A possible record of Large-billed Reed-Warbler *Acrocephalus orinus* from Kanha Tiger Reserve, central India

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Large-billed Reed-Warbler *Acrocephalus orinus* is one of the most enigmatic of Oriental birds. This species was described from a single specimen obtained in the Sutlej Valley near Rampoor, Himachal Pradesh on 13th November 2007 by Allan Octavian Hume (Hume 1869). However, this specimen was later suspected to be an isolated form of Clamorous Reed-Warbler *A. stentoreus* or an aberrant Blyth's Reed-Warbler *A. dumetorum* until it was proved to be a distinct species with compelling mtDNA evidence (Bensch & Pearson 2002). The species entered the front page of newspapers during March 2007 when Philip D. Round announced the trapping of a live individual of this species at Laem Phak Bia Environmental Research and Development Project in Phetchaburi, Thailand on 27th March 2006; this site was *c*. 3,100 km from its type locality (Round *et al*. 2007). A few months later, another specimen was discovered, from India, among the collection of Blyth's Reed-Warbler skins at the Natural History Museum, Tring (U.K.). This bird had been captured in Mussoorie, Uttar Pradesh, in October 1869 (Peter Kennerley *in litt*., May 2008). The Indian birding community also had its time to rejoice when Sumit K. Sen photographed an individual in Chintamani Kar Bird Sanctuary, Narendrapur, West Bengal, India, on 1st April 2007 (Sen 2007). Since then, Philip D. Round has netted one more individual in Thailand, which means that this species has been encountered a mere five times. On only one of these occasions was the species actually observed in the wild, with about 12 minutes of field observation (Sen 2007). This account describes our exciting encounter with a mysterious *Acrocephalus* warbler, which we believe was a Large-billed Reed-Warbler, in Kanha Tiger Reserve (KTR), Madhya Pradesh, central India.

A photograph of the bird was taken during the first week of April 2008 (Fig. 1) on the outskirts of KTR at Banjar Tolla by one of us (DR), using a Nikon D80 and Sigma 300 mm telephoto lens; this picture was sent to PJ and subsequently to MP for confirmation, labelled as "Blyth's Reed-Warbler". The general habitat of the area is predominantly Sal forest but grass, bamboo and mango orchards mainly dominate the locality where the bird was sighted. DR initially believed that the bird was nesting as it frequented a particular bamboo clump during early morning and late evening. The picture was also circulated on the Internet mailing list, delhibirdpix@googlegroups.com. The initial feedback for the photograph was that the bird could be a Clamorous Reed-Warbler although opinions were generally inconclusive. DR had prior experience with Clamorous Reed-Warbler from Kerala and hence was sure that this was not one, considering the size of the bird. The call of the warbler was also found to be similar to Blyth's rather than Clamorous Reed-Warbler, a hard "*chak*" repeated thrice or four times. A structure in the bamboo clumps, which was believed to be a nest, could not be confirmed.

Meanwhile, DR procured Sen's notes of the Kolkata *orinus* and compared them with this particular bird. Two peculiar aspects noted by Sen were also present in the Kanha bird: the relatively pointed tail feathers and the bird's behaviour of frequently fanning its tail (Figs. 2 & 3). The bird fanned its tail almost like a Black-naped Monarch-Flycatcher *Hypothymis azurea,* indulging in this behaviour on every alternate hop—much more frequently than any other *Acrocephalus* warblers.

The next set of pictures taken by DR, from the same locality, did little to clear the air and instead created more confusion! There were other skulking warblers in the area and DR photographed several Sykes's Warblers *Hippolais rama* along with the mystery bird; the hunt almost reached an anticlimax when everyone 'confirmed' some of the better photographs to be actually those of Sykes's Warblers! The likelihood of a 'nest' seemed slim: the behaviour of the warbler suggested that it might have been using the bamboo clumps for roosting. DR

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Fig. 1: First image from KTR.

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Figs. 2 & 3: Showing fanned tail, long under-tail coverts and pointed tail feathers.

was able to observe the bird entering the clumps at dusk and leaving at dawn—but no specific nesting or brooding behaviour was noted.

During the third week of April, DR made further forays into the warbler area and took some more photographs. These clearly showed an *Acrocephalus* warbler with a long bill, short wings, long claws, short supercilium and a white crescent below the eye (Figs. 4–8). This bird was a high canopy feeder, at times going up 30 m on sal *Shorea robusta* trees, was very restless, rarely coming down to feed, frequenting trees with good canopy cover and behaved more like a *Phylloscopus* warbler. On 29th April 2008, the bird was seen eating an oak blue *Arhopala* sp., butterfly. The bird was seen frequently chasing tailorbirds, prinias and leaf warblers. DR also suspects that he saw the same species on a mango *Mangifera indica* tree at Kisli gate, 30 km away from the original site. This bird also had the tail fanned most of the time, was feeding mostly in the top canopy, had a large bill with an entirely pale lower mandible and pointed tail feathers. However, no photograph could be taken of this bird but it does indicate that there could have been more individuals around this area.

The final set of photographs, together with details of the sighting history, was circulated among several bird-watchers and ornithologists who were associated with prior sightings and/or documentation of the Large-billed Reed-Warbler. Some of the quotes from them are worthwhile in assessing the chances that this Kanha warbler was indeed the Large-billed Reed-Warbler.

Bill Harvey: "I must say that to me these pictures look much more convincing. They clearly show an *Acrocephalus* with a long bill, very short wings and large claws. These pictures are very similar to the Kolkata ones last year," and, "Indeed these are looking much more encouraging. The very latest six shots from David [DR] show well fanned tails and long claws."

Philip D Round: "I am probably not the person to make any judgment of these since I have not seen Large-billed Reed-Warbler in the field—only in the hand! Also, I am often reluctant to make definitive judgments from photos, even of birds that are much easier to identify than *Acrocephalus*. However, I think these later pictures seem highly plausible for *Acrocephalus orinus*. What else could they be?"

Peter Kennerley: "The bird is clearly an *Acrocephalus*; the long undertail-coverts and rounded tail shape rule out Sykes's and all other *Hippolais* species. I must stress that I have no experience of Large-billed Reed-Warbler, so my comments must be read in this context. However, I agree with that when everything else is eliminated, the only option remaining is Large-billed Reed-Warbler."

The last sighting that DR had of this warbler was on 5th May 2008; perhaps the bird left for its breeding grounds after that.

The likelihood of Large-billed Reed-Warbler at KTR for more than a month also evokes interesting possibilities on its migration and breeding. Two specimens from the nineteenth century were procured during fall migration (October–November) from the upper Sutlej Valley, an important passageway for Palaearctic migrants, indicating birds on passage, presumably breeding in the Palaearctic. The netting of two birds in March in Thailand and the April sighting at Kolkata also suggest an early spring migration and that the bird was perhaps breeding in the northern tropics or sub-tropics (Philip

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Fig. 4: Note short primary projection, pale lower mandible, white crescent below eye.

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Fig. 5: Showing pointed tail feathers, white crescent below eye.

D. Round *in litt*., May 2007) or even in the southern Palaearctic. However, it is not clear if the bird at Kanha was on passage and these records do not fit well into this hypothesis. Hence, a slightly different possibility emerges that it could also be a wet-season breeder spending the drier months in southern and eastern India, spreading up to Thailand and moving north with the monsoon to breed (Peter Kennerley *in litt*., May 2007).

What seems likely is that the Large-billed Reed-Warbler could be more widespread than was believed even as late as five years ago. This is perhaps the first instance that this species has been observed in the field for such a long time, giving us a rare opportunity to study its behaviour. We hope that these interesting field observations from Kanha will lead to the discovery of more sites and observations of this presumably endangered species.

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Fig. 6: Note long claws, all pale lower mandible, long bill.

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Fig. 7: Note long bill, long claws, pointed tail feathers, pale lower mandible, short wings and white crescent below eye.

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Fig. 8: Note long claws, pointed tail feathers, all pale lower mandible, long bill.