

The Brown Shrike in Italy – the first wintering in Europe

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On 5th January 2003, we spent the morning at the bird observatory known as 'La Tomina', near Mirandola, in the province of Modena, northern Italy.

La Tomina is a private estate of roughly 200ha situated close to the Po river. It belongs to some farmers who, about ten years ago, decided to flood the previously cultivated fields, thanks to an EU grant. During the breeding season, the area hosts up to about 120 pairs of Whiskered Terns, as well as two pairs of Common Bitterns and also breeding Garganey and Black-winged Stilts. It also attracts other wildfowl and waders on passage, including flocks of up to about 300 Black-tailed Godwits. An excellent range of passerines also occurs, particularly in autumn, with over 5,000 birds ringed by the bird observatory (Stazione Ornitologica Modenese) each year regularly including such species as Bluethroat, Savi's, Great Reed, Moustached, Marsh and even Aquatic Warblers.

The morning was cold, dull and foggy – it was a good day to do some maintenance work. Consequently we saw few birds of note, but as we were leaving, driving towards Mirandola at midday, RG suddenly stopped the car and pointed out a bird perched on a small bush close to the road, and shouted: "the shrike, look: the shrike!". On 29th November, DL had seen a small shrike in the same area, but bad weather conditions had not allowed him to reach a firm identification, other than to suggest that it was probably a first-winter Red-backed Shrike. The bird had not been seen subsequently by anyone, so this was the first time that we had an opportunity to see it.

It was immediately obvious that it was not a Red-backed Shrike, as previously supposed. It was too long-tailed, with a stout bill and large head and, in the short flight observed, the tail looked evenly reddish-brown, with no white. We quickly grabbed our telescopes and looked for additional features which might confirm our

Plate 1. First-winter Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus cristatus*, La Tomina, Modena, Italy, January 2003 (Andrea Corso). The first for Italy and the eighth for the Western Palearctic.



first hypothesis that it could be an Isabelline Shrike. Unfortunately, however, the day was so dull and the light so poor that we could not get any further clues. RG tried to take some video footage, but after a few minutes the bird flew into the reedbeds and vanished in the fog.

Once at home, we checked our books and field guides, which at first seemed to confirm our identification as Isabelline, and we spread the news to our friends.

A number of people went to see the bird over the next few days, and photographers took some pictures. The following Sunday, MP joined us at the site, together with other birders and photographers, and we discussed the bird's identification. We concluded that not all of its features completely fitted Isabelline Shrike, so we decided to try to trap it.

We set up two mist nets in the ditch close to the bird's usual perches, and also used playback of its sub-song recorded by MP to attract it. Just a few minutes later, the shrike flew into one of the nets and within a few seconds it was put into a bag and taken to the observatory.

We examined it in detail in the hand and took a detailed description. It was soon clear that it was neither a Red-backed nor an Isabelline Shrike. In fact, the wing formula, wing length, tail/wing ratio and the difference between t_6 and t_5 (which gave the tail a rounded shape) all indicated that it was a Brown Shrike – the first for Italy. The general state of the plumage and the presence of some retained juvenile feathers confirmed that the bird was a first-winter, probably a male. Finally, the bird was weighed, ringed and released where it had been trapped, all within 15 minutes of it being caught.

Plate 2. First-winter Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus cristatus*, La Tomina, Modena, Italy, January 2003 (Marco Pesente).



Description summary

Size as Red-backed Shrike, but with different jizz, due to bulkier head with bicoloured bill and longer reddish-brown tail; at first glance its proportions seemed more like Lesser Grey Shrike than Red-backed Shrike. Upperparts brown, with the crown more orange-coloured and sandy margins to the tertials, secondaries and greater coverts. Underparts sandy brown with obvious clean white throat and lower face; very faint chevron-shaped bars on breast sides and flanks. Well defined blackish-brown mask obvious just behind the eye, but indistinct on the lores and forehead. White supercilium more evident at rear. Upper mandible lead grey with blackish culmen and tip; lower mandible pinkish-brown. Feet and legs dark brown.

The bird was well-watched over the following days, and it was observed catching mole crickets and shrews at a rate of up to three prey items per hour.

The news spread rapidly, by telephone and thanks to the Po Delta Birds and EBN Italy internet mailing lists, and the Brown Shrike quickly became the subject of the largest twitch ever known in Italy. Over the next week, about 100 birders from all over Italy and abroad came to La Tomina, and the procession of visitors continued right through the following weeks. In fact, so many birders came that, reluctantly, we had to send out a message asking that disturbance to the area be kept to an absolute minimum to avoid the danger of wildfowl wintering on the reserve being accidentally flushed onto nearby duck-shooting ponds. Our suggestion was followed by more birders who came to see the shrike in the following weeks and there was no further disturbance, either to the bird itself or to the environment.

Plate 3. First-winter Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus cristatus*, La Tomina, Modena, Italy, January 2003 (Marco Pesente).





Plates 4-5. First-winter Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus cristatus*, La Tomina, Modena, Italy, January 2003 (*Per Lif*).
More photographs of this bird appear on pages 13 and 37.

Plate 6. First-winter Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus cristatus*, La Tomina, Modena, Italy, January 2003 (*Per Lif*).



The bird remained until 6th February, but was not seen again after that. The record is, of course, subject to ratification by the Italian rarities committee, to whom a rich documentation with photographs and sound recordings has been submitted.

Acknowledgements

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