Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus cristatus* at West Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands, 16th February to 7th April 2019

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Introduction

In 2019, a Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus cristatus* was present from 16th February to at least 7th April on West Island in the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, an Australian Indian Ocean Territory. It was found by the authors and observed and photographed by both until 22nd February when MC departed the atoll. Thereafter GC, who is resident during summer on the island, observed it intermittently and gathered a series of photographs at intervals that form the substance of this submission. Over the approximately two month period of its stay, it moulted from first winter to adult plumage. During this transition its appearance altered and our opinion of its racial identity fluctuated with it. This was partly due to inconsistencies within the literature on the characters that determine racial identity. Our interpretation of its plumage when last seen is that it was an adult male of the nominate race.

The observations, habitat & behaviour

All observations were in a 10 m long stretch of roadside vegetation at the southern end of the runway. So far as we are aware, this bird was seen only by the two authors. When found, we studied the bird with binoculars and a 30x magnification Swarovski tripod-mounted telescope. It was perched in an exposed position on emergent leafless, probably dead, sticks, projecting ~0.5 m above the dense hedge-like green foliage of ~3 m tall shrubs known locally as 'brambles'. These shrubs have erect closely spaced stems and being close to the ocean are subject to salt laden, wind-driven sea-spray. It was first sighted at about 16.15 local time on 16th February and remained visible for about 10 minutes. It was seen again on 17th February at about the same time but for a shorter period. The third sighting was for about four minutes from 07.15 on 19th February. MC departed Cocos on 22nd February.

Thereafter GC observed it at the same place intermittently until 7th April. Some attempts to see the bird failed. It was suspected that it had retreated into the dense shrubbery. The bird was not seen to hunt or take prey but was observed turning its head, shifting position and turning around as if searching for prey. In the evenings at this location many bugs up to 2 cm or more in length were buzzing around.

In the main, the weather was fine, cloudless, warm and humid. When first seen we were about 1 km from the bird and looking almost directly into the lowering sun. We approached the bird at an angle so as to improve the viewing aspect. The photos that day were taken at a range of roughly 100 m and were partially backlit. Experience with its habits enabled GC to position himself so as to obtain better illuminated images.

The Photographic Record

The images below are presented in reverse chronological order. This is because the more recent shots are of better quality and are of the bird in adult plumage. Therefore they are more useful in determining the subject's identity, particularly subspecifically. Unless stated otherwise the photos were taken by Geof Christie.

Brown Shrike Cocos 7th April 2019

Brown Shrike Cocos 4th April 2019

Brown Shrike Cocos 17th March 2019

Brown Shrike Cocos 8th March 2019

Brown Shrike, Cocos, 19th February 2019

Brown Shrike, Cocos on 16th February 2019 Photos by Mike Carter
Although backlit the brown upperparts and slightly greyer crown are discernible.

Description

This was a typical shrike judged to be about 18 cm in length. The accompanying photos depict structure, plumage, bare-part colours and show how colouration changed mainly due to moult over the two months of its stay. Therefore the following description highlights only significant features. As the purpose of this submission is to present a case to prove the identity of the subject

bird first to specific level and secondly to subspecific level and as typically it is easier to identify adults in breeding plumage than immatures and winter plumaged birds, with regard to plumage we will concentrate on the features developed late in its stay as shown in the photos taken in April.

The striking feature is the black facial 'mask' that passes from the base of the bill across the lores through the eye to the nape. This is set off below by white cheeks, chin and throat and above by a white supercilium that is widest above and behind the eye and is about equal in width to the diameter of the eye. Note that the supercilium is not sharply defined. Forward of the eye it narrows considerably and does not pass across the forehead. The crown and upperparts are a rich rufous brown, a little greyer on the forehead. The rufous is brightest on the rump. The remiges and wing coverts were dark brown with narrow pale edges to the tertials. The whole of the underparts were pale with a peach or rich buff wash that was very strong on the sides of the breast and flanks.

The robust bill was dark grey on the upper mandible, horn coloured at the base of the lower mandible and black at the tip. The legs were leaden grey.

Tips of the wings extended to the tips of the upper tail coverts. From measurements of enlarged versions of the photos taken on 4th April, the primary projection beyond the tertials is determined as 60% of that of the exposed length of the tertials beyond the scapulars and greater coverts. It appears that the tips of 5 or 6 primaries are visible beyond the tertials but that is not very clear.

Identification

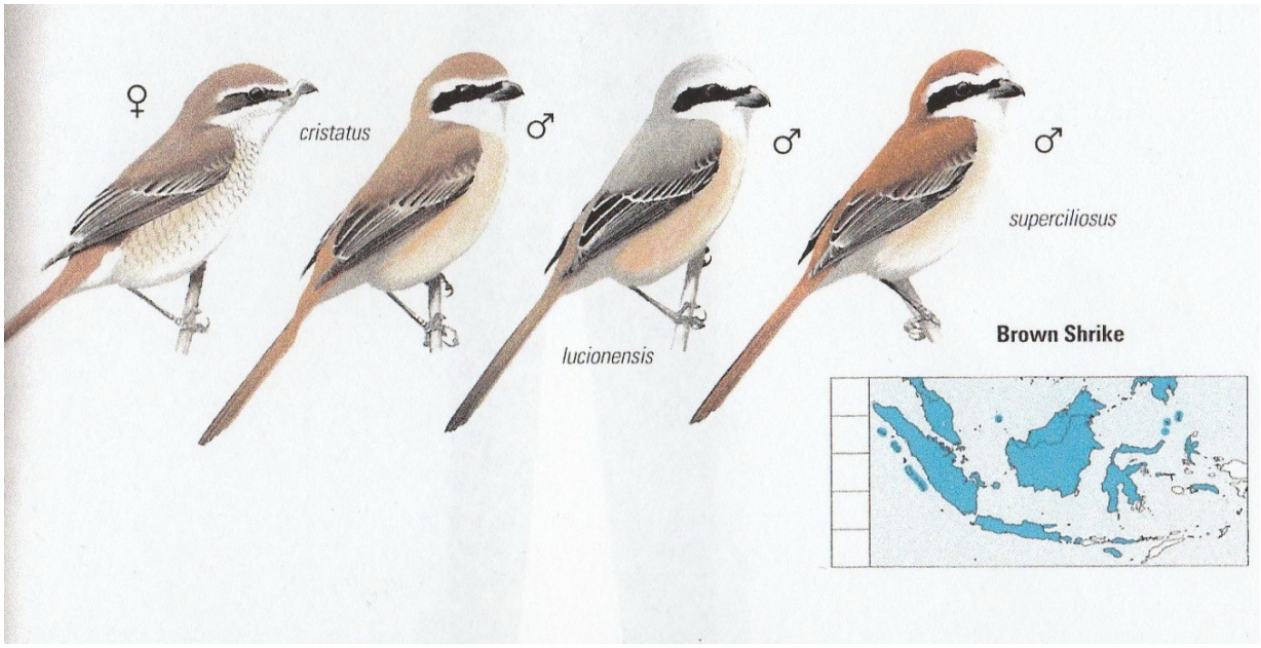
Texts used to determine identification as a Brown Shrike include Cramp (1993), Wells (1999), Worfolk (2000), Harris & Franklin (2000), Higgins *et al*. (2006), Brazil (2009), van Duivendijk (2011), Rasmussen & Anderton (2012), Eaton *et al*. (2016) and Menkhorst *et al.* (2017).

Otherwise superficially similar species that have longer than normal tails, have grey not brown crowns, show bold and extensive barring on upper or/& underparts, or have a bold white patch at the base of the primaries are immediately discounted. Thus the only serious contenders are some races of just three species, Brown Shrike, Isabelline Shrike *L. isabellinus* and Red-backed Shrike *L. collurio*. The primary projection of 60% as determined for the subject bird is precisely the value stated as being diagnostic of Brown Shrike in van Duivendijk (2011). Although the images are not at the right angle or sharp enough to determine accurately the number of primaries that project beyond the tertials, we consider that it is 5 or 6. As Red-backed Shrike typically has 7 or 8, that species is also ruled out on that feature. Isabelline Shrike has more muted colouration than the subject bird and typically has a white patch at the base of the primaries so that too is ruled out.

As with the 2016/17 Cocos Brown Shrike (BARC case 961), the rather narrow tail was cleft at its tip, not rounded as widely stated in the literature. Although it underwent a complete tail moult during March, the shape of the tail was similar before and after the moult.

Because at no time was there any trace of barring on the flanks we believe that it was a male in its first year. Typically even adult females are at least faintly barred.

Racial identity is also determined using the references cited above. As an example we copy below the illustrations in Eaton *et al*. (2016). It is clear that the subject bird doesn't have the grey head of *lucionensis* or the rich rufous crown and back or broad white supercilium and forehead of *superciliosus*. Moreover, it's supercilia were diffuse not sharply defined as in that taxon. The form *confusus* considered by some authors as a fourth subspecies is intermediate between *lucionensis* and *superciliosus*. According to Worfolk (2000) it has an even broader white forehead than *superciliosus* so is eliminated on that feature. It most resembles the illustration of the male *cristatus* but differs in that the subject bird has much more richly coloured underparts. Other texts that illustrate *cristatus* with either virtually white underparts are Harris & Franklin (2000), Robson (2008), Brazil (2009), Phillipps & Phillipps (2014) and Menkhorst *et al.* (2017). All show this subspecies with much paler underparts than our Cocos bird. However the illustration in Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) shows male *cristatus* with richly coloured underparts and is an excellent likeness of the subject bird. A photocopy of that plate is provided below. Perhaps birds of this race that winter in southern Asia, a likely source of vagrants to Cocos, have more brightly coloured underparts than their relatives elsewhere.



Races of Brown Shrike as illustrated in Eaton *et al*. (2016).

Distribution and previous records

According to Worfolk (2000), Brown Shrikes of the nominate subspecies, which in that text includes the form '*confusus*', breed in eastern Siberia from the Russian Altai, and Ob river eastwards through northern and eastern Mongolia to the Pacific with *confusus* occupying the south-eastern portion of that breeding range. It winters from India to Thailand and Malaysia. Rasmussen & Anderton (2012), state that in winter, this race is widespread and very common in South Asia. According to Eaton *et al.* (2016), as a migrant to the Indonesian Archipelago during the boreal winter, the subspecies *cristatus* is the usual form of Brown Shrike in western parts (Sumatra & Borneo). The form *confusus* tends to have a more easterly non-breeding distribution in that it frequents the Lesser Sundas but does also occur in Sumatra. This is contrary to Worfolk (2000) in which the map therein shows the only subspecies wintering in the Indonesian Archipelago to be *superciliosus* which breeds in Sakhalin and Japan. Eaton *et al.* (2016), state that all four subspecies winter somewhere in the Indonesian Archipelago with *superciliosus* wintering south to Sumatra and the Lesser Sundas, whereas the main wintering range of the race *lucionensis*, which has previously occurred on Ashmore Reef, is further north and east in Borneo, Sulawesi and Ambon.

This is the third report from the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. The first was a bird that spent the boreal winter of 2016/17 at 'The Farm' on West Island (BARC case 961). That individual was accepted as being of the nominate race. Since then, a bird was seen briefly on Home Island in December 2017 (Birding Tours Australia Report for Christmas/Cocos islands for 2017/18). Prior to the 2016/17 occurrence, there were eight reports of Brown Shrike on Australian territory, seven from Christmas Island (James & McAllan 2014). Three of these were accepted by BARC (Cases 260, 299, 329) but none were confidently identified to subspecific level. A bird seen on Christmas Island in April 2007 was considered to be either this subspecies or *confusus* and one seen in December 2001 (Case 329) was most likely *superciliosus*. The well documented bird seen on Ashmore Reef on 11 November 2011, BARC Case 944) was an individual of the race *L. c. lucionensis*.

Plate 109, Shrikes in Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) *Cristatus* is image 7

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