



# FROM THE RARITIES COMMITTEE'S FILES

## 'Steppe' Great Grey Shrike in Cornwall



The following report was submitted to the Rarities Committee:

'SPECIES Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor* of race *pallidirostris* or ? *homeyeri*.  
PLACE Cape Cornwall and Kenidjack Carn, Cornwall.

DATES 21st-22nd April 1992. Times: 5.45 p.m. on 21st and 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. on 22nd. Watched for several hours. (Also seen on 23rd at nearby Kenidjack Carn by Viv Stratton and Andy Birch.)

OBSERVER J. F. Ryan

OTHER OBSERVERS Andrew Birch, Renfred Hathway, Paul Semmens and others. Found by birder whose name is something like J. Shower [enquiries have failed to confirm this]. Identified as Great Grey Shrike by P. Semmens, identified as a possible 'Steppe' Grey Shrike by JFR and Andrew Birch. Photographed by JFR and RH.

OPTICAL AIDS 10 × 40 binoculars and 25 × telescope.

RANGE Down to 10 m.

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE Many Great Grey Shrikes here and abroad, but none looking like this one. Experience of similar species: Lesser Grey Shrike *L. minor* and Loggerhead Shrike *L. ludovicianus*.

WEATHER CONDITIONS Fine and sunny with a moderate easterly wind.

After receiving a phone call to say there was a Lesser Grey Shrike at Cape Cornwall, I went to have a look at it after work. When I arrived, I was the only observer present, but quickly located the bird in a Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa* and on walls around the coastguard cottages. It was an unusual-looking bird, but had a short primary projection thus identifying it as a Great Grey rather than a Lesser Grey Shrike. Paul Semmens had also come to the same conclusion earlier in the afternoon.

What struck me about the bird was the general paleness of the plumage, the largely bare lores and the large area of white at the bases of the primaries. I thought at that time that it might be a *pallidirostris* race Great Grey Shrike; however, from previous conversations with Grahame Walbridge about the Portland claim, I thought they were meant to have a pale, fleshy-coloured bill base.

The following day, I spent all morning watching and photographing the bird and became even more convinced that it was 'something different'.

### Description

STRUCTURE AND BEHAVIOUR It was quite tame, allowing an approach to within 10 m and quite unlike the generally wary behaviour of our standard Great Grey Shrikes. It would drop onto prey items, usually bumble bees, but once seen to take a small lizard, and then impale them onto the Blackthorn and devour them there and then.

In general it was of a similar structure to Great Grey Shrike, being long-tailed with a short primary projection, but I thought it was more round-headed, and most people thought it looked smaller and more compact.

HEAD Forehead, crown and nape all pale grey. Black mask extended from eye backwards, with only a tiny black point projecting forward of the eye. The lores were pale grey, like the forehead, down to the level of the gape. There was a slight

buffy tint to the lores in some lights. Also, in some lights, there was a suggestion of a paler supercilium extending back from the eye, in between the pale grey crown and the black of the mask, but this was very inconspicuous.

**UPPERPARTS** Mantle uniform, very pale grey with white scapulars bordering the dark wing feathers. The rump appeared to me to be as pale grey as the mantle, with some buff on the uppertail-coverts and at the sides of the rump, but Andrew Birch and Viv Stratton, who saw the rump very well on 23rd when the bird was at Kenidjack, stated that they thought the rump was wholly buff.

**UNDERPARTS** The throat was white. The rest of the underparts were whitish except for the flanks, which had a pinkish-buff hue. This was strongest on the rear flanks and certainly extended onto the sides of the rump.

**WINGS** The feathers on the closed wing were as follows. The alula was dull, buffy brown, contrasting with the greater coverts which were black, the inner ones of which were finely tipped white. The primary coverts were black. The tertials were black with white edging and broadening towards the tips. This created a small white crescent below the rear scapulars and then a thick white crescent below this. There was a large white patch at the base of the closed primaries. The secondaries and especially the primaries were quite pale brown, appearing bleached and worn and contrasting greatly with the black of the tertials, greater and primary coverts.



**Fig. 1.** Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor* of race *pallidirostris*, Cornwall, April 1993 (Ren Hathway)

In flight, the bird displayed a very large white flash at the base of the primaries. This appeared to me to be much greater than on any Great Grey Shrike that I have seen previously. Examination of the photograph of the bird in flight (*Brit. Birds* 86: plate 196) reveals an extensive, almost triangular-shaped white area, which does not extend onto the secondaries.

**TAIL** The tail was only slightly rounded at the tip. The central tail feathers were quite pale brown like the primaries; however, what was presumably the penultimate tail feather was black and the outer tail feather was white. The white in the outer tail feather did not appear quite to reach the tail tip, but whether the tip was dark or simply that the feather was slightly shorter than the feathers more central to it could not be determined.

**BARE PARTS** Legs steel-grey. Bill steel-grey with a darker culmen and a small black tip to the upper and lower mandibles.

### *Ageing*

Both adult and first-year Great Grey Shrikes undergo a partial moult in winter quarters. They are therefore presumably both unageable in spring as both would show new tertials, greater and primary coverts and some new rectrices. However, the obviously worn alula may be of significance (but in what way I don't know!).

### *Race*

It would appear that two races would be possible for a bird showing the above characteristics—*homeyeri* and *pallidirostris*.

From the literature I have looked at and the enquiries made, it would seem that *pallidirostris* is the only one that fits for the following reasons:

1. Bare lores.
2. Paleness of plumage.
3. Virtual lack of supercilium.
4. Large white flash on primary bases.
5. Bill colour. Although autumn *pallidirostris* may show pink bill bases, in spring their bills darken and the grey bill with a black tip fits very well with the bill of *pallidirostris* illustrated in Hollom *et al.* (1988, *Birds of the Middle East and North Africa*), although the text describes it as 'horn'.

The race *homeyeri* should show whiter underparts and a more obvious white forehead and supercilium than *excubitor*, as well as the larger white wing patch (Svensson 1984, *Identification Guide to European Passerines*).

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**EDITORIAL COMMENT** Rob Hume, Chairman of the Rarities Committee, has commented: 'This is a good example of the high standard of submission to the Rarities Committee now frequent, but sadly not yet approached by a proportion of claims. It has been selected for publication not only as a model set of notes, but also because it involves a form (distinctive race, or perhaps separate species) in which greater interest is currently being shown than used to be the case, in anticipation of potential taxonomic developments.'