

THE RACES OF THE RED-TAILED SHRIKE *LANIUS ISABELLINUS*
OCCURRING IN EAST AFRICA

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From November to early April the Red-tailed Shrike of southern Asia is one of the most conspicuous and familiar Palaearctic passerine visitors to the lower lying semi-arid bushlands and open woodlands of Kenya, northern and eastern Uganda and northeastern Tanzania. The great majority of these birds are referable to the race *phoenicuroides*.

It has been stated by a number of authorities (e.g. Jackson 1938, Mackworth-Praed & Grant 1960, Dement'ev & Gladkov 1954, Vaurie 1959, White 1962b) that the more easterly breeding nominate race also occurs, but most early workers failed to separate the forms *isabellinus* and *speculigerus*. I have recently had the opportunity of examining the Red-tailed Shrike specimens at the British Museum (Nat. Hist.) and at the National Museum in Nairobi, and in the light of the racial criteria set out by Vaurie (1959) have attempted to ascertain whether *isabellinus* and/or *speculigerus* do reach East Africa. This note summarizes the characters of the various Red-tailed Shrike races, and reviews their status in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. It also provides details of the occurrence of Red-tailed/Red-backed Shrike hybrids (*L. isabellinus* × *L. collurio*) in Kenya and Tanzania.

SYSTEMATICS AND DISTRIBUTION

Opinions have varied with regard to the systematic position of the Red-tailed Shrike in relation to other similarly sized, short-tailed Eurasian shrikes. Earlier authors regarded it as a species separate from the largely allopatric Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio* of Europe and western Asia and the Brown Shrike *L. cristatus* of north-central and eastern Asia. However, there has more recently been a tendency to place all three together as groups of races within a polytypic species *Lanius cristatus*, *sensu lato*, ranging from the Atlantic to the Bering Sea (e.g. Meinertzhagen 1954, Dement'ev & Gladkov 1954, Voous 1960, Portenko 1960, Hall & Moreau 1970). There is a close plumage resemblance between certain races of the Red-tailed and Brown Shrikes, whilst interbreeding seems to occur commonly between the Red-tailed and Red-backed Shrikes where their ranges overlap. Vaurie (1959) separated the Brown Shrike specifically, but retained the other two together within an expanded *L. collurio*. Following Moreau (1972), Voous (1977) and early authors, as well as recent usage in East Africa (e.g. Pearson & Backhurst 1976), I have treated the Red-tailed Shrike here as a separate species.

Vaurie (1959) recognizes four races of the Red-tailed Shrike: *phoenicuroides*, *speculigerus*, *isabellinus* and *tsaidamensis*. Their breeding ranges are shown, together with those of the Red-backed and Brown Shrikes in Fig.1. The male plumage characters of the first three races as given by Vaurie are summarized and compared with those of the Red-backed Shrike in Table 1, together with other apparently useful wing and tail criteria, checked by me in each case on series of 20 fresh male museum specimens. *L.i. tsaidamensis* differs from the nominate race only in being slightly larger and paler. Most female and first-autumn specimens appear to be unidentifiable as to race on plumage characters. Although past authors have often confused *speculigerus* and *isabellinus*, or have lumped them, it can be seen from the table that they are distinct in a number of respects. *L.i. speculigerus* in fact shows several characters in common with *phoenicuroides*.

Early reports of nominate *isabellinus* in Africa were presumably based on the collection of paler birds lacking rufous heads. Van Someren (1922) mentions

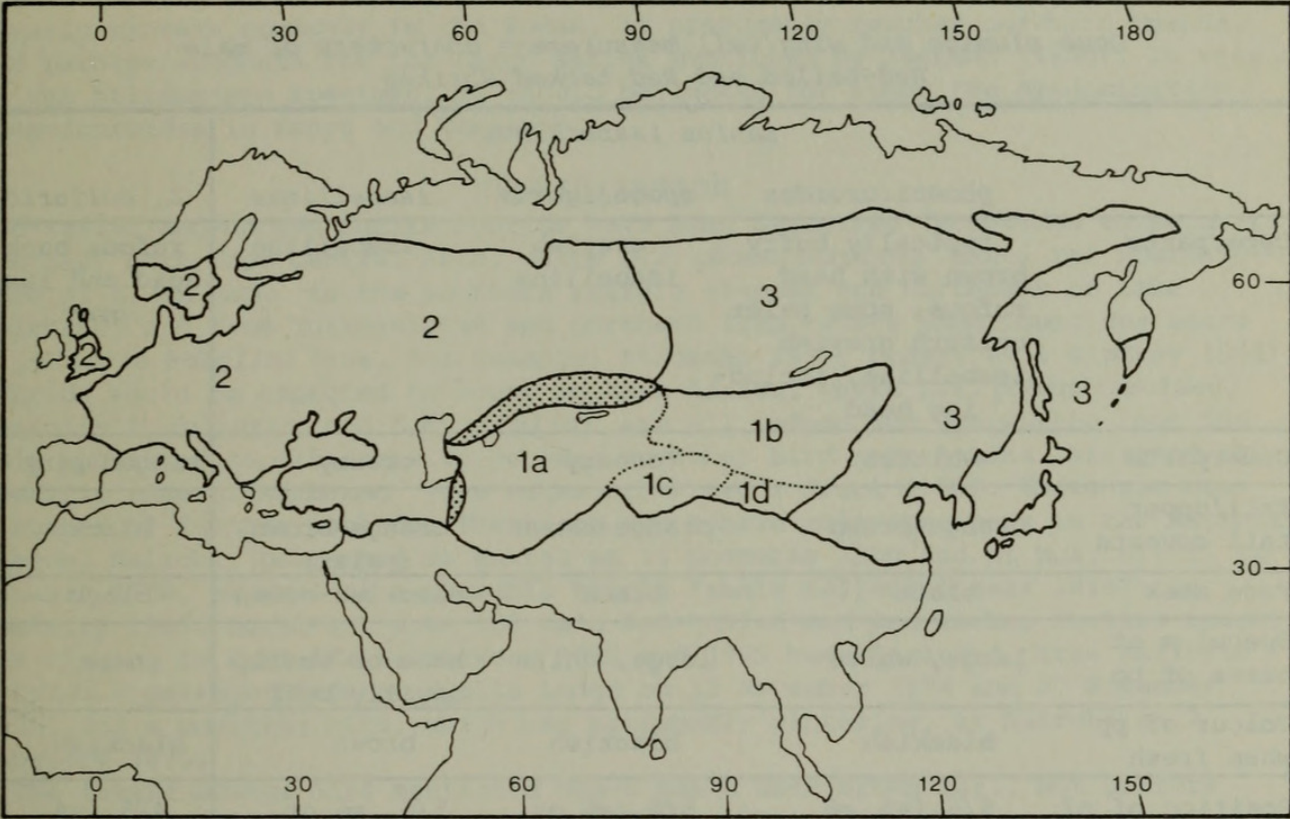



Fig.1. Map showing the breeding ranges of three species of Lanius

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|  Regions of <i>L. collurio</i> x <i>L. isabellinus</i> interbreeding | 1a. <i>L. isabellinus phoenicuroides</i> |
| | 1b. <i>L. i. speculigerus</i> |
| | 1c. <i>L. i. isabellinus</i> |
| | 1d. <i>L. i. tsaidamensis</i> |
| 2. <i>L. collurio</i> | 3. <i>L. cristatus</i> |

seven Kenyan examples, but only one of these was a 'mature' male. Jackson (1938) admitted *isabellinus* for East Africa on the strength of a single Naivasha bird and a small series collected by Fox in Lango. Chapin (1954) considered that the nominate race wintered to the west of *phoenicuroides*, from the Nile Valley to Lake Chad, Ituri and Lake Kivu; he listed five birds collected in north-eastern Zaïre. Vaurie (1959) included Africa south and west to Kenya, Uganda and Lake Chad in the wintering range of *isabellinus*; he stated that the winter quarters of *speculigerus* were "unknown, but probably the same as those of *isabellinus*". Moreau (1972) also considered *isabellinus* to be the race reaching the Sudan and Chad.

I examined 30 male-plumage museum specimens from East Africa. Twenty-seven of these, dated 18 November - 28 March, were undoubtedly *phoenicuroides*, with a black mask, a large speculum, whitish underparts and, in all except three, a chestnut crown; the three exceptions were uniform pale isabelline above. The other three had originally been labelled *isabellinus*. One of these, collected on 25 March on the northwest flank of Kilimanjaro (presumably in Tanzania) could be assigned without hesitation to *speculigerus*; in addition to greyish isabelline upperparts, it had a black face mask, a large speculum, new blackish primaries and sandy underparts tinged pink on the breast. The

TABLE 1

Some plumage and wing/tail measurement characters of male
Red-tailed and Red-backed Shrikes

	<i>Lanius isabellinus</i>			<i>L. collurio</i>
	<i>phoenicuroides</i>	<i>speculigerus</i>	<i>isabellinus</i>	
Upperparts	typically buffy brown with head rufous; some paler uniform greyish isabelline, including head	greyish isabelline	isabelline	rufous back, head and rump grey
Underparts	whitish	*creamy	creamy	tinged pink
Tail/upper tail coverts	orange-brown	orange-brown	orange-brown (paler)	black
Face mask	black	black	blackish-brown	black
Speculum at bases of pp	large, white	large, white	none or small, usually buff	none
Colour of pp when fresh	blackish	blackish	brown	blackish
Position of p2 tip cf. other pp **	5/6 (=5, =6 rarely 6/7)	5/6 (=6 or 6/7)	5/6, =6 or 6/7	4/5 (=4 or =5)
Wing point	p3 or 3&4	p3 or 3&4	p4 or 3&4	p3
Mean wing/tail ratio	1.18	not taken	1.15	1.25
Moult locality	winter quarters	winter quarters	apparently in breeding area. Found freshly moulted in November in India and Pakistan.	winter area

*In males from Central Asia and in fresh African specimens which otherwise conform to *speculigerus*, a slight pinkish suffusion was noticed on the breast.

**Positions enclosed in round brackets are occasionally found.

other two, collected at Kisumu (January) and Dar es Salaam (November) were worn, but appeared to be either *speculigerus* or pale *phoenicuroides*.

A further 63 male specimens were examined from elsewhere in northeastern Africa and the Arabian peninsula. Many were typical *phoenicuroides* but 30 were uniform isabelline or greyish-isabelline above. These pale birds all had a black mask and a large white speculum, and showed evidence of a winter moult timing. Most were referable to *speculigerus*, and none matched breeding *isabellinus* material from Chinese Turkestan. The majority of these *speculigerus* specimens were from the Sudan (including southern areas) and Arabia.

It would appear therefore that the nominate race and *tsaidavensis* do not occur in East Africa, or perhaps migrate through Arabia to Africa at all. Isabelline-coloured birds in northeast Africa (and probably those wintering

west to Lake Chad and Zaïre) are mainly *speculigerus*. Since *speculigerus* clearly winters commonly in the Sudan, it presumably reaches northern Uganda, and perhaps accounts for the Lango series mentioned by Jackson (1938). In view of the Kilimanjaro specimen, it should be looked for among the predominating *phoenicuroides* in Kenya and Tanzania.

HYBRIDIZATION

Red-tailed/Red-backed Shrike hybrids have been described (sometimes as separate species) both from Central Asia, where *L.i.phoenicuroides* meets the nominate race of *L.collurio* in the southern Khirgiz steppes and northeast of Lake Balkhash, and from Turkmenistan and northern Iran, where *phoenicuroides* meets *L.collurio kobylini* (see, for example, Stegmann 1930, Dement'ev & Gladkov 1954). Hybrids would be expected to occur in East Africa, where *L.i.phoenicuroides*, nominate *L.collurio* and *L.c.kobylini* are all common and overwinter, but the only published report seems to be of a November bird near Arusha, assigned the specific name *L.bogdanowi* (see Mackworth-Praed & Grant 1960). There are now a number of further records. There are two hybrid male specimens in the National Museum, Nairobi, collected at Maktau on 11 November 1950 and at Mui, Kitui, in January 1938, as well as a probable hybrid female collected near Isiolo in February 1961. Moreover, some 180 male Red-tailed and Red-backed Shrikes caught for ringing in East Africa between 1966 and 1979 have included three definite hybrids - passage birds at Ngulia Lodge on 12 November 1974 and 27 November 1975, and a moulting bird, which was presumably wintering, at Nairobi on 2 February 1975.

The female museum bird mentioned above has a dark brown tail, but uniform isabelline-brown upperparts and fine barring below, and has the second primary tip falling short of the fifth. The five Kenyan males all resembled typical Red-backed Shrikes in having a grey upper head and pinkish underparts. They differed, however, in having the back warm brown to earth brown, the rump and upper tail coverts with mixed reddish and grey feathers, the tertials brown with buff edges, and the tail dark brown to blackish, with reddish brown edges. All except one had a large wing speculum. In one case, the second primary was equal to the fifth; in the other four birds it was rather shorter.

Further trapping, and even careful inspection in the field, may well provide many more records of these intermediate birds in East Africa.

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CORRIGENDA

Scopus 3: 40 - *ANDROPADUS IMPORTUNIS* should be *ANDROPADUS IMPORTUNUS*
35, Table 1, last column: should be headed: Coastal Kenya
including
Sokoke Forest



Pearson, D J. 1979. "The races of the red-tailed shrike *Lanius isabellinus* occurring in east Africa." *Scopus* 3, 74–78.

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