

Lesser Grey Shrike

Gryslaksman

Lanius minor

The Lesser Grey Shrike is a Palearctic migrant which can be considered a 'nonbreeding endemic' to southern Africa, since this is the nonbreeding destination of virtually the entire world population (Curry-Lindahl 1981; Pearson & Lack 1992). Its southern African range is less than one-fifth the area of its breeding range in Eurasia, and it spends almost twice as long here as on the breeding grounds (Dowsett 1971; Harris & Arnott 1988). It is widespread and common in central and northern Namibia, over most of Botswana, the northern Cape Province and the Transvaal. In Zimbabwe it is mainly a passage migrant (Irwin 1981). It extends only marginally into the eastern higher-rainfall parts of the region.

It has strongholds in Namibia, where densities of nearly 2 birds/km were found along roads (Becker 1975; Loske 1984–85; Ginn *et al.* 1989), and in the open Kalahari bushveld of Botswana, where average densities of 1 bird/20 ha have been recorded (unpubl. data). The population in the region, and therefore the total world population, is of the order of 5–10 million birds (Herremans 1992a; unpubl. data).

It is solitary and territorial during the austral summer (Harris & Arnott 1988), but upon arrival and departure it forms loose associations. It is conspicuous and the atlas data are reliable.

Habitat: It is a specialist of *Acacia* thornveld in the Kalahari basin and has a distribution similar to several other thornveld specialists. It does not need to drink (Irwin 1956a; Skead 1975a). It prefers arid open *Acacia* bushveld, particularly places with both low bushes and tall (or dead) trees alternating with open grassy space. Throughout the summer it perches prominently on open posts, e.g. dead branches, tops of trees, fences and powerlines. It also occurs frequently on fallow land with coppicing *Acacia* bushes and along the ecotone between arable land and bushveld. Contrary to the case on its breeding grounds (Lefranc 1995), it does not hover and is dependent on perches for hunting. It prefers drier, more open parts of the southern and central Kalahari, and it is rare in mid-summer in more lush parts of the northern Kalahari, north of 20°S. New habitat is found in places where bush has been cleared, e.g. for farmland, in eastern Botswana and the west-

ern Transvaal where average densities of 1 bird/10–15 ha are reached (unpubl. data). Associations with broadleaved woodlands result either from migrants on passage and/or from a mosaic with *Acacia*.

Movements: Arrival is progressively later further south, and at a given latitude arrival is remarkably 'punctual' from year to year (Dowsett 1971; Herremans 1994d). The first birds arrive in late October in the north, but only in the second half of November in the south; peak arrival is early November in the north and mid-December in the south. Departure is fast and synchronized: in the first ten days of April, but mostly in only a few nights, the whole subcontinent is vacated. The apparent peak in abundance just before departure in late March is probably due to increased activity associated with hyperphagy during the period of premigratory fat deposition. The models do not provide support for the idea that most birds depart via an eastern route (cf. Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). There are no confirmed records in the region during the austral winter.

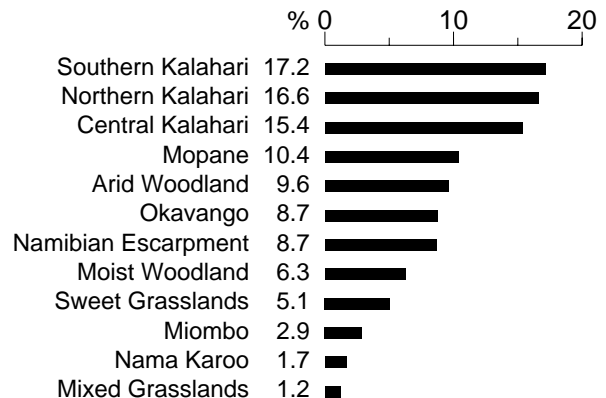
Interspecific relationships: The only resident *Lanius* shrike within its nonbreeding range is the rather similar Fiscal Shrike *L. collaris* and, although their distributions overlap considerably, the stronghold of the Lesser Grey Shrike coincides with a large Kalahari 'hole' in the distribution of the Fiscal Shrike, a species which otherwise has relatively high reporting rates in a wide range of biomes, including *Acacia* woodlands. Compared to the Redbacked Shrike *L. collurio*, the Lesser Grey Shrike prefers more open, arid country (Herremans 1997), and consequently extends further west.

Historical distribution and conservation: Lesser Grey Shrikes have dramatically declined over the western part of the breeding range (Niehuis 1968; Cramp *et al.* 1993; Lefranc 1995), and their concentrated distribution in southern Africa (Dowsett 1971) offers a good opportunity for monitoring. Drought in the Kalahari may affect the immediate survival of individuals but the associated mortality of trees promotes availability of preferred open habitat in subsequent seasons. Bush encroachment associated with overgrazing by livestock has reduced this habitat considerably in the Kalahari, but bush clearing for agriculture in the eastern periphery has created millions of hectares of new habitat in a more mesic area, now used by a considerable proportion of the population, possibly more so during drought years.

M. Herremans

Recorded in 1874 grid cells, 41.3%
Total number of records: 5901
Mean reporting rate for range: 8.4%

Reporting rates for vegetation types



Also marginally in Namib, E. Zimbabwe Highlands, Grassy Karoo, Sour Grasslands and East Coast Littoral.

