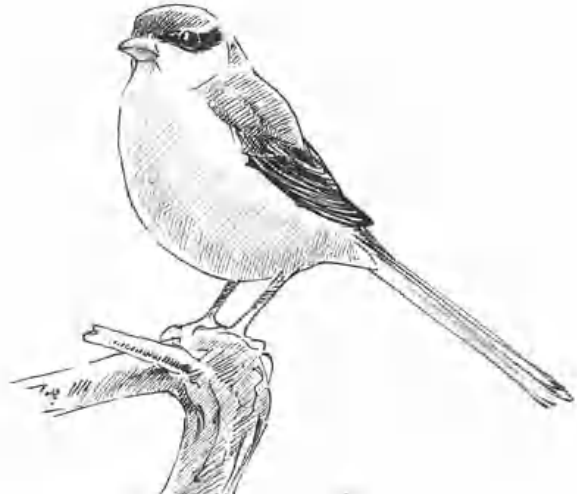


# Long-tailed Shrike: new to Britain

Andrew Stevenson

**ABSTRACT** A Long-tailed Shrike *Lanius schach* was present at Howmore, South Uist, Western Isles, on 3rd and 4th November 2000. What was probably the same bird had been seen at nearby Howbeg on 27th October 2000. This constitutes the first record for Britain. The likely origins and racial identity of the bird are discussed.



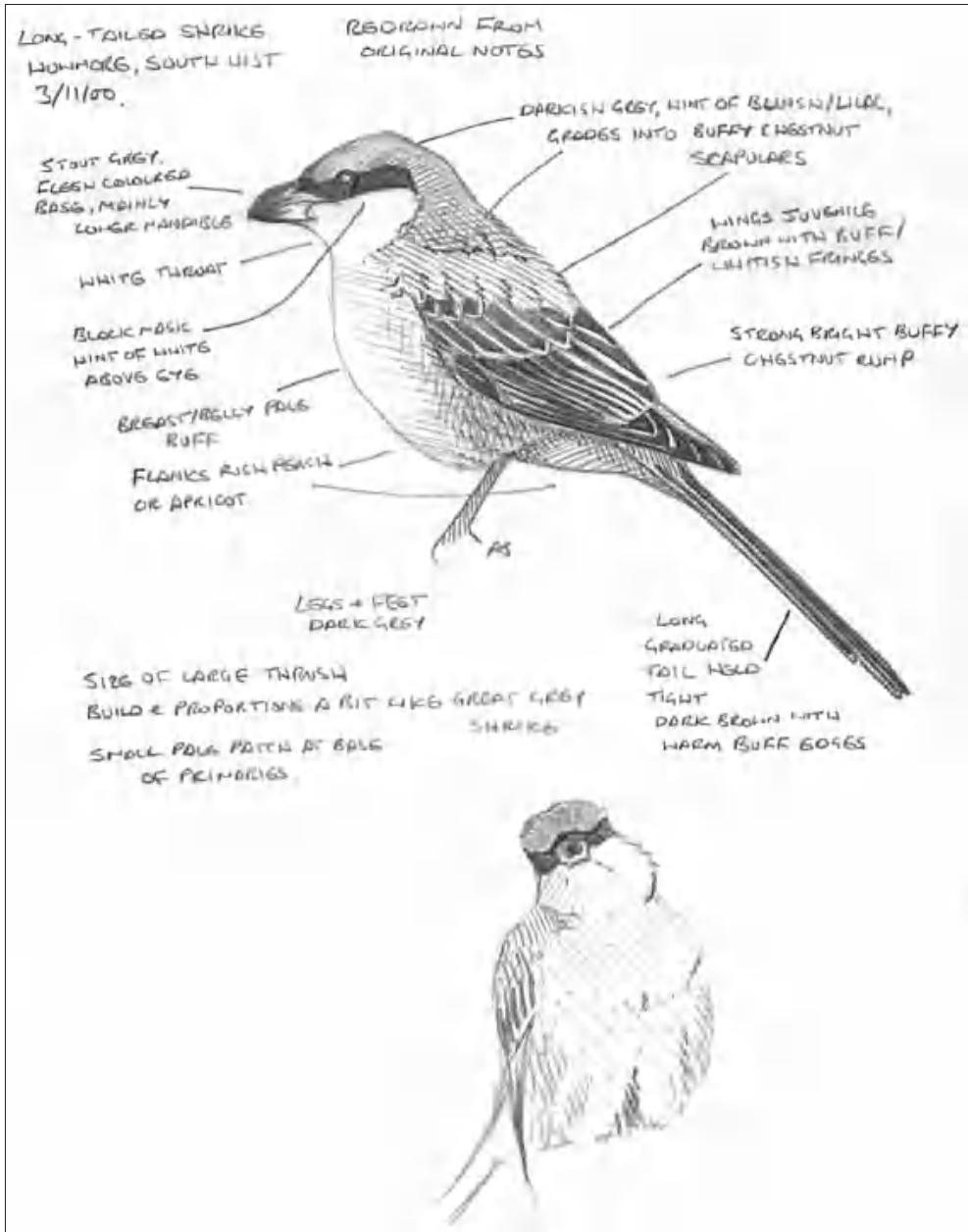
The Howmore Long-tailed Shrike *Lanius schach*. Bill Neill

The autumn of 2000, particularly October, brought an exciting mixture of vagrants and scarce migrants to northern and western Scotland. In Shetland, these included a Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus* on Fair Isle on 21st October, while on the Outer Hebrides we had enjoyed vagrants of predominantly Nearctic origin, with an influx of American waders in the Uists, a Red-eyed Vireo *Vireo olivaceus* on Lewis, and a hotly debated female Hooded Merganser *Lophodytes cucullatus* on North Uist which, ultimately, was accepted onto Category D of the British List. As local birders contemplated what could be next to turn up, Jon Brain reported seeing what he thought was a male Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio* fly into a garden at the Howbeg road junction, South Uist, on 27th October. He saw it only briefly, at dusk, when returning home from a day's fishing, and his views were far from conclusive.

Red-backed Shrike is a genuinely scarce migrant on the Outer Hebrides, with fewer than 25 records at the time of writing. As most of these have been autumn records of juveniles, an

adult male in late October seemed a little odd. I was due to leave the islands the following day but, as Howbeg is close to my home, I thought I would check it out. Unfortunately, I could not find the bird and I left South Uist for the ferry, stopping en route to watch the Hooded Merganser, where I mentioned the possible Red-backed Shrike to some visiting birders when they asked the age-old question of 'anything about?' When I returned to South Uist on 1st November, there had been no further reports of the shrike.

At 12.45 hrs on 3rd November, I was driving home from the office at lunchtime and, as I was passing a small deer-fenced plantation at Howmore, I noticed a large number of Red-wings *Turdus iliacus* sunning themselves on the wires. As I slowed a little on my way past, another pale-fronted bird caught my eye. It clearly was not a thrush, so I pulled in just past the plantation for a second look. It was obviously a large shrike, but none of the obvious candidates fitted. The grey head with characteristic 'highwayman's mask' was fine, but the almost apricot tone to the underparts and



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**Fig. 1.** Long-tailed Shrike *Lanius schach*, Howmore, South Uist, Western Isles, November 2000, redrawn from original field notes.

rufous back caused panic. I quickly phoned Gwen Evans, who at the time was RSPB officer for the Uists, and lived close to Howmore, saying that I had found Jon's shrike, that I was not sure what species it was, and that she should come and see it as soon as possible! As I tried phoning other local birders, the shrike flew into some Gorse *Ulex europaeus* bushes, revealing a long, narrow tail, which had previ-

ously been hidden behind the fencing. This confirmed my previous, seemingly ludicrous, thoughts that it could be a Long-tailed Shrike *L. schach*, which I vaguely recalled was mentioned in Lewington *et al.* (1991). What followed was almost surreal. As I described the bird over the phone to a somewhat incredulous Angus Murray at 'Birdline Scotland', he confirmed the features of Long-tailed Shrike from Lewington

*et al.* as the bird fed on beetles by the roadside, within a few metres of where I sat, totally oblivious to the panic it was causing. Worse was to follow, as a Merlin *Falco columbarius* shot through and caught a bird close to where the shrike was feeding. At this point, only Gwen and I had seen the bird, and we had an agonising 10-15-minute wait, which seemed far longer at the time, before the shrike reappeared.

Later in the afternoon, the shrike moved to the area around the Howmore Post Office and nearby garage, where it remained through the following day, 4th November. Being a Saturday, that day saw the largest-ever one-day twitch to the Outer Hebrides, with over 130 people managing to see the bird, plus a number of locals (including the two local estate gamekeepers) who came along to twitch the twitchers, as well as the bird! The shrike spent much of the day in just one willow *Salix*, eating mice from a larder, before becoming quite active in the late afternoon. It was looked for again the following and subsequent days but was not seen again, and probably left the island on the clear frosty night of 4th/5th November.

### Description

My initial description and sketches were taken on 3rd November, with the bird performing well on a calm, crisp, sunny afternoon, within the first hour of the sighting. During this time, the bird was also photographed. With hindsight and the opportunity to look at various photographs of the bird under different light conditions, I consider that bright, sunny weather heightened the plumage tones a little, perhaps leading me to over-emphasise the bright coloration of the bird in my description.

### Size and structure

A large shrike, about the same size as a Blackbird *T. merula*, with a long, graduated tail, and a stout, deep-based, slightly hooked bill.

### Plumage

The crown, nape and mantle were medium/pale grey with a lilac tinge, especially noticeable in bright light. The face showed the typical 'highwayman's mask', which was blackish on the lores but dark brownish on the ear-coverts. There was a thin whitish line between the mask and the crown, starting above the eye and fading out along the upper edge of the ear-coverts. A pencil-thin line of black extended across the

forehead above the base of the bill. Although the throat was white, the rest of the underparts were warm, pale buff, deepening to a deep apricot or peach colour towards the flanks and breast-sides. One or two juvenile, crescent-edged, feathers were retained on the breast-sides, but these were typically obscured under the bend of the wing.

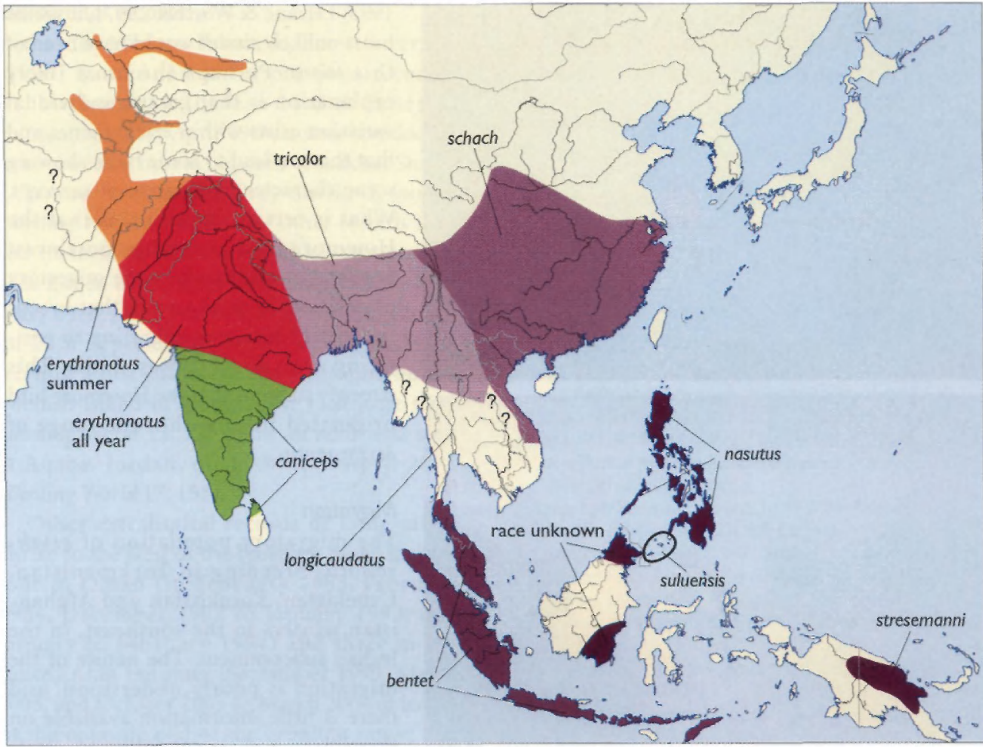
On the upperparts, the grey mantle merged with the rich rufous colour of the scapulars. The rump and uppertail-coverts were also a rich rufous. The wings were dark brown, with broad, faded-buff edges to most feathers, producing a faint bar across the tips of the greater coverts. At rest, a poorly defined, thin, pale buffish-white crescent was visible at the base of the primaries, but this was more obvious in flight. All these features suggested that the wing feathers were retained (unmoulted) juvenile feathering. The long, dark brown tail showed buff edging, and appeared rather narrow owing to the feathers being tightly held together.

### Bare parts

The bill-tip was blackish, while the bill base was paler, grey, most obvious on the lower mandible. The eye was dark, and the legs dark grey in colour.

### Age

Ageing the bird in the field proved straightforward, as it clearly showed the retained juvenile greater-coverts and remiges and some vestiges of dark barring on the sides of the breast. I was, however, slightly surprised to discover, when checking various reference sources, that some illustrations showed first-winter birds still in largely juvenile plumage. Initially, this caused some confusion as the Howmore bird was considerably more advanced. Subsequent checking revealed that, in fact, the moult from juvenile to first-winter plumage is often complete by autumn (Beaman & Madge 1999). Lefranc & Norfolk (1997) expanded upon this, stating that birds of the western form, *erythronotus*, undertake post-juvenile moult shortly after fledging, and this can be completed as early as the end of July, although most juveniles are still moulting in the second half of August, with some continuing to do so until early October. This fits much better with the appearance of the Howmore bird, and would suggest that it belonged to *erythronotus*, although there is an absence of data on the moults of other subspecies.



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**Fig. 2.** The distribution of Long-tailed Shrike *Lanius schach*. Modified from that first published in Lefranc & Worfolk (1997), and reproduced with permission of the publishers, Christopher Helm/A&C Black.

**Behaviour**

During 3rd-4th November, the bird was often quite confiding and unconcerned by the crowd that had gathered to enjoy it. It was observed catching beetles as well as a Wood Mouse *Apodemus sylvaticus* and Short-tailed Vole *Microtus agrestis*. It also appeared to be quite settled in the area, with three larders discovered at sites up to 400 m apart, and was reported to have visited gardens in Howbeg, some 800 m away from the Howmore Post Office. All this suggests that it been present for long enough to have established a territory.

**The racial provenance of the Howmore bird**

At the time of the sighting, I was unaware of the degree of racial variation exhibited by Long-tailed Shrike. I quickly discovered that it is a wide-ranging and highly variable species, with no fewer than nine races described, although only one of these, *erythronotus*, breeds in the Palearctic, where it is strongly migratory (fig. 2). Based upon the description of *erythronotus* in Lewington *et al.* (1991), the Howmore bird appeared to fit this race closely, with two characters (the rufous extending onto the scapulars, and the extent of

the peachy-buff wash on the underparts) strongly supportive of this subspecies. Furthermore, this form breeds west to the Aral Sea in Kazakhstan and was also considered responsible for the extralimital Western Palearctic records of Long-tailed Shrike (see below).

Subsequently, however, it transpired that racial identification of Long-tailed Shrike is not necessarily straightforward. The BOURC, after checking museum skins, concluded that the white line above the eye and the lilac tinge to the grey mantle are features more typically associated with the form *caniceps*, which is considered to be largely resident in southern and western India. Examination of a selection of specimens available at the National Museums of Scotland demonstrated that *erythronotus* can show individual variation, but rarely show any white above the eye. The limited number of specimens of *caniceps* similarly showed individual variation, but the paler grey mantle and white above the eye were apparent on most individuals. It is worth emphasising that the white above the eye on the Howmore bird was a restricted and indistinct feature, and was largely invisible unless the bird was seen at close range;





Gwen Evans



Gwen Evans



Gwen Evans

**8-10.** First-winter Long-tailed Shrike *Lanius schach*, Howmore, South Uist, Western Isles, November 2000.

and also that there is clinal variation between adjacent mainland forms and that many individuals cannot be confidently assigned to any given subspecies (Ali & Ripley 1972; Lefranc & Worfolk 1997).

Given the above complications, it may not be possible to assign the Howmore bird with absolute certainty to one particular race. Given that *caniceps* is generally considered to be a fairly sedentary race, restricted to peninsular India (Ali & Ripley 1972; Cramp & Perrins

1993; Lefranc & Worfolk 1997), it seems most unlikely that it would have been of this form. Perhaps the most likely explanation is that greater individual variation exists within *erythronotus*, and that this can lead to some birds showing some characters suggestive of *caniceps*. What is certain, however, is that the Howmore bird arrived in northwest Scotland at a time when the migratory population of *erythronotus* that breeds in Central Asia was migrating to wintering areas in northwest India. This strongly suggests that the Howmore bird originated from within the range of *erythronotus*.

**Migration**

The migratory population of *erythronotus* breeding in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Afghanistan winters to the southeast, in the Indian subcontinent. The nature of the migration is poorly understood, and there is little information available on the timing and routes followed. Post-breeding dispersal begins in early August, with passage through the northern parts of the range occurring mainly during September, while juveniles continue their migration into mid October. Stragglers have been noted as far northwest as Tashkent in early November (Cramp & Perrins 1993). It is interesting to note that, during migration through Kazakhstan, *erythronotus* mixes with Isabelline Shrike *L. isabellinus* of the races *phoenicuroides* and *isabellinus*, which are migrating to wintering areas to the southwest, in Arabia and East Africa, and to the southeast, in northwest India. The timing of migration through Kazakhstan coincides with that of Isabelline Shrike, although on average *phoenicuroides* migrates slightly earlier, and is a more abundant migrant than Long-tailed Shrike (Cramp & Perrins 1993). Given that the timing of migration and routes of Long-tailed and Isabelline Shrikes appear to be similar over at least part of the route, it is perhaps surprising that there have been so few Long-tailed Shrikes seen in the Western Palearctic, at least in comparison with the number of Isabelline Shrikes recorded.

**Extralimital records**

Within the Western Palearctic, Snow & Perrins (1998) quoted just three previous records, although one of these, a bird at Fehértó, Hungary, on 21st April 1979 is now considered to have been a hybrid between Woodchat Shrike *L. senator* and Lesser Grey Shrike *L. minor* (*Birding World* 12: 227). The other records they cite include an adult male which wintered at Sede Boqer, Israel, from November 1982 to February 1983, and a first-winter at Birecik, Turkey, on 24th September 1987 (specimen). More recently, a first-summer male was found on the Swedish island of Gotland on 11th June 1999 (*Birding World* 12: 227), and an adult was seen at Aqaba, Jordan, on 11th-13th April 2004 (*Birding World* 17: 153).

Other extralimital records of Long-tailed Shrike to the west of the breeding range include four in Oman (in February 1983, February 1984, December 1992 to January 1993, and January to February 1994) and three in the United Arab Emirates (September 1999, March 2003 and October 2003 to March 2004 at least). At the opposite end of the breeding range, two

vagrants have been reported from Japan, well to the northeast of the breeding range of the nominate form in China.

**Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank Bob MacGowan for providing information relating to the subspecies of Long-tailed Shrike from specimens held in the bird collection at the National Museums of Scotland. Thanks also go to Jon Brain for his initial report of a probable Red-backed Shrike; without his initial report, this bird may not have been discovered.

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**EDITORIAL COMMENT** Colin Bradshaw, Chairman of the British Birds Rarities Committee, commented: 'With only one other record from northern Europe [see above], this species could not have been high on anybody's list of potential 'firsts'. The combination of grey head and mantle, contrasting with rich chestnut rump, tail and scapulars and apricot underparts makes this species distinctive in all but juvenile plumage. Bay-backed Shrike *L. vittatus*, a most unlikely vagrant breeding from southeast Iran to India, is the only species which is vaguely similar. A glance at plate 10 of Lefranc & Worfolk (1997) is ample demonstration of just how great the racial variation of Long-tailed Shrike can be. While the plumage features were not precisely those of a classic *erythronotus*, this is the most likely origin on geographical grounds.'

Eric Meek, Chairman of the British Ornithologists' Union Records Committee, commented: 'For birders hooked on vagrants from the east, the South Uist Long-tailed Shrike was one of the very best finds of recent years. The migratory race *erythronotus* breeds in that legendary part of Central Asia famed for adding exciting species and subspecies to the British List.'

'The description and photographs left no doubt about identification at the species level but assigning this individual to a particular geographical race was somewhat more problematic. Some plumage characters were more indicative of the race *caniceps*, which has a more southerly distribution than *erythronotus* though is contiguous with it.'

'Investigations by our cage-bird consultant, Roger Wilkinson, found no evidence of either *erythronotus* or *caniceps* being kept in captivity, although the nominate form *L. s. schach* is occasionally kept in captivity (but this is very rare). With a captive origin highly improbable, with the bird occurring on a likely date and in a likely locality for a wild vagrant, and with a good supporting cast of species of similar origin in Europe at the same time, members of the BOURC were unanimous in accepting the South Uist Long-tailed Shrike as the first for Britain.'