

Becoming a Great Grey Shrike: a patient homage to a bird

During winter, the Schaopedobbe nature reserve in the northern Dutch province of Friesland is inhabited by a single Great Grey Shrike (*Lanius excubitor*). Unaccompanied by other members of its species, it spends the winter there alone. It appears space is lacking for more Great Grey Shrikes; the Schaopedobbe is only a small feeding territory. The Sentinel, as the Great Grey Shrike is also known, is well acquainted with Martin Brandsma, a keen observer like the bird itself. Brandsma followed this Shrike faithfully from its arrival in autumn 2015 until it left the area in mid-April 2016 to breed in Scandinavia.

Apart from an adder researcher and Brandsma, no visitors to this restricted area are allowed to leave the paths. Today, however, I'm one of the privileged few. Brandsma hadn't dared to promise we'd find the Great Grey Shrike, but he was quickly able to point it out. It was perched on a treetop, adeptly keeping its balance on a branch rocking gently in the breeze. 'It can see I've got someone with me,' said Brandsma. 'It instantly notices anything unusual. It's more alert and restless than normal.' What strikes me is Brandsma's perspective. No sooner has he caught sight of the Great Grey Shrike than he observes abnormal behaviour and puts himself in its place. What does the arrival of two visitors on its territory mean for the Great Grey Shrike? After numerous encounters, it already knows Brandsma isn't dangerous, but who is the stranger?

The Great Grey Shrike averts its head, preens its feathers, peers out over the tree-and-shrub-dotted heathlands. Then, in a lightning flash (a great first line for a haiku), dives down kamikaze-like before disappearing into the heather, only to return a short time later to the higher vantage point it has just abandoned. A successful manoeuvre. A lizard wriggles in its bill. It soon makes another nosedive, this time in a different direction, again disappearing into the undergrowth, before re-emerging seconds later, with no lizard, and flying back to its tree. We walk to the place where we lost sight of the bird and discover the motionless lizard. In the bright March sun, it has a flaming reddish-orange belly with jet-black speckles. The creature has been decisively impaled behind its head. Its body is drooping. A branch has pierced its neck. A thick drop of blood, not yet clotted, seeps from its neck. Brandsma carefully taps the motionless body with his finger, establishing that, after being impaled, it died a swift death.

During the second week of March, the ground had warmed up quickly and, in the process, also warmed up the cold-blooded bodies of countless hibernating lizards. All those little holes dotted across the Schaopedobbe began seething with life. Thyroid glands shifted into higher gear, intestines started churning, heartbeats accelerated, until, after their months-long hibernation, the lizards finally began appearing in slow motion. The Great Grey Shrike catches up to fifty lizards a week. The moment they're available, lizards are its favourite prey. As long as they're abundant, the Shrike loses interest in decapitating field voles and common voles, and songbirds and minotaur beetles are eaten less frequently.

Old photographs show Great Grey Shrikes building collections of impaled prey: mice, lizards, dragonflies, bumblebees. They are varied collections, clumped together on single shrubs. They made a big impression on me when I was a child. Today I hoped to see them in the wild. But, according to Brandsma, I could forget that. Those photographs of Great Grey Shrike collections are staged.

Though Great Grey Shrikes do indeed build collections, they seldom leave more than one prey on a specific shrub or fallen dead branch. The fact that they create 'larders' at all may be an unintentional by-product of having relatively weak legs. Unlike raptors, they have difficulty grabbing their prey, butchering them, and plucking out and shredding the meat. Presumably that's why they wedge them into a forked branch or impale them on a thorn or sharp branch.

Once, a few years ago, the Great Grey Shrike of the Schaopedobbe caught thirty-three lizards in one day and skewered them on an equal number of shrubs spread across the landscape. It seems the Great Grey Shrike hunted when the hunting was good and ate when hunger called. Within two weeks all thirty-three lizards had disappeared. They were seldom or never removed or consumed by other animals. How does the Shrike ever recall the location of thirty-three elusive lizards? I'm afraid if I weren't in the company of Brandsma, with his trained eye, I wouldn't find a single one. It's unlikely the bird would smell the desiccated lizard mummies. Instead, you would expect that, like Brandsma, it would rely on its visual recognition skills. Perhaps the Great Grey Shrike memorises a route marked by the hiding spots of the impaled prey. Might it also remember the order in which they were caught? Those routes would make beautiful drawings. Routes on which the life of the Great Grey Shrike depends.

It's well known that squirrels are experts at finding nuts they once stashed away. Some birds are equally adept. Clark's Nutcrackers, for example, store more than 20,000 pine nuts every autumn. According to primatologist Frans de Waal, to do this they use hundreds of different locations spread over many square kilometres. The birds are capable of retrieving most of the nuts during winter and spring, something humans are cognitively quite incapable of doing. After only one day, humans have often already forgotten where they parked their bicycle!

Driven by his intense interest, Brandsma managed to find all thirty-three impaled lizards (with the help of drawings and photographs). The so-called 'episodic memory' of humans may be less impressive than that of squirrels and some species of birds, but humans are clever enough to overcome this handicap.

The eminent animal observer Konrad Lorenz was legendary for his inspiring lectures. When he talked about jackdaws, wolves, geese or cichlids, he became them. After countless hours of observation, he knew them intimately. By placing himself deeply inside their world and their powers of perception, his metamorphosis enabled him to make unique discoveries. As well as in the Schaopedobbe and fifty-seven other areas in the Dutch provinces of Friesland and Drenthe, Brandsma has studied the Great Grey Shrike in many other natural habitats, from the Vosges right up to the breeding grounds in Lapland. The Great Grey Shrike is his muse.

He has spent thousands of hours observing Great Grey Shrikes, drawing them meticulously in the hope of learning more about their secrets. Not only in the field, but also as dead specimens in natural history collections. Through making morphological drawings of the colour patterns on their tails, he has learned to distinguish one individual from the other. For anyone who has studied them closely, no two Great Grey Shrikes are alike. By collecting their pellets – one consisting of mouse remains, another sparkling like a diamond because of the facet-like iridescent lizard scales on its surface – Brandsma has tried to penetrate ever more deeply into their world. Something between controlling and warding off a favourite animal. This is how he seeks to grasp the essence of the bird: its entire habitat, its diet, the black, grey and white feathers unique to every individual. The long almond-shaped black eye mask that allows the bird to hunt while flying into the sun, because its shadow, which could betray its arrival to a potential prey, is cast behind rather than in front of it. The acrobatic balancing on the uppermost branch of a tree. The alertness, the furtive looking, the patient waiting, the chattering call of the bird. It's a large assortment of characteristics that makes the collecting and visually orientated Great Grey Shrike what it is. In Lapland, Brandsma ventured even further, by dressing, in a performance – the way the local Saami do during their rituals – like a Great Grey Shrike, donning a black eye mask, climbing into a tree, chattering like the bird and peering out over the landscape. A unique and patient homage to the Great Grey Shrike.

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