

# Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis* and Jerdon's Baza *Aviceda jerdoni* in Saiha, Mizoram

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## Introduction

North-eastern India, comprising the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Tripura, forms part of a rich biogeographic unit and is among the biodiversity "Hotspots" of the world (Choudhury 1999; Myers *et al.* 2000; Ved & Lalramnuna 2008). Within the hotspot our efforts are concentrated in the state of Mizoram. Mizoram (21°58'N–24°35'N, 91°15'E–93°29'E) covers an area of 21,081 kms<sup>2</sup> (Anonymous 2006). In broad terms, the forests of Mizoram are classified as 'Cachar Tropical Evergreen (IB/C3),' and 'Cachar semi evergreen (2B/C2),' by Champion & Seth (1964). Its land and people have a tendency to being somewhat detached, obscure, and unknown, finding scarce mention in literature, whether historical, anthropological, or ecological (Singh 1996).

Saiha district, located in extreme southern Mizoram, covers an area of 1,965.81 kms<sup>2</sup> and its headquarters are situated at an altitude of 1,226 m (Anonymous 2005). 42 mammalian spp., were recorded during recent wildlife surveys, at three sites within Saiha (Datta-Roy *et al.* 2007). Palak Lake, locally referred to as *Pala Tipo* (Ved *et al.* 2008) is an Important Bird Area (IBA) (BirdLife International 2008). The forests around Palak Lake are rich in palms, rattans, dense cane-brakes, and reeds along the lake margin. Nine amphibian spp., and 21 reptiles were recorded in the vicinity of the lake during the course of a survey by Pawar & Birand (2001).

Saiha shares a northern boundary with Lawngtlai district. Some of the best rainforest of north-eastern India is found in southern Mizoram, covering parts of the districts of Lawngtlai and Saiha (Choudhury 2006). The forest cover offers contiguity with the Blue Mountain National Park (BMNP). The BMNP is located in south-eastern Mizoram at 22°39'N, 93°02'E, close to the Myanmar border and the Chin Hills. The total area of the park is 50 km<sup>2</sup> (Ghose 2002).

## Species

We undertook a survey during February and March 2009 in an area south of Palak Lake in Saiha. During this survey we recorded both these birds.

One Steppe Eagle was noticed on 25 February 2009 at Khaiky village (22°01'03"N, 92°55'35"E). It was around 0900 hrs on a clear day and we were about to begin our walk for the day. The bird had a loud infrequent call that was heard as it flew above the village. It was visible on and off for about 30 min., before we walked away from Khaiky. While the bird remained unphotographed we were able to notice a white band placed between two colours very clearly.

The Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis* is a widespread winter

migrant and prefers wooded hills, open country, and lakes (Grimmett *et al.* 1998). It is a large heavy-set raptor with a prominent yellow and fleshy gape that extends almost beyond its eye. In wintering haunts it is not territorial, its movements and numbers being governed solely by the search for food. It is attracted to abundant food sources such as poultry farms, garbage dumps, *etc.*, (Naoroji 2006).

One Jerdon's Baza was spotted on 4 March 2009 near Lomasu village (22°06'10"N, 92°51'48"E), on the banks of Kolodyne River (22°13'43"N, 92°50'12"E). It was around 1100 hrs on a clear day and we were moving from Lomasu to Tuidang village when we saw it perched 10 m up a tree on the riverbank. We slowed down, stopped the boat, and observed it for 20 min., as it perched motionless, before we rowed on (Fig. 1).

Jerdon's Baza *Aviceda jerdoni* is resident, prefers broad-leaved evergreen forest (Grimmett *et al.* 1998), is rare, endangered, shy, and crepuscular (Ali 2002). It has a rufous-brown head, a strongly streaked back, is a sluggish flier, and hunts from ambush. Its northern race *A. j. jerdoni* ranges from north-eastern West Bengal (Mahananda and Buxa Reserves), Sikkim, Assam, and associated north-eastern hill states to Arunachal Pradesh, seasonally frequenting moist-deciduous to evergreen forest in the foothills from 150 m upwards, mainly between 350 and 1,800 m (Naoroji 2006).

In their bird lists for Mizoram, Zonunmawia & Pradhan (2004) have listed 201 species while Choudhury (2008) has listed 479. Neither of them lists Steppe Eagle, while Choudhury (2008) records Jerdon's Baza as an uncommon resident; the location of this sighting however is not mentioned. Pawar & Birand (2001), in their survey around Palak Lake, and Dutta-Roy *et al.* (2007) in Saiha, have not listed both these species. Ghose (1999) does not list the two taxa in his survey at Blue Mountain National Park, while Naoroji (2006) has marked the area overlapping Mizoram as, "presence suspected," for Jerdon's Baza, and, "rare winter visitor," for Steppe Eagle.



Fig. 1. Jerdon's Baza *Aviceda jerdoni* in Saiha.

## Conclusion

These sightings confirm the presence of these rare birds in Saiha, Mizoram. Hunting is culturally sanctioned and widely practiced in Saiha and impacts birds in a negative fashion. Select myths and beliefs that exist in the local society exacerbate the pressure on wildlife. We therefore believe that regular communications focusing on natural values occurring in a region are pertinent towards wildlife conservation in these remote, forested lands (Ved & Lalramnuna 2008).

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