

Godlewski's Bunting *Emberiza godlewskii* in Arunachal Pradesh: A first breeding record for the Indian Subcontinent and review of its status in the region

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Sharma, M., Sangha, H. S., & Jain, A., 2014. Godlewski's Bunting *Emberiza godlewskii* in Arunachal Pradesh: A first breeding record for the Indian Subcontinent and review of its status in the region. *Indian BIRDS* 9 (2): 49–51.

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Manuscript received on 28 July 2013.

On 07 May 2013, at 0505 hrs we came across a bunting perched on an electric cable along the road from Walong to Kibithu, close to Dong village (28°10'N, 97°01'E, c. 1225m asl), Anjaw district, Arunachal Pradesh, India [61]. The first photographs, taken in light drizzle and poor light conditions, showed it to be similar to Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia*. As that species does not occur in north-eastern Arunachal Pradesh, further photographs were taken when the light conditions improved. The bird disappeared briefly down the steep slope, only to come back with feed in its beak. On close inspection we realised that a pair was feeding young in a nest concealed in a vertical grassy crevice, 2.5–3.0 m above the road on a vertical rockface [62]. The birds were observed till 0545 hrs and later from 1335 hrs to 1350 hrs. On both occasions, though the nest and chicks were not seen, the adults were observed carrying feed into a vertical grassy crevice, and returning with empty beaks. There appeared to be more than one chick in the nest, as they were frequently heard begging for feed.

The birds were identified as Godlewski's Bunting *E. godlewskii* based on the features noted in the field, from images, and after consulting literature. It is described as a fairly large bunting, superficially similar to Rock Bunting (del Hoyo *et al.* 2011) but its head and breast are darker grey, and stripes on crown and behind eye dark chestnut rather than black (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). It has black lores and moustachial stripe, chestnut border to rear ear-coverts, white wing-bars, (del Hoyo *et al.* 2011). It

shows a clear-cut contrast between rufous belly and grey breast (Pic.XX1), sandy-brown mantle boldly streaked with black, bright chestnut scapulars, black tertials, rufous rump, and pinkish-brown feet (Byers *et al.* 1996). The tail is described by del Hoyo *et al.* (2011) as, 'blackish, central feather pair with thin rufous edges, outer pair with white on one or both webs.' As per Bayer *et al.* (1996) the breeding female has darker central crown stripes and slightly paler underparts.

The birds observed and photographed at Walong showed the following features: dark grey head, throat, and breast with black streaking in central crown, chestnut lateral crown stripes, and posterior eye-stripe, black lores and moustachial stripe, clear contrast of grey breast with rufous belly, brown mantle with very bold black streaks, bright chestnut scapulars, white wingbars, blackish tertials with pale edges, rufous rump, dark tail with brownish central tail feathers and some white in the outermost tail feathers, and pinkish-brown tarsus. One of the birds, possibly a female, had bold instead of fine streaking in the central crown and comparatively paler coloration to the underparts. During our field surveys conducted in eastern Arunachal Pradesh from 05 to 12 May 2013, we did not come across the species anywhere else, and it appeared to be scarce and restricted to the extreme north-eastern parts of Arunachal Pradesh.

del Hoyo *et al.* (2011) describe its range from the Russian Altai mountains to southern Baikal Lake and west Transbaikalia; Mongolia; widespread in China in north, north-west, south-central,



Photos: M. Sharma

61. Godlewski's Bunting *E. godlewskii* at Walong.



62. Godlewski's Bunting *E. godlewskii* carrying food in its bill.

east and south China; south and south-east Tibet to Lhasa and Gyantse regions; wintering in Myanmar.

There is great confusion amongst various authors about its status in the Indian Subcontinent. It is claimed to occur, presumably in eastern Nepal (Ali & Ripley 1974), Sikkim (Baker 1926), Bhutan (Ripley 1961), and Arunachal Pradesh (Singh 1995), but in the absence of hard proof, later authors (Grimmett *et al.* 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012) treat it as doubtful and hypothetical. del Hoyo *et al.* (2011) do not show its distribution within the Indian Subcontinent. BirdLife International (2013) shows its status in India as 'native' without giving any further details, probably following Ali & Ripley (1974).

Its first reference is given by Kinnear & Wollaston (1922). During the first Mt. Everest expedition, Wollaston observed many birds migrating through Arun valley in southern Tibet during August and September, and Kinnear believed that these, 'must have come from farther north, and possibly they pass the winter in some of the lower valleys adjoining the Nepal border.' This assumption led Ali & Ripley (1974), and Ripley (1982), to presume it to occur in eastern Nepal. Such a presumption was not correct and this is highlighted by the species' absence from any subsequent work on Nepal (Fleming *et al.* 1976; Inskipp & Inskipp 1985, 1991; Grimmett *et al.* 2000; Bird Conservation Nepal & Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation 2012).

Baker (1926) mentions that it winters in Sikkim, but without giving any details or source. Unnithan (2005), describing three specimens in the BNHS collection, obtained by Wollaston from southern Tibet in August 1921, cites Baker (1926) for their distribution as, 'wintering in Sikkim and hills of north Assam,' (present day Arunachal Pradesh). Ticehurst (1941), while categorically denouncing Baker's statement says, it is said to occur in Sikkim and the hills of N. Assam. No one has recorded it, nor are there any specimens thence.' Matthews (1944), following Baker (1926), states that it doubtfully occurred in Sikkim, and Dutta *et al.* (2006) list the species for Sikkim, without any details or sources, probably based on Baker (1926). Ali (1962) does not record the species from that area, but interestingly Ali & Ripley (1974) presume it to occur in Sikkim, once again following Baker (1926). There are no confirmed records of the species from Sikkim, and later authors (Grimmett *et al.* 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012) do not include it for that area.

Its status in Bhutan is much misinterpreted. The species was obtained by Ludlow (Ludlow & Kinnear 1937) on his east Bhutan expedition, from Lhakhang Dzong (3048 m), a place located in southern Tibet, and not in Bhutan, as pointed out by Ticehurst (1941). Kinnear states that he could find no record of its occurrence in British India. As Bhutan was never a part of British India, subsequent authors have misinterpreted this statement believing that the species was recorded from Bhutan. Ripley (1961) clearly misinterprets Ludlow & Kinnear (1937) while giving the distribution of the species as, 'wintering south to Bhutan, 10,000 ft,' believing Lhakhang Dzong (3048 m) to be in Bhutan rather than southern Tibet. The species is however not listed for Bhutan by any later authors (Ali *et al.* 1996; Inskipp *et al.* 1999; Spierenburg 2005).

Ali & Ripley (1974) give its status and distribution as a 'Common resident, subject to vertical movements. Southeastern Tibet and northern Arunachal Pradesh, breeding between 2700 and 4200 m, wintering between 2200 and 3300 m.' Ali (1977) repeats this, and Ripley (1982) changed his statement from that given in Ripley (1961) and follows Ali & Ripley (1974). No

sources are given for these statements and they are presumably extrapolations from the Tibet information. It is also clear that the northern Arunachal Pradesh distribution given by the authors is based on Baker (1926). Byers *et al.* (1996), no doubt, following Ali & Ripley (1974) stated that it 'occurs locally in Arunachal Pradesh.' Singh (1995) found it quite often in northern Arunachal Pradesh, in upper Subhansiri valley in the Redding–Taksing area, and in upper Lohit valley on the Kibithu track north of Walong during 1988–1994. Rasmussen and Anderton (2005, 2012) seek corroboration for these sight records and Grimmett *et al.* (2011) treat the species as doubtful in the Indian Subcontinent. The species has recently been photographed from areas close to Walong (Gode 2013).

The species is 'often considered conspecific with *E. cia*' (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005, 2012), and earlier authors have often described races as *E. c. godlewskii* (Kinnear & Wollaston 1922; Baker 1926), *E. c. khamensis*, and *E. c. yunnanensis* (Ripley 1961, 1982; Ali & Ripley 1974). Both, Byers *et al.* (1996), and del Hoyo *et al.* (2011) recognise five races of the species out of which two, *khamensis* and *yunnanensis* are said to occur in India (Ali & Ripley 1974). del Hoyo *et al.* (2011) describe the range of *khamensis* as 'SC China from S Qinghai S to S & SE Tibetan Plateau (to Lhasa and Gyantse regions) and W Sichuan (to 29° N)', and that of *yunnanensis* as 'S. China in extreme SE Tibetan plateau and N Yunnan E to C Sichuan; also NE Myanmar in winter.' del Hoyo *et al.* (2011) describe *E. g. khamensis* to be heavily streaked on mantle and *E. g. yunnanensis* as darkest amongst all races with most saturated plumage.

Kinnear & Wollaston (1922) describe the birds collected from southern Tibet during the first Mt. Everest expedition in August 1921 as *E. c. godlewskii*, treated by Unnithan (2005) as *E. g. khamensis*, based on distribution. Though Baker (1926) describes *E. c. godlewskii* as wintering in Sikkim and the hills of northern Assam (present day Arunachal Pradesh), without proof, he does not, however, give the distribution of *yunnanensis* within the boundaries of erstwhile British India nor within those of present day India. The birds collected by Ludlow are described as *khamensis* (Ludlow & Kinnear 1937). Ripley (1962) states that race *yunnanensis* was a 'winter visitant in southeast Tibet which may occasionally reach the higher hills of Bhutan or Assam.' There appears to be no basis of this statement. Ali & Ripley (1974), and Ripley (1982) describe *khamensis* as a common

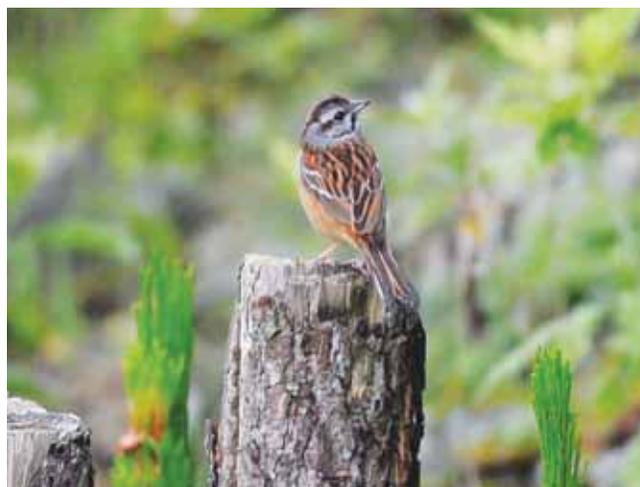


Photo: M. Sharma

63. Godlewski's Bunting at Walong, with bold black streaks on the mantle; probably *E. g. khamensis*.

Photo: A. Vaidya



64. Godlewski's Bunting photographed north of Walong.

resident subject to vertical movements in south-eastern Tibet and northern Arunachal Pradesh. The same authors state *yunnanensis* to be a winter visitor to south-eastern Tibet and that it may occur in the higher hills of Arunachal Pradesh. No sources are given for these statements and they are presumably extrapolations from the Tibet information. del Hoyo *et al.* (2011) do not include the range of either of the races within the Indian Subcontinent. There appears to be no conclusive proof of occurrence of *yunnanensis* from the Indian Subcontinent. The birds photographed at Walong showed very bold black streaks on the mantle and were most probably *khamensis* [63].

The species is known to summer at 2700–4200 m and winter at elevations as low as 2200 m (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Interestingly the birds at Walong were found in summer at c. 1225 m, considerably lower than its previously described summer range. This is probably the lowest elevation record for the species. Its nest is described as 'cup-shaped, with loose structure made from withered grasses and plant stems, lined with fine rootlets and hair, placed on ground under overhanging rocks, or sheltered by stones' (del Hoyo *et al.* 2011).

At Walong we observed the birds nesting in a vertical grassy crevice, 2.5–3.0 m from ground on a vertical rockface. This is probably a first record of the species nesting so high from ground and in a vertical crevice. This is the first breeding record of Godlewski's Bunting from the Indian Subcontinent. Alka Vaidya (*pers. comm.*, email dated 06 February 2014) came across good numbers of the species in areas north of Walong during 22–24 January 2014 [64]. On 22 January 2014 at least 20–25 individuals, mostly singles, were observed between Mesai village and Kibithu. The birds were on the ground, on the bushes, on rocky slopes, and on overhead electric wires. It is possible that most of the birds wintering in areas close to Walong may go to higher elevations in nearby Tibet, to breed. Further studies are required to establish its correct status in Walong and surrounds.

Acknowledgements

We thank Col. (Dr.) Neeta Gode for supplying logistical information about Walong. While Phupla organised logistics, Biki was helpful in the field. MS would like to thank Tim Inskipp, Pamela Rasmussen, Praveen J. & Aasheesh Pittie for all their help with

information and references. MS is also thankful to Alka Vaidya for sharing her winter records.

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