

First breeding record of Lesser Grey Shrike *Lanius minor* in Iraq

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In June 2012, as part of a Nature Iraq conservation programme, I spent two days surveying birds and other wildlife on the slopes of Shirin mountain (36.94° N 44.20° E), above the town of Barzan, Iraqi Kurdistan, close to the border with Turkey. On 8 June 2012 at c1780 m asl, I noticed two Lesser Grey Shrikes *Lanius minor*, which I quickly realised were a pair, actively catching insects and carrying them to what I presumed was a nest site in an oak *Quercus aegilop*. Oaks, mostly scattered, but also in fairly dense patches, were the dominant tree on the rocky slopes (Plate 1). I watched the shrikes for over an hour as they hunted grasshoppers (Orthoptera: Caelifera), taking them to the nest site. The birds spotted the grasshoppers from a prominent look-out at the top of a *Pistacia eurycarpa* (Plates 2, 3). The pair made at least five visits to the nest site during the hour. I made a cursory look for the nest, which appeared to be c4–5 m above the ground, but I could not locate it looking up through the dense foliage and I didn't want to draw attention to it as a shepherd boy seemed curious about my activities. On the following day, 9 June, the pair was still taking food to the nest site, regularly from 07.00—at least 10.00 h. During this time I located another pair c200 m away, which were engaged in full courtship with much bowing and tail raising by the male; nearby a third male was singing, which suggests they were breeding in a loose group. Lesser Grey Shrike is sometimes solitary, but more typically breeds in neighbourhood groups of 3–7 pairs (Cramp & Perrins 1993).

Incubation and fledging periods for Lesser Grey Shrike are 15–16 and 16–18 days respectively, with an additional five days prior to incubation for egg laying (Harrison & Castell 2002). Thus the first egg could have been laid as early as 3 May (if chicks were close to fledging) or as late as 22 May, if the chicks were hatched on 8 June. In detailed studies in Slovakia, egg-laying of first clutches has been recorded 6–26 May (Kristin *et al* 2000) whilst for Turkey 21 May is the earliest date (Kirwan *et al* 2008).

This is, surprisingly, the first record of Lesser Grey Shrike breeding in Iraq, as it breeds throughout neighbouring Turkey (Kirwan *et al* 2008). Hitherto in Iraq, it has only been recorded as a passage migrant (Salim *et al* 2012). Shirin mountain is part of the Gali Balnda key biodiversity area (Nature Iraq 2016) and falls in the Zagros mountains forest steppe ecoregion. The Gali Balnda KBA is one of the richest areas for biodiversity in



Plate 1. Oak woodland nesting habitat of Lesser Grey Shrike *Lanius minor* on Shirin mountain, Iraqi Kurdistan, June 2012. © RF Porter



Plate 2. Lesser Grey Shrike *Lanius minor* with prey in top of *Pistacia eurycarpa*, Shirin mountain, Iraqi Kurdistan, 8 June 2012. © RF Porter



Plate 3. Lesser Grey Shrike *Lanius minor* waiting to carry prey to the nest, Shirin mountain, Iraqi Kurdistan, 8 June 2012. © RF Porter

Iraqi Kurdistan holding two globally endangered mammals, one endangered breeding bird (Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*) as well as eight Irano-Turanian, and five Mediterranean, biome-restricted bird species. In addition the KBA has seven species of Iraqi endemic plants (Nature Iraq 2016).

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