes are vagrants to India and are classified as national rarities (Praveen et al. 2019). The Masked Shrike has been noted in Gujarat earlier from Vyara, in Tapi District, and it was the first record for Gujarat and India (Bharti 2017). The Woodchat Shrike has not been noted in Gujarat and it is not included in the Gujarat checklist (Ganpule 2016, 2017). However, there is a record of the Woodchat Shrike from Maharashtra (Nandgaonkar 2013) and it is the only record of the species for India so far. Thus, this record from Velavadar is important for Gujarat as well as for India. Though this individual could not be conclusively identified, this record shows that both Woodchat Shrike and Masked Shrike could occur here and are possibly overlooked due to identification difficulties. It is advised that birders should look out for odd looking shrikes in September-October, during the passage migration season, when the occurrence of both these vagrant species is possible.

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