

Correspondence

A Giant Shrike *Lanius giganteus* at Bumla Pass, Arunachal Pradesh – An addition to the South Asian Avifauna

On 28 March 2024, I visited Bumla Pass (4,633 m asl) and Sangetsar Lake (3,708 m asl), located in the Tawang District of Arunachal Pradesh in India, near the Indo-China border, with my family. It was a cloudy, overcast day, but I was intently watching for any bird activity enroute.

At 1125 h, at location (27.677°N, 91.858°E), approximately 13 km from Bumla Pass, while driving towards Sangetsar Lake, I noticed a black and white bird fly by the side of the vehicle and perch on a pole ahead. Immediately, I requested the driver to stop the vehicle to photograph the bird, thinking that it could be something unusual. The roads in that area are narrow with considerable traffic, with little possibility of parking the vehicle to get off for photography. Fortunately, there was some stalled traffic ahead, which gave me time to observe and photograph the bird. In flight, and from a distance, I had noticed white patches on the wings and dark, longish tail, and the impression it gave was of a Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica*. However, looking at the bird through the camera, I realised that it was a shrike, possibly a Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor*. It changed perch, allowing me to photograph from the back, front and side angles [40–43]. As I had not previously encountered a Great Grey Shrike at this altitude, I checked the Merlin Bird ID App for its distribution. Surprisingly, I found that it had no distribution near Arunachal Pradesh. In the late afternoon, I asked Salehin Md Habib for previous records of the Great Grey Shrike near Bumla Pass, and apparently, there were none. I shared the images with Salehin to check the possibility of any other similar shrike species. Salehin shared the images further with Sandeep Biswas, and after deliberation, they were quite certain that it was a Giant Shrike *L. giganteus*. Sandeep posted the images on the eBird India editors WhatsApp group, where it was confirmed as a Giant Shrike, the first record for South Asia.

Identification of this image as a Giant Shrike required elimination of several large, long-tailed shrikes with grey upper parts and white underparts and a black mask. Although now a separate species, it was formerly considered a subspecies of Chinese Grey Shrike *L. sphenocercus*, from which it can be separated by its darker grey upperparts [42], absence of a prominent white supercilium [41, 43], and reduced white on its wings [41, 42]. Great Grey Shrike of any subspecies will also have much more white portions on the wings as well as paler grey rump [42]. Northern Shrike *L. borealis* can be eliminated by its proportionately longer tail and grey rump [42, 43]. Although smaller, a non-breeding Lesser Grey Shrike could also pose confusion in photos, but that species can be eliminated by the white scapular fringing and darker rump [42], as well as the comparatively longer bill than that species [43]. My photos also show a rosy tinge to the underparts [40, 43], which is concordant with a Giant Shrike.

The Giant Shrike occurs in eastern Xizang and the surrounding provinces in China (Yosef et al. 2021), which share a border with Arunachal Pradesh in India. It is considered uncommon to rare throughout its distribution range, with only 144 other documented



40. Giant Grey Shrike showing a dark mask with rosy tinge to white underparts.



41. Giant Grey Shrike showing a dark mask with a faint white supercilium and black primaries.



42. Giant Grey Shrike showing dark grey upperparts, including the rump, little white on wings and longer tail.



43. Giant Grey Shrike showing a faint white supercilium, longer tail, longer bill and rosy tinged white underparts.

observations on eBird, all of which are from China. It appears to be a resident bird, undertaking only local and altitudinal movements. It is found at high elevations (3,000–5,200 m asl) in open habitats with stunted shrubs such as *Rhododendron* and often uses tall, exposed perches (Yosef et al. 2021). The nearest records are from two locations in Xizang (Ko 2017; Wang & Guan 2017; Shen 2023), the last two being from the same site. These are c. 180–250 km away from the current site, as calculated from linear distances on Google Maps. The area where I saw the bird is heavily patrolled by the military and access is limited. There is also limited scope for birding on foot, making regular birding and species documentation challenging. However, this record encourages the possibility of the occasional presence of the species in the area.

I am grateful to Salehin Md Habib from Kolkata for helping me identify this and other species I photographed during the trip and to Sandeep Biswas and members of the eBird India editors WhatsApp group for ID confirmation. I would like to thank two anonymous referees who enhanced this manuscript with several finer details. I am obliged to Praveen J for his invaluable input.

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A Tiger Shrike *Lanius tigrinus* from Bakkhali, West Bengal – A new species for India

On a sunny morning on 14 May, 2024, at Kargil Beach (21.571°N, 88.201°E), Bakkhali, South 24 Parganas, West Bengal, I set out with hopes of capturing some striking photographs of waders in their breeding plumage, such as the Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*, Tibetan Sand-Plover *A. atrifrons*, and Greater Sand-Plover *A. leschenaulti*, among others. Amidst my observations, a particularly agile passerine caught my eyes. I took several photos, initially believing it to be a Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus*. However, upon reviewing the photographs at home, I began to suspect my identification. For clarity, I sent the images to Ashwin Viswanathan and Kanad Baidya. Based on discussion with others, the bird was identified as a female Tiger Shrike *L. tigrinus*.

Identification of this shrike as a Tiger Shrike is straightforward. The only regionally occurring shrike with such a grey crown and reddish mantle is a male Red-backed Shrike. Among other things, a male Red-backed Shrike in an adult-like plumage always has a black and white tail, unlike this bird. Bay-backed Shrike in adult plumages have black forecrown, quite unlike this bird, and never show barred flanks. The proportionally larger bill, grey crown, and barred flanks and upperparts are consistent with those of a female Tiger Shrike. Additionally, an adult male can be ruled out by the presence of white lores and pale white supercilium apart from the crown and back being duller. A juvenile would have had



44. Tiger Shrike showing grey crown and upper mantle, barred rufous-brown back, thick bill, pale lores, and pale supercilium.



45. Tiger Shrike showing barred flanks and upperparts.



46. Tiger Shrike showing a clean white breast and belly grading to dirty white flanks with a dense barring.

a brown head and back and would have moulted out into an adult-like plumage by May. Even males in their second calendar year would show clean-white breast and flanks, unlike this bird, where there is dirty suffusion from the centre of the belly to the flanks. Hence, this particular bird is an adult female Tiger Shrike.

The Tiger Shrike breeds in south-eastern Russia, north-eastern and eastern China, Korea, and Japan and winters mainly in Southeast Asia; in the countries of Myanmar, Malaysia, Singapore, Laos, Vietnam, and Indonesia (Yosef et al. 2020). Recently, a female Tiger Shrike was reported from Bhutan on 09 July 2020