

## ISABELLINE SHRIKE *Lanius isabellinus*: A NEW SPECIES TO THE BULGARIAN AVIFAUNA

### Bledi srakoper *Lanius isabellinus*: nova vrsta v bolgarski avifavni

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The Isabelline Shrike (*Lanius isabellinus* Hemprich and Ehrenberg, 1833) is a species, which is known to breed from Iran through central Asia, the Russian Altai Mountains to northern China and Mongolia reaching the upper Amur River (DEMENT'EV & GLADKOV 1968, CRAMP & PERRINS 1993). It prefers to breed in flat hilly areas between 1,000 and 2,000 m a.s.l., usually in narrow foothill gorges near water or even in gardens. Another type of habitat are dry steppe areas with bushes predominantly of *Caragana* spp. All populations are migratory and winter from northwestern India and Afghanistan through southern Middle East to sub-Saharan Africa west to Nigeria and south to Kenya (CHAPIN 1954, CRAMP & PERRINS 1993). Birds leave their African and Middle Eastern wintering grounds between late February and late March (CRAMP & PERRINS 1993); they reach their northwest Chinese breeding grounds as early as mid-March (LUDLOW & KINNEAR 1933) and the extreme northeast of their range by the end of May (CRAMP & PERRINS 1993). The species migrates along a broad front with no apparent areas of concentration. A clear picture of the species' phenology, movements and wintering range is difficult to establish due to confusion in identification and nomenclature (PEARSON 1979).

The taxonomy of the Isabelline Shrike is complex and has been a source of much debate. The Isabelline Shrike encompasses the following taxa: *L. (i.) isabellinus* (breeding from southeastern Altai and north central China to India, wintering in eastern and central Africa), *L. (i.) arenarius* (breeding

in northwestern China (Xinjiang), wintering in Iran, Pakistan and northwestern India), *L. (i.) tsaidamensis* (breeding in northern China (Qinghai), wintering range unknown), *L. (i.) phoenicuroides* (breeding in Iran, far northwestern China (Xinjiang), Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, western Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tadjikistan and southern Kazakhstan, wintering in Iran, Pakistan and northwestern India) (WORFOLK 2000). Based on the range and migratory habits, *isabellinus* has the highest potential for vagrancy in Europe, followed by *phoenicuroides*, while the occurrence of other taxa would be unprecedented (WORFOLK 2000). Several West European specialists treat the appellation Daurian Shrike as the correct English name for *Lanius isabellinus* (SANGSTER *et al.* 2003). The Dutch Committee for Systematics (CSNA) split the Isabelline Shrike into three species (SANGSTER *et al.* 1998). The decision was based on qualitative differences in morphology and analyses of the species' contact zones and vocalizations. SANGSTER *et al.* (1998) named the taxa as follows: Isabelline Shrike, *L. isabellinus* (formerly *speculigerus*); Daurian Shrike *L. phoenicuroides*; Turkestan Shrike *L. arenarius* (formerly *isabellinus*); and Chinese Shrike, *L. tsaidamensis*. After this taxonomic change, the Dutch Rarities Committee (CDNA) re-assessed all national records to identify the birds to a specific level (VAN DER LAAN & CDNA 2008). Later on, PANOVA (2009) re-examined the nomenclature of the polytypic *Lanius isabellinus* sensu lato also using substantial data supported by mitochondrial DNA analyses (PANOVA 2011) and revised the status of the above four taxa considering them as subspecies. CLEMENTS *et al.* (2015) removed the subspecies *phoenicuroides* from Rufous-tailed Shrike *L. isabellinus* and changed the English name of the species to Isabelline Shrike. The monotypic *L. phoenicuroides* is therefore considered an independent species by Clements. This view is shared by GILL & DONSKER (2015). Nevertheless, both the British Ornithologists' Union (BRITISH ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION 2013) and the Association of European Rarities Committees (CROCHET & JOYNT 2015) still consider *phoenicuroides* a subspecies, a view which we follow in this paper as well.

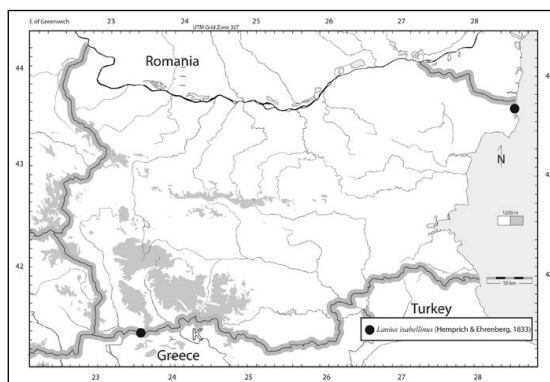
The Isabelline Shrike sensu lato has been recorded many times (about 140, > 20 of these have been accepted as *isabellinus* and > 120 as *isabellinus/phoenicuroides*) in European countries including United Kingdom, France, Spain, Germany, Scandinavian countries, Italy, Poland, Belgium, Estonia, Latvia, Netherlands and Switzerland (SMALL 2000, VAN DER LAAN & CDNA 2008). There are three records in Austria (LABER & RANNER 1997, RANNER 1999, RANNER & KHIL 2008). In most Central and Western European countries, the

species has been observed in almost all months of the year except February, with a large peak in the second half of October and a smaller one between late April and early June (VAN DER LAAN & CDNA 2008). Only a few records from the Balkans are known – one in Romania (Sep 2004, 1cy bird) and eight in Greece (Sep 1995 adult ♂, Apr 2000 adult ♂, Sep 2002 1cy bird, May 2009 adult ♀, Sep 2009 1cy bird, Apr 2014 adult ♂, with two birds identified as *phoenicuroides*: May 2006 adult ♀, Sep 2009 adult ♀) (VAN DER LAAN & CDNA 2008, HELLENIC RARITIES COMMITTEE 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010).

Until now, there have been no records of this species from Bulgaria, although considering the number of records from all across Europe it was reasonable to expect it in this country as well. In this paper we report on the first two observations of the Isabelline Shrike in Bulgaria.

The first observation was made on 24 May 2010 during a bird watching trip to the Slavyanka Mountain (Figure 1) – an Important Bird Area (IBA) in Bulgaria (code BG0002078), at the border of the Alibotush Reserve (UTM GL 19, SW Bulgaria) by a group of Bulgarian and Dutch ornithologists. The area lies at an altitude of about 590 m a.s.l., close to the Bulgarian-Greek border, about 2 km southwest of the Goleshovo village. The weather that day was dry and sunny. The geological composition of the site, together with the complete lack of open water sources, the geographic situation and the specific local climate have created conditions for the development of a mountain habitat of Submediterranean type. The foothills of the mountain are located in the xerothermic oak belt, which presently consists mainly of secondary forests and bushes of *Carpinus orientalis*. Up the hills *Fagus moesiaca* forests follow (KOSTADINOVA & GRAMATIKOV 2007). The area resembles typical breeding habitat of the Isabelline Shrike. At around 14.00 hrs on that day, the group spotted a shrike, which was subsequently identified as Isabelline Shrike. During the observations, a sketch of the bird (Figure 2) was made by one of the authors. The bird was feeding on a Bright Bush-cricket *Poecilimon* sp.

After catching its prey, the bird perched on the top of a small wild apple tree *Malus* sp. Judging by its size and structure, the bird was a typical shrike with long and thick bill, long tail and stocky head. The predominating colour was light sandy, with a more greyish back and neck and rusty tail. It had a poorly pronounced facial mask and no strong barring on the breast. The supercilium was almost absent. There was no scaly pattern on the mantle, chest or belly. We



**Figure 1:** Observation sites of Isabelline Shrike *Lanius isabellinus* in Bulgaria

**Slika 1:** Kraja opazovanja bledega srakoperja *Lanius isabellinus* v Bolgariji



**Figure 2:** Isabelline Shrike *Lanius isabellinus*, Slavyanka Mountain, southwest Bulgaria, 24 May 2010 (sketch: A. Ignatov)

**Slika 2:** Bledi srakoper *Lanius isabellinus*, gora Slavjanka, jugozahodna Bolgarija, 24. 5. 2010 (skica: A. Ignatov)

concluded that the observed bird was most probably a 2cy male Isabelline Shrike. The colour pattern and size resembled those of an adult male bird, but there was not as much contrast between the under- and upperparts. Due to the weakly expressed colour pattern, the subspecific identification is unclear.

The second bird was observed at Durankulak Lake (UTM PJ23, NE Bulgaria) on 28 Sep 2014 at about 10.40 hrs. The lake is an IBA (code BG0002050) located 6 km from the border with Romania, to the east of the village with the same name (Figure 1). The area is surrounded by farmland and steppe habitats. Sand dunes and beach separate it from the sea on the east. The main habitats are open water areas and huge massifs of vascular hygrophyte vegetation, covering mainly the northern and southwestern parts of the lake, as well as the marsh on its south-eastern side (KOSTADINOVA & GRAMATIKOV 2007). A day before the observation, a strong wind from north-northeast had started blowing in a broad geographic area between the Ural Mts and central Europe. The observed specimen was an adult Isabelline Shrike perched on a Russian Olive *Eleagnus angustifolia* about 6 m from the observer.

The bird was identified as a male (Figure 3). It had a typical structure of a shrike. The bill was greyish with dark edges. The supercilium was thin and white to creamy in colour. The mask was black, running from the forehead across the lores to the ear coverts. The primaries were blackish with buff edges. There was a small whitish patch at the base of the primaries, visible as a small speculum. The upperparts were uniformly



**Figure 3:** Isabelline Shrike *Lanius isabellinus*, Durankulak Lake, northeastern Bulgaria, 28 Sep 2014 (photo: D. Mitev)

**Slika 3:** Bledi srakoper *Lanius isabellinus*, jezero Durankulak, severovzhodna Bolgarija, 28. 9. 2014 (foto: D. Mitev)

isabelline-grey, the underparts pale creamy buff, with a rich orange tone, from the chin to the ventral region – the overall appearance was more uniform, with less contrast between the upper- and underparts than in *phoenicurioides*. The rump and tail were bright rufous, although the rump was paler than the uppertail. The buff supercilium, lack of contrast between upper- and underparts, along with the rich orange tone of the latter and the bill pattern permitted reliable identification as *isabellinus*.

The reported observations are considered the first two records of the Isabelline Shrike in Bulgaria. Both were accepted by the Bulgarian National Rarities Committee (BUNARCO) and included in Category A of the Bulgarian list. Both records fit the temporal patterns of the species' occurrence in Europe. Contrary to most eastern vagrants in autumn, a relatively high percentage of birds are adults, which was also the case in Bulgaria (VAN DER LAAN & CDNA 2008). The correlation between weather conditions and the appearance of avian vagrants is not straightforward (NEWTON 2008), but the strong winds may have played a part in the occurrence of the second bird.

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### Povzetek

Bledi srakoper *Lanius isabellinus* gnezdi v širokem pasu od Irana prek osrednje Azije in severne Kitajske do Mongolije. Prezimuje v osrednji in vzhodni Afriki, Pakistanu in Indiji. V Evropi se redno pojavlja, predvsem med koncem aprila in začetkom junija ter med začetkom septembra in koncem novembra. Pojavljata se (pod)vrsti *isabellinus* in *phoenicuroides*. V srednji in jugovzhodni Evropi so znana opazovanja iz Avstrije (3), Romunije (1) in Grčije (8). Avtorji prispevka predstavljajo prvi opazovanja za Bolgarijo, in sicer je bil 24. 5. 2010 na gori Slavjanka opazovan drugoletni samec nedoločene (pod)vrste, 28. 9. 2014 na jezeru Durankulak pa odrasel samec (pod)vrste *isabellinus*. Opazovanja je kot prvo in drugo za državo potrdila bolgarska komisija za redkosti BUNARCO.

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