

A BRIEF LOOK ON THE TAXONOMY CHANGES IN SHRIKES SINCE 1960 WITH FOCUS ON THE *EXCUBITOR* /*MERIDIONALIS*/*BOREALIS* GROUP

NORBERT LEFRANC

Chemin du Bois Basselin, 88100 Saint-Dié des Vosges, France. norbert.lefranc@hotmail.fr

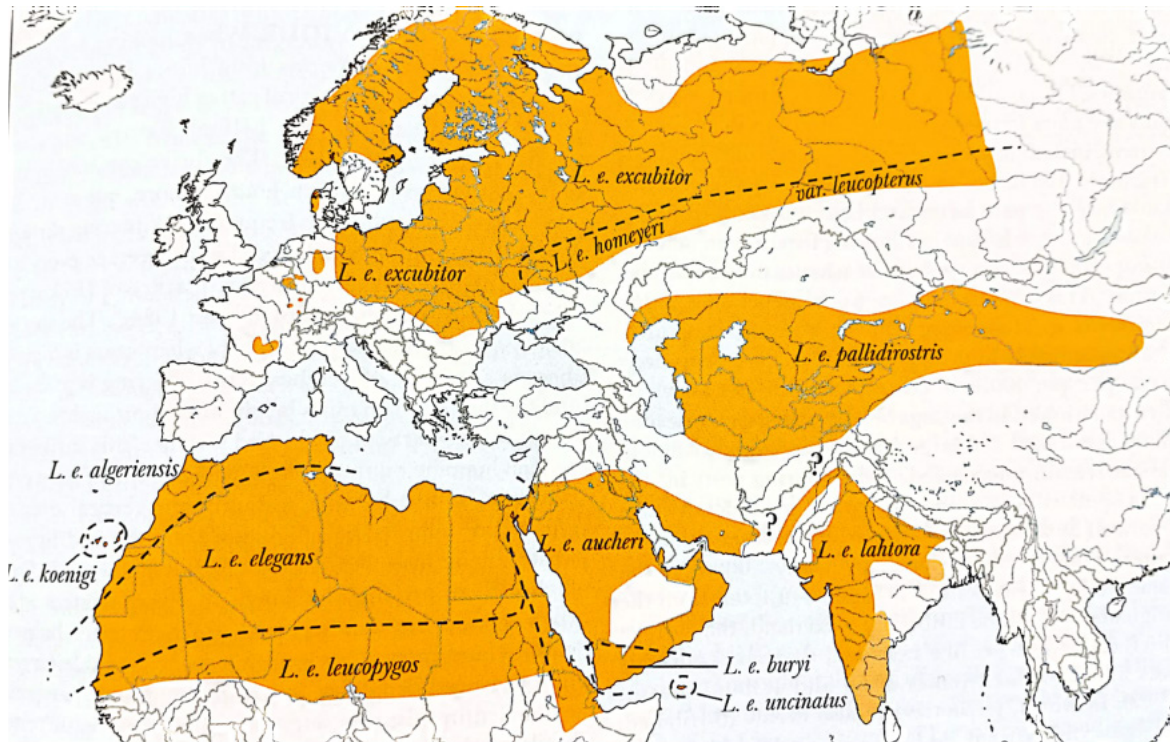


Figure 1. The different subspecies of *L. excubitor*. (map from Lefranc & Worfolk 2022)

Peters's Checklist of Birds of the World (1960) is a seminal work in bird taxonomy. Within the family Laniidae, as delineated by Austin L. Rand in volume 9, a total of 74 species are grouped across four subfamilies: Prionopinae, Malacotinae, Laniinae, and Pityriasinae, spanning 12 genera. Notably, the subfamily Laniinae encompasses two genera: *Corvinella*, comprising two species, and *Lanius*, housing 23 species. Additionally, *Eurocephalus* (white-crowned shrikes) are represented by two species. These are traditionally associated with the family Laniidae and find placement within the subfamily Prionopinae in this classification.

Over the years, numerous significant modifications have been proposed (Cf. history of the changes in Lefranc & Worfolk 2022).

The family Laniidae is currently regarded as monogeneric, with 32 species in the genus *Lanius*. The DNA analyses by Fuchs *et al.* (2019) indicate that the two species assigned to the genera *Urolestes* or *Corvinella* are part of the same clade as the *Lanius* species. Thus the Grey-backed Fiscal becomes *L. excubitoroides* and the Long-tailed Fis-

cal *L. cabanisi*. The same analyses confirm that the genus *Eurocephalus* is not closely related to the remaining species. McCullough *et al.* (2023) come to the same conclusion and propose to elevate the white-crowned shrikes to their own family: Eurocephalidae.

All these changes are mainly, but not exclusively, due to molecular approaches. Shortly, after even more genetic analyses, more shrike subspecies will likely be promoted to full species status. Based on just phenotypic characters, the so-called “Japanese” Brown Shrike *L. cristatus superciliosus* and the “Philippine” Brown Shrike *L. cristatus lucionensis* are already good candidates, as well as several subspecies of the Schach Shrike *L. schach*.

The changes in the last decades can be well illustrated by the example of the Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor*, traditionally treated as a species with up to 19 subspecies (e.g., Rand 1960) and with a breeding range covering vast parts of Eurasia from Spain eastwards to the Indian subcontinent, but also the Middle East, North Africa, and the extreme north of North America (Fig. 1).

In the 1990s, following Vaurie (1959), it was sometimes divided into a northern and a southern subspecies group based on differences in morphology, ecology, and distribution (e.g., Cramp & Perrins 1993). In Lefranc & Worfolk (1997), the Great Grey Shrike was split into a northern (nine races) and a southern (11 races) species, thus following, among others, the suggestion of Panov (1995) in his paper on ‘*The superspecies of shrikes in the former USSR.*’ Arguments in favor of this split concerned morphology, ecology, and geographical distribution (Cf. details in Lefranc & Worfolk 2022), including the fact that two taxa, *pallidirostris* (then attached to the southern subspecies group) and *mollis* (then northern subspecies group) co-existed geographically, and not infrequently syntopically, in an area of Mongolia.

This taxonomy was later contradicted by results from genetic studies, the most significant papers being Klassert *et al.* (2008) and Olsson *et al.* (2010). The latter paper deals with 18 taxa of the Great Grey Shrike complex. It shows a mitochondrial tree incompatible with the above-related division of the *L. excubitor* complex into a northern (*L. excubitor*) and a southern (*L. meridionalis*) species. Among the suggestions resulting from these findings: nominate Southern Grey Shrike *L. m. meridionalis* should be elevated to species status as it is genetically neither closely related to the nominate *excubitor* nor to the North African taxa regarded as its subspecies (*algeriensis*, *elegans*, *koenigi*, etc.).

Currently, three species are generally recognized: Great Grey Shrike *L. excubitor*, with 11 or 12 subspecies; Iberian Grey Shrike (ex nominate ‘Southern Grey’; Fig. 2) *L. meridionalis*, monotypic; and Northern Shrike *L. borealis*, with 3, 4, or 5 subspecies (e.g. Dickinson *et al.* 2014, Shirihai & Svensson 2018, Clements *et al.* 2019, Lefranc & Worfolk 2022, Gill *et al.* IOC checklist 2024).

The map (from Lefranc & Worfolk 2022; Fig. 1) shows the breeding distribution of the 11 *excubitor* races mentioned in the book. They are listed below with their English names following Shirihai & Svensson (2018) and sometimes with a few comments. The last two mentioned publications give more details, including descriptions.

- *L. e. excubitor* Great Grey Shrike.
- *L. e. homeyeri* Homeyer’s Shrike

Identifying *homeyeri* remains a challenge for observers in the field, on photos, or in museums (skins) because of its strong resemblance to what is generally called the ‘*galliae*’ type in nominate. It is not always possible to assign a label!

Leucopterus is sometimes regarded as a pale morph of *homeyeri* (Dickinson *et al.* 2014, Shirihai & Svensson 2018). In Peter’s Checklist (1960), *leucopterus* is listed as a valid race, a view still shared by Panov (2010). It is noteworthy that Tajkova & Red’kin (2014) synonymise *homeyeri* with *excubitor*, not an absurd option given the similarity with “*galliae*.” For further details see that publi-



Figure 2. Iberian Grey Shrike *L. meridionalis*. Bouches-du-Rhône, France, April (Camera trap, Olivier Hameau).

cation and discussion in Lefranc & Worfolk (2022). The precise breeding and wintering ranges of *homeyeri* and *leucopterus* (as well as their general biology) are still poorly known; the breeding ranges shown on the map are probably not quite correct and incomplete. .

- *L.e. algeriensis* ‘Algerian Grey Shrike’
- *L.e. koenigi* ‘Canary Islands Grey Shrike’ (Fig. 3)
- *L.e. elegans* ‘Elegant Grey Shrike’
- This taxon is sometimes referred to as ‘Desert Grey Shrike’
- *L.e. leucopygos* ‘Sahel Grey Shrike’
- *L.e. aucheri* ‘Levant Grey Shrike’



Figure 3. ‘Canary Island’ Grey Shrike *L. excubitor koenigi*. La Graciosa, Canary Islands, November (Yves Muller).

Gill *et al.* (2024) also recognize *L.e.theresae* (northern Israël, southern Lebanon), here included in *aucheri*

- *L.e. buryi* ‘Yemen Grey Shrike’
- *L.e. uncinatus* ‘Socotra Grey Shrike’

This taxon, confined to an island off the Horn of Africa, was subsumed with *aucheri* by Kirwan (2007) as it is phenotypically very similar. DNA analyses, however, tell another story suggesting that *uncinatus* may even be a good candidate for species recognition (Olsson *et al.* 2010).

- *L.e. lahtora* ‘Indian Grey Shrike’
- *L.e. pallidirostris* ‘Desert Grey Shrike’ (Fig. 4)

In the literature, this taxon was often, and sometimes still is, referred to as ‘Steppe Grey Shrike,’ but given its habitat characteristics, ‘Desert Grey Shrike’ appears much more adequate, a name already used by Dement’ev & Gladkov (1968) and later by Panov (2011).



Figure 4. ‘Desert’ Grey Shrike *L. excubitor pallidirostris*. Sohar, Oman, March (Annika Forsten).

Other ‘more progressive’ taxonomic treatments may also be found in the literature, as Olsson *et al.* 2010 state that the *Lanius excubitor* complex may be treated as at least six species. Thus within *Lanius excubitor* alone, the Dutch Committee for Avian Systematics (CSNA) recognizes four species: three polytypic: Great Grey *L. excubitor* (*excubitor*; *homeyeri*, *leucopteros*), ‘Asian’ Grey *L. lahtora* (*lahtora*, *pallidirostris*, *aucheri*, *buryi*), ‘Desert’ Grey *L. elegans* (*elegans*, *leucopygos*, *algeriensis*, *koenigi*) and the monotypic Socotra Grey *L. uncinatus* (Poelstra 2010).

Two other recent examples: in his checklist of the *Birds of Moroccan Atlantic Sahara* (in French), Bergier *et al.* (2017) elevate the ‘Desert’ (here = Elegant) Grey Shrike to species status *L. elegans elegans* and also mention the presence of one of its subspecies: the ‘Algerian Grey Shrike,’ *L. elegans algeriensis*. In the *Atlas of Birds of Iran*, the ‘Desert Grey Shrike’ (named ‘Steppe Grey

Shrike’) becomes a subspecies of the ‘Indian Grey Shrike: *L. lahtora pallidirostris* (Kaboli *et al.*, 2016).

All these taxonomic proposals or modifications are interesting to follow, particularly with the progress in DNA analyses. But they may understandably create confusion in the birders’ minds!

The good thing to remember is that when changes happen in one of our preferred World lists or our field guide, the affected taxa continue of course to exist and will not be less attractive.

In the case of the Great Grey Shrike, the Latin names indicated on the map will not change whether they refer to species or subspecies. In summer, in Uzbekistan, for instance, one is sure to be in *pallidirostris* country or in ‘Desert Grey Shrike’ country! While Latin names will not change, it is also hoped that there will be a certain stability in the use of English names as they appear in most scientific publications.

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