

= Masked shrike =

The masked shrike (*Lanius nubicus*) is a bird in the shrike family , Laniidae . It breeds in southeastern Europe and at the eastern end of the Mediterranean , with a separate population in eastern Iraq and western Iran . It is migratory , wintering mainly in northeast Africa . Although it is a short @-@ range migrant , vagrants have occurred widely elsewhere , including northern and western Europe . It is the smallest member of its genus , long @-@ tailed and with a hooked bill . The male has mainly black upperparts , with white on its crown , forehead and supercilium and large white patches on the shoulders and wings . The throat , neck sides and underparts are white , with orange flanks and breast . The female is a duller version of the male , with brownish black upperparts and a grey or buff tone to the shoulders and underparts . The juvenile has grey @-@ brown upperparts with a paler forehead and barring from the head to rump , barred off @-@ white underparts and brown wings ?part from the white primary patches . The species ' calls are short and grating , but the song has melodic warbler @-@ like components .

The masked shrike 's preferred habitat is open woodland with bushes and some large trees . It is less conspicuous than its relatives , avoiding very open country and often perching in less exposed locations . The nest is a neat cup built in a tree by both adults , and the clutch is normally 4 ? 6 eggs , which are incubated by the female for 14 ? 16 days until hatching . The chicks are fed by both parents until they fledge 18 ? 20 days later , and remain dependent on the adults for about 3 ? 4 weeks after leaving the nest . The masked shrike eats mainly large insects , occasionally small vertebrates ; it sometimes impales its prey on thorns or barbed wire . Populations are decreasing in parts of the European range , but not rapidly enough to raise serious conservation concerns , and the species is therefore classified by the International Union for Conservation of Nature as being of least concern .

= = Taxonomy = =

The shrikes are a family of slender , long @-@ tailed passerines , most of its members being in the genus *Lanius* , the typical shrikes . They are short @-@ necked birds with rounded wings and a hooked tip to the bill . Most occur in open habitats . The affiliations of the masked shrike with other members of the genus are uncertain ; the " brown " shrikes (brown , red @-@ backed and isabelline shrikes) and tropical species like the Somali fiscal have both been suggested as possible relatives . The masked shrike has no subspecies .

The masked shrike was described by German explorer and naturalist Martin Lichtenstein in 1823 under its current scientific name . *Lanius* is the Latin for a butcher , and comes from the shrikes ' habit of impaling prey , reminiscent of a butcher hanging carcasses , and *nubicus* means " Nubian " (from northeast Africa) . The bird was independently described by Dutch zoologist Coenraad Temminck in 1824 as *Lanius personatus* , from the Latin *personatus* " masked " , referring , as does the English name , to the bird 's appearance , but the older name takes precedence . A later synonym from 1844 was *L. leucometopon* from the Greek *leukos* , " white " , and *metopon* , " forehead " , describing a feature of the distinctive head pattern . " Shrike " , first recorded in 1545 , derives from the shrill cries given by this family , and the traditional common name " butcher @-@ bird " again refers to the characteristic prey storage , and has been in use since at least 1668 .

= = Description = =

The masked shrike is the smallest of its genus , a slender bird which usually weighs 20 ? 23 g (0 @. @ 71 ? 0 @. @ 81 oz) , measuring 17 ? 18 @. @ 5 cm (6 @. @ 7 ? 7 @. @ 3 in) long with a 24 ? 26 @. @ 5 cm (9 @. @ 4 ? 10 @. @ 4 in) wingspan . It has a long tail and relatively small bill , on each side of which is a tomial tooth ; the upper mandible bears a triangular ridge which fits a corresponding notch in the lower mandible . This adaptation is otherwise only found in falcons .

The male has mainly black upperparts , a white crown , forehead and supercilium . There are large white patches on the shoulders and primaries , and the outermost tail feathers are also white . The

throat , neck sides and underparts are white , with orange on the flanks and breast . The iris is brown , the bill is black and the legs are dark brown or black . The female is a duller version of the male , with brownish @-@ black upperparts and a grey or buff tinge to the white shoulder patches and underparts . The juvenile has grey @-@ brown upperparts with darker bars from the head to rump , a paler grey forehead , barred off @-@ white underparts and brown wings with white primary patches .

Masked shrikes are most similar in appearance to woodchat shrikes , but are smaller , more slender and longer @-@ tailed . Adults of the two species are easily distinguished , since the masked shrike has white on its head and a dark rump , whereas the woodchat shrike has a black crown , rusty nape and white rump . Juveniles are more similar , but the masked shrike has a longer tail , paler face , and grey back and rump , whereas the woodchat shrike has a sandy back and pale grey rump .

Juveniles moult their head , body and some wing feathers a few weeks after fledging , and adults have a complete moult after breeding . In both cases , if the process is not complete by the time of migration it is suspended and completed on the wintering grounds .

= = = Voice = = =

The masked shrike gives the harsh calls typical of this family , with repeated tsr , tzt or shek notes and some whistles , and when alarmed produces a rattling krrrr . The bill may be snapped when the bird is agitated . The song , up to a minute long , is soft for a shrike , with chattering sounds interspersed with rich warbles . It resembles the songs of Hippolais species , particularly the olive @-@ tree warbler . On rare occasions , males may sing in flight .

= = Distribution and habitat = =

The masked shrike breeds in the Balkans , northeast Greece and some of the Greek islands , Turkey , Cyprus and from Syria south to Israel . It also nests in eastern Iraq and western Iran . The range in the east is uncertain , and may include Afghanistan and northern Saudi Arabia . It is migratory , wintering south of the Sahara , mainly in Chad , Sudan and Ethiopia . Smaller numbers are found west to eastern Mali and Nigeria , and in northern Kenya and southern Saudi Arabia . Most birds leave the breeding areas in late August and September , and return north in February and March .

This species is seen in Egypt , Jordan and Israel much more often in spring than autumn , suggesting that the southern movement may be concentrated further east . Birds will hold small territories on about 0 @-@ 5 hectares (1 @-@ 2 acres) on migration , and , unlike other shrikes , may congregate in significant numbers . More than 100 have been seen in one locality in Israel , with five in a single bush . This shrike has occurred as a vagrant in Algeria , Finland , Kenya , Libya , Spain , Sweden , Mauritania and Turkmenistan . At least three individuals have been documented in Great Britain , and two individuals in Armenia .

The masked shrike 's preferred habitat is open woodland with bushes and some large trees . Unlike its relatives , it avoids very open , lightly vegetated country . Orchards and other cultivated land with suitable old trees or large hedges are also used by this species . It is normally found in more wooded areas than sympatric shrikes . It occurs in lowlands and in hills up to 1 @-@, @ 000 m (3 @-@, @ 300 ft) . In some areas breeding occurs at greater altitudes , up to 2 @-@, @ 000 m (6 @-@, @ 600 ft) . It may occur in gardens and resorts on migration , and in winter again prefers open country with thorny bushes and large trees like acacia or introduced eucalyptus .

= = Behaviour = =

The masked shrike is a solitary species except when on migration . It maintains a breeding territory of 2 ? 5 ha (5 ? 12 acres) and is also territorial on the wintering grounds , defending an area of about 3 ha (7 acres) . Although unafraid of humans , it is aggressive to its own species and other

birds which infringe on its territory . Most other shrikes use high , exposed branches throughout the year , but the masked shrike only uses conspicuous locations at the start of the breeding season , otherwise choosing lower , more sheltered spots . It perches upright , frequently cocking its tail , and has an easy , agile flight . A masked shrike has been recorded as feigning injury when trapped , only to return to normal when the threat receded .

== Breeding ==

Male masked shrikes sing from perches in their territories from early April , sometimes chasing or competing vocally with neighbouring males . The male 's courtship display , usually accompanied by singing , starts with the bird perching erect and shivering its wings on an exposed perch , and is followed by the shrike stepping down its branch and bowing , either on the move or while temporarily halted . The male may also give a fluttering , zigzagging flight display . The female is sometimes fed by her mate while she crouches with spread wings and gives begging calls . Elements of the display are shared with other shrikes , but stepping @-@ down and bowing on the move appear to be confined to this species .

The nest , built by both sexes , is a small , neat cup of rootlets , stems and twigs , lined with wool or hair , and adorned with lichen externally . It is constructed in a tree 1 @. @ 5 ? 10 m (4 @. @ 9 ? 32 @. @ 8 ft) above the ground and averages 170 mm (6 @. @ 7 in) wide and 65 mm (2 @. @ 6 in) deep , with the cup 75 mm (3 @. @ 0 in) across and a 35 mm (1 @. @ 4 in) in depth . Eggs are laid from April to June , mainly in May in the lowlands and about a month later in the mountains . Replacement clutches are laid in June or July if the nest fails , and second broods appear to be common in at least some areas . The first nest is destroyed by the pair to provide material for a replacement breeding attempt . The eggs average 20 mm x 16 mm (0 @. @ 79 in x 0 @. @ 63 in) in size and are variable in colour , with a background of grey , cream or yellow , diffuse grey blotches , and a ring of brown markings . The normal clutch is 4 ? 6 eggs , which are incubated by the female for 14 ? 16 days until hatching . The altricial downy chicks are fed by both parents until they fledge 18 ? 20 days later . They are dependent on the adults for about 3 ? 4 weeks after leaving the nest . The masked shrike breeds in its first year , but its average life span is unknown .

Vertebrate predators of young birds include cats and crows . This species may also be infected by parasites , such as an eyeworm , a tick , *Hyalomma marginatum* , and at least two species of *Haemoproteus* blood parasites .

== Feeding ==

Like its relatives , the masked shrike hunts from a perch , typically 3 ? 8 m (10 ? 26 ft) high , although usually in less exposed locations than those favoured by most other shrikes . Prey is usually taken from the ground , but occasionally picked off foliage or caught in the air with an agile flycatcher @-@ like flight . The kill may be impaled on thorns or barbed wire as a " larder " for immediate or later consumption . Because passerines have relatively weak legs , impalement holds the corpse while it is dismembered . It was once thought that this behaviour was shown mainly by male shrikes in the breeding season , but this is not the case . Masked shrikes of both sexes are known to impale in winter and on migration . Individual birds may be very tame , following a gardener or feeding close to an observer .

The masked shrike feeds mainly on large insects , although other arthropods and small vertebrates are also caught . Shrikes fatten up before migration , but to a lesser extent than other passerines because they can feed on the way , sometimes taking other tired migrants . Despite its relatively small size , the masked shrike has been recorded as killing species such as lesser whitethroat and little swift . Vertebrates are killed by bill blows to the back of the head , and the tomial teeth are then used to separate the neck bones .

== Status ==

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) estimates the European population of the masked shrike to be between 105 @,@ 000 ? 300 @,@ 000 individuals , suggesting a global total of 142 @,@ 000 ? 600 @,@ 000 birds . Although the population appears to be declining , the decrease is not rapid enough to trigger the IUCN vulnerability criteria . The large numbers and extensive breeding range of about 353 @,@ 000 km² (136 @,@ 000 sq mi) , mean that this shrike is classified by the IUCN as being of least concern .

Numbers have declined in recent decades in Europe , although Bulgaria , Greece and Cyprus still have several thousand breeding pairs . Turkey is a stronghold with up to 90 @,@ 000 pairs . The species is declining in Greece and Turkey because of habitat loss , and a large decrease in Israel is thought to be due to pesticides . In Somalia this bird is now rare . Migrating birds are shot in the countries around the eastern Mediterranean , despite legal protection in most countries , and there is some persecution of breeding birds in Greece and Syria , where this species is considered to be unlucky . There are indications that this shrike is adapting to plantations instead of natural woodlands , which could help populations in the longer term .

= = = Vocalisations = = =

Alarm call at Xeno @-@ canto

Song at Xeno @-@ canto

= = = Further information = = =

Lanius nubicus in the Flickr : Field Guide Birds of the World

Lanius nubicus on Avibase