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# White-browed Crake *Amauornis cinerea* in Maguri-Motapung Beel, Assam, India: A new species for South Asia

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**M**aguri-Motapung Beel (27.57°N, 95.36°E; hereinafter, the Beel) is a ten square kilometer waterbody situated in Tinsukia town (Tinsukia District, Assam, India). It is an important birding destination for tourists from across the world. This wetland complex is part of the Dibru-Saikhowa Important Bird Area (IBA IN-AS-13) (Islam & Rahmani 2004) but is located just outside the Dibru-Saikhowa National Park and Biosphere Reserve. The Beel (=wetland in Assamese) is located on the southern bank of the Dibru River, which is a tributary of the Brahmaputra. The Beel is connected to the Dibru River by a system of channels, and is very rich in aquatic life. The grasslands adjacent to the northern, and western, parts of the beel are an essential habitat for important grassland species like Black-breasted Parrotbill *Paradoxornis flavirostris*, Marsh Babbler *Pellorneum palustre*, Jerdon's Babbler *Chrysomma altirostre*, Swamp Francolin *Francolinus gularis*, and Swamp Prinia *Prinia cinerascens*. The main grass species here include: *Andropogon* species, *Arundinella bengalensis*, *Arundinella nepalensis*, *Narenga porphyrocoma*, *Saccharum reynaudiana*, *Saccharum arundinaceum*, *Saccharum procerum* (Meghela, Bhutang), *Seacharum spotaneum* (Kohua), *Arundo donax* (Nal), *Cynodon dactylon* (Dubori), *Imperata cylindrica* (Ulukher), *Erianthus ravennae* (Ikora), *Phragmites karka* (Khagori), *Themeda villosa*, *T. arundinacea*, and *Vetiveria zizanioides* (Birina).

On 05 March 2016 we went birding at the Beel with the prime target of photographing the Critically Endangered (CR) Baer's Pochard *Aythya baeri*, which is a winter visitor to Assam Valley. We were accompanied by Dipankar Phukan, a local bird guide from Maguri. At 1612 hrs, on our way back, we saw a crake in the floating marshes [98]. We took few photographs of the bird; it had a gray-black crown, yellowish-green bill, and a black eye stripe that intersects white patches on its eyebrows, and upper cheeks [99–102]. The bird had very large, yellowish-green, feet that allowed it to walk on lily pads. After a few minutes we saw another bird in the same marsh, along with a pair of Ruddy-breasted Crake *Porzana fusca*, and a Rusty-rumped Warbler *Locustella certhiola*.

We observed the bird for 38 mins, while sitting quietly on a country boat. The bird was quite bold and most of the time ignored our presence. It walked, and ran, on lily pads and other aquatic vegetation, just like a jacana (Jacanidae). The bird was flicking their tails most of the time while feeding in shallow water full of aquatic vegetation.



98. The marsh where the White-browed Crake *Amauornis cinerea* was spotted.

Photo: Porag Jyoti Phukan



99. White-browed Crake *Amauornis cinerea*.

Photo: Deborshee Gogoi

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100. White-browed Crake *Amauornis cinerea*.

Photo: Porag Jyoti Phukan

101. White-browed Crake *Amauornis cinerea*.

Photo: Porag Jyoti Phukan

102. White-browed Crake *Amauornis cinerea*.

Our first reaction on spotting them was that we have seen, and photographed, a new species for the area as the birds resembled no *Porzana* crakes that are known to occur in northeastern India. At first, we tried looking for the birds in Kazmierczak (2000), Grimmett *et al.* (2011), and Rasmussen & Anderton (2012). But no illustration matched the species we photographed. Later on, we compared our photographs with the description, and plates provided in Robson (2015), and those available on the Oriental Bird Images website ([www.orientalbirdimages.org](http://www.orientalbirdimages.org)) and confirmed the species to be a White-browed Crake *Amauornis*

*cinerea*. This crake is easily distinguishable from sympatric crakes by its strikingly diagnostic face pattern; black eye stripe intersecting white patches on eyebrows and upper cheeks. This seems to be the first record of the species from South Asia.

The White-browed Crake was previously thought to occur mainly south of the Isthmus of Kra, which includes Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, Indonesia, New Guinea, and North Australia (Taylor 1996). Accordingly, in Southeast Asia, early records were from Malay Peninsula (Robinson & Chasen 1936). In the 1990s, new distribution sites were found across Southeast Asia, including Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos (Mundkur *et al.*, 1995; Robson, 2000, 2004, 2011; Buckton & Safford 2004). Duckworth & Hedges (2007) analysed the distribution records for this species since 1980 and deduced that it has been expanding northward, from a purely Sundaic distribution, and moving almost to China. Recently, this species was observed in different locations throughout south-western China, including Ningming and Baise, Guangxi, in 2012, and 2013, and from Xichang, Sichuan in 2013 (Yu *et al.* 2015). It has been recently reported from Myanmar too, though further location details are unknown (Anonymous 2015).

Birders to north-eastern India should keep a look out for this species in future.

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