A presumed Steppe Grey Shrike (*Lanius pallidirostris*)
on Socheong Island, S Korea

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(EDITOR’S NOTE: This manuscript was written for online use, and was not originally intended for publication. It has been modified for the present publication. More details on identification and colour photographs are available from http://www.birdskorea.org/greyshrikes.asp. Additionally, follow this link for excellent images of Chinese Grey Shrikes www.wwfchina.org/birdgallery/birdpic.shtm?booknum=620.)

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**Abstract:** A large grey shrike was seen and digi-scoped on Socheong Island, South Korea, on 22nd September 2004. Basing on its general patterning and size, and some plumage details, it can be confidently identified as either a Steppe Grey Shrike (*Lanius pallidirostris*), or a Chinese Grey Shrike (*L. sphenocercus*). Furthermore, basing on a coarse estimate of its size, general appearance, head pattern, pattern on the scapulars; pattern on the remiges; pattern on the underside of the tail; the presence of a narrow white or whitish rump band; and the lack of an obviously graduated tail, it can be tentatively identified as a Steppe Grey Shrike. The Chinese Grey Shrike is rare in South Korea, whereas the Steppe Grey Shrike was not recorded there before.

**Key words:** *Lanius pallidirostris*, taxonomy, identification, Korea

**INTRODUCTION**

Only two species of grey shrikes have so far been recorded in South Korea: the Great Grey Shrike (*Lanius excubitor*) and Chinese Grey Shrike (*L. sphenocercus*); and neither are numerous. In a review of most published and well-documented records, PARK (2002) lists only 5 records of Great Grey Shrikes (all falling between 23rd November and 26th February, and all considered to be of the eastern subspecies *bianchii*), while Chinese Grey is considered a “rare winter visitor” to the country (LEE et al. 2000), even though it is the most regular of the grey shrikes to occur. Five pairs of the nominate Chinese Grey Shrike have, for example, been found recently breeding in the Cheorwon basin (LEE KI-SeO pers. comm.), and probably between 10 and 20 or more individuals winter nationwide most years (October–February), typically in rice fields and wetland edge habitats.
In autumn, the earliest migrant Chinese Grey Shrikes appear to arrive at coastal sites in mid-late September, with at least 4 records of Chinese Grey Shrikes in South Korea in the 10 days preceding our observations: (1) one near Gunsan on 11th September, (2) one on Socheong Island on 14th and 15th September, (3) two on Hong Island in mid-September, and (4) one on the neighbouring Heuksan Island in the far southwest, also in mid-September. Neither Southern Grey (\textit{L. meridionalis}) nor the long-distance migrant Steppe Grey Shrikes (\textit{L. pallidirostris}) have been recorded in South Korea, although one photograph in a 550 series (Iozawa et al. 2000) apparently depicts a first-winter Steppe Grey Shrike in Japan (in December), while another individual photographed in southwest Japan in January 2003 also appears likely to be a Steppe Grey Shrike. In addition, two further individuals photographed in mid-winter in Seosan and Gangneung in South Korea also suggest several characters of the taxon.

As a long-distance migrant breeding as far east as Mongolia, and wintering as far west as North-East Africa, and with a proven record of vagrancy to western Europe, it seems quite possible that Steppe Grey Shrikes might occasionally occur in Far East Asia, yet be easily misidentified or overlooked within the region.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

\textit{Our observation on Socheong Island}

On 22nd September 2004, at 5 pm, a scan through a tripod-mounted telescope of an almost inaccessible ridge about 150 to 200 m away (and less than 200 m from another hilltop, which had held a Chinese Grey Shrike on 14th and 15th September) revealed a grey shrike sitting half-obscured in a low-lying thorn bush.

Several distant digi-scope images were taken through a handheld Nikon coolpix. The views in the field, and the resultant images, reveal a large grey, black and white shrike. Its size (combined with its lack of pale edged greater coverts or black forehead) ruled out the possibility of the unrecorded Lesser Grey Shrike (\textit{L. minor}), or the even more unlikely possibility of a North American Loggerhead Shrike (\textit{L. ludovicianus}). This limited the possible species to Chinese Grey, Great Grey, Southern Grey, or Steppe Grey Shrikes.

The long process of identification through elimination

There is little literature looking in detail at the identification of grey shrikes in Far East Asia, with only Great Grey and Chinese Grey illustrated by Lee et al. (2000) and Mackinnon & Phillipps (2000), two of the most often used field guides in the region.

Recent taxonomic decisions regarding the “Great Grey Shrike Super-species” which have split the group into Great Grey, Southern Grey and Steppe Grey (e.g. Hernandez et al. 2004), are therefore not covered by regional field guides, and recently developed identification criteria for these newly recognized species remain largely unknown. Additionally, identification papers written in Europe (e.g. Conzemius 2001, Perttula & Tenovuo 2002) primarily focus on the separation of Steppe Grey and Southern Grey Shrikes from western subspecies of the Great Grey Shrike (not covering eastern and Nearctic taxa), and do not consider the Chinese Grey Shrike
at all – a species sharing many Steppe Grey type features. The possibility of misidentification of grey shrikes in this region therefore remains relatively high.

Distinguishing Chinese Grey and Steppe Grey Shrikes in the field

The Chinese Grey Shrike, the only regularly occurring grey shrike in South Korea, and the Steppe Grey Shrike appear to share a number of features, many of which are considered useful in western Europe for separating Steppe Grey from Great Grey (and Southern Grey) Shrikes. Both Chinese and Steppe Grey Shrikes are largely pale; both perhaps lack clear vermiculations or brown tones in any plumage (though some literature suggests that juvenile Chinese Grey Shrikes show some buff-grey barring on the upper parts); both show extensive white in the closed wing (including broad white tertiary tips, with white extending along the edges of the tertaries or across on the secondaries); both often show largely pale or at least not solidly black lores; and finally both are supposed to show some graduation in the tail, with the central tail feathers longer than the outer ones. Although this last feature appears easy to discern in all Chinese Grey Shrikes with fresh-looking tails, it does not seem, basing on images, to be at all typical of Steppe Grey Shrikes, which seem to have rather narrow and square-ended tails.

In direct comparison of the two species, size alone should allow ready identification. The Chinese Grey Shrike is typically very large and long-tailed. Measurements given in Lee et al. (2000) suggest that it is 31 cm in length, while the Great Grey Shrike is significantly smaller, reaching about 24 cm. These measurements are repeated in the rather unreliable guide written by Mackinnon & Phillipps (2000), which indicates that the two are similar in size. Svensson & Grant (1999) include the Steppe Grey Shrike within the Great Grey Shrike, and give an overall length of 22 cm to 26 cm. The Chinese Grey Shrike is therefore typically ca 20% larger in total length than the Steppe Grey Shrike. In addition, behaviour might provide some useful clues. Conzemius (2001) reports that both Southern Grey Shrikes and Steppe Grey Shrikes observed in Europe often flush only short distances (20 m in some areas) and can be rather approachable.

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REFERENCES
