



Hilly scrubland



Open short-grass country with hillocks and scrub

Habitat

Open scrub and semi-arid country, desert edges, dry deciduous-thorny forests and near low hillocks. Avoid dense forests. Rare in the coastal regions.

Distribution – Entire India.



Shrikes expel pellets of undigested food



Usually perch on wire or branch



Habit

Arboreal, territorial and aggressive. Perch on bush tops, wires or on poles. Fly close to ground.

Hunt prey by pursuit and in pairs. Batter prey and eat by tearing it in shreds. Often remove the sting of a scorpion before eating it.

Nest

Both sexes build a deep cup from thorny twigs, grass, leaves, cotton, thread, paper, wool, hair, feathers and rags. Hence the nest may be mistaken for a rubbish pile. Rarely old nests of crow or babbler for a pile of rubbish may be used.



A typical nest of the Grey Shrike in a thorny bush

Courtship



A pair



With insect food



Inspecting the nest after completion

Larder

Shrikes maintain a larder by impaling surplus prey that they hunt in morning, on thorns, spikes, barbs or pointed sticks. Food is eaten leisurely in the noon.

Shrikes spend time and energy in guarding the larder. During the first week chicks are fed grub and insects. Flesh is fed from second week onwards.

Grasshoppers, dressed avian chick and a claw of a mouse are impaled on thorns. Because of this habit, the shrikes are called 'Butcher Birds'.



The head of a lizard, a toad, a skink and a beetle are cached in the larder. The shrikes spend a lot of time protecting their larders from other birds, who may otherwise steal their food

Food

Carnivorous. Insects – Ants, beetles, caterpillars, grub, bugs and locusts. Scorpions, lizards, geckos, skinks. Rodents, shrews and amphibians. Birds like sunbirds,

small green bee-eaters, warblers, sparrows, larks, pipits, brahminy myna, house bunting, occasionally sandgrouse and spotted owlet juveniles.

Key Features



- Sexes alike.
- Pied silvery grey plumage.
- Large bull-like head with a black eye mask.
- Crown and back grayish black.
- Black wings with white mirrors - best seen in flight.
- Bill hawk like, hooked, black.
- Black and white tail with black central feathers and white upper wing coverts.
- Talons black, pointed, powerful.



Other Shrikes



Bay-backed Shrike



Long-tailed Shrike

Long-tailed Shrike, Bay-backed Shrike, Brown Shrike, Isabelline Shrike and Red-backed Shrike. The latter three species are winter migrants to India.

Etymology

Lanius meridionalis : L. *Lanius* – an executioner, a butcher. L. *meridionalis* – southern (*meridies* – the south, noon, mid-day). Shrikes are known as 'Butcher Birds' from their habit of storing cached prey items by impaling them on sharp objects, giving resemblance to a butcher's slaughter house. Sanskrit name – *Latushak*.

Cultural aspects

In Moghul times shrikes were trained for falconry to hunt small and medium sized birds like sparrows and mynas. Marathi name **Gandhari** is after the blind-folded queen by the same name, and the mother of Kauravas in the epic Mahabharat.



Guarding the territory



A dead chick due to heavy parasitic load in the nest

Threats:

Habitat loss and tree felling for firewood. In our observation period of the past 30 years, several shrike habitats are lost to urbanization and industrialization.

No legal protection:

Does not feature in any of the schedules of WildLife (Protection) Act.

Southern Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis* Temminck, 1820

Type Locality – Bengal

Pedda kiriti gadu (Telugu); *Khatik, Gandhari* (Marathi); *Dudhiya latora, Bada latora, Safed latora* (Hindi); *Kachkacha, Anjana* (Bangla); *Latushaka - big headed* (Sanskrit) – aptly descriptive.

- **Size:** 250 mm.
- **Weight:** 52 g male; 55 - 66 g female.
- **Wing:** Male 108 – 115 mm. 105 -113 female.
- **Tarsus:** 49 – 57 mm.
- **Breeding season:** January – October.
- **Clutch:** 3 – 6 eggs. One to two clutches per year.
- **Eggs:** Oval; Greenish white, variable, with brown-purple spots, blotches; smooth to coarse;
- **Egg Size:** 25.9 x 19.7 mm.
- **Incubation:** 16 - 17 d.
- **Nuptial displays:** Flying, mutual feeding and calls.
- **Call:** Shrill calls.



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Southern Grey Shrike

- **Order:** Passeriformes • **Family:** Laniidae
- **Status:** Resident, Local migrant.

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Flight:



Swift on wing the shrike is capable of several aerobatic manoeuvres

Phenology



Eggs



One day old chicks



Two days old chicks



Three days old chicks



10-12 days old chicks panting during hot noon



16 days old chick



Adult plumage



Sub-adult plumage

Amazing Facts

Shrikes are intelligent birds and remember all the larders. They retrieve all prey items that they impale on thorns. If threat is perceived, parents may push all chicks out of the nest and escort them away from the nest by encouraging them to walk on ground and then hide them in a tussock or clump under a bush and feed them there. If a chick dies in the nest it is not eaten or removed by parents, but allowed to dry in hot sun amidst live chicks. **Post-fledging dependence period:** Parents teach juveniles to hunt by dropping semi-killed prey like grasshoppers on ground and encourage them to retrieve and eat the prey items.

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