

# The female/first winter Kashmir Flycatcher *Ficedula subrubra*: an identification conundrum

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Ganpule, P., 2012. The female/first winter Kashmir Flycatcher *Ficedula subrubra*: an identification conundrum. *Indian BIRDS* 7 (6): 153–158.  
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Manuscript first received on 24 May 2011.

## Introduction

The Kashmir Flycatcher *Ficedula subrubra* is endemic to the Indian Subcontinent. It is a Red Data species categorised as Vulnerable (BirdLife International 2011). It breeds in the Kashmir area and Pir Panjal Range (Bates & Lowther 1952; Henry 1955; Roberts 1992), and is known to winter in the Western Ghats and Sri Lanka (Zarri & Rahmani 2004b).

At c. 0900 hrs on 2 January 2009, in a patchwork habitat comprising cultivation, scattered trees, and scrub near Morbi, Rajkot district, Gujarat (22°49'N, 70°50'E) I heard a loud and clear bird call: "sweet-sweet," similar to the call of an Indian Robin *Saxicoloides fulicata*. The calling bird was perched on a *Prosopis juliflora* shrub. After one minute, the call was repeated. When I approached closer to the songster, it uttered the call again, and took off from its perch, uttering a "tit-tee," call in flight; in such a way that no time seemed to have elapsed between the two calls. The bird then settled on a new perch and repeated the first call three or four times. It then changed its perch again uttering the second call as soon as it took off. This was uttered rapidly and sounded like the "tic," call of a Red-breasted Flycatcher *Ficedula parva*. I thought that the second call was uttered twice but both notes differed from the call of *parva*. The entire call-cycle sounded like "sweet-sweet-tit-tee."

The bird generally perched on a *P. juliflora* and repeatedly made short sallies for insects. I was surprised to see that it resembled *parva*, but I had never heard one uttering such a call before.

## Observations

The bird in question had orange spotting/mottling on the breast, which was almost absent on its white throat, extending up to the flanks. It had a white belly. It had darker/blackish wings, grey on the sides of the neck, and dark brownish upperparts. The tail and rump were completely black. It had a greyish-black bill with a pale base to the lower mandible. The bill looked slightly longer and stronger than the bill of a typical *parva*. I took numerous photographs, referred books, and *prima facie* identified the bird as a female Kashmir Flycatcher based on the call and other identification features. This bird is henceforth referred to as Bird A.

On 24 November 2010, while bird watching near home, my attention was drawn to a flycatcher similar to Bird A. I observed it closely, took extensive notes, and lots of photographs. It was confiding and allowed close views. It was seen in the area until 12 December 2010. This sighting was c. 100 m from the location of the above sighting. It is henceforth referred to as Bird B.

A third individual, Bird C, was seen from 5 December 2010 onwards. A fourth, Bird D, a juvenile/first winter bird was seen from 15 December 2010 onwards. A fifth, Bird E, also a juvenile/first winter bird was seen in the same area from 5 November 2011 onwards. And a sixth, Bird F, again a juvenile/first winter bird, was seen in the same area from 15 November 2011 onwards. Table 1 gives a description of the all these individuals, including plumage, bill details, and vocalization transcriptions.

**Table 1.** Morphological characters and vocal transcriptions of six Kashmir Flycatchers *Ficedula subrubra*

Individual birds	Plumage	Bill	Vocalisation
A	Orange spotting / mottling on breast, almost absent on the white throat, extending up to the flanks; white belly; darker / blackish wings, grey on the sides of the neck, and dark brownish upperparts; tail and rump completely black.	Greyish-black bill with a pale base to the lower mandible	"Sweet-sweet"; "tit-tee" call in flight; entire call-cycle sounded like "sweet-sweet-tit-tee."
B	Dark greyish sides of neck, rufous wash on breast extending to flanks; upper parts dark brownish (with a tinge of olive); black tail, wings, and rump; showed a black border from near the neck up to the alula, bordering the grey to the sides of the neck seen when observed closely.	Completely yellow lower mandible	"Eep eep eep" and the rattle call.
C	Wash on breast tawnier; grey sides to the neck diminished; On scrutiny scaled effect apparent on the rufous wash.	Dark greyish with a reduced pale base to lower mandible	"Eep eep eep" and rattle call.
D	Variably orange-washed throat, breast, and flanks; wash appeared mottled when seen closely; slight rufous wash was also apparent on flanks; from a distance the breast appeared greyish with a slight orange wash and the scaled effect not visible; upperparts dark brownish with a faint greater covert wing bar; tail black.	Dark brownish with a distinctly yellowish base to the lower mandible.	"Eep eep eep" and the rattle call.
E	Showed greater covert wing bar; black tail with black upper-tail coverts; black rump, grey sides of neck, dark brownish upperparts; rufous wash on the underparts with a slight scaling effect; no rufous on white throat.	Prominently pale yellowish base to lower mandible	"Eep eep eep" and the rattle call. A new call heard this year was a soft "chrit chrit"
F	Showed greater covert wing bar; black tail with black upper-tail coverts; black rump, grey sides of neck, dark brownish upperparts; faint rufous wash with no scaling effect; no rufous on white throat.	Dark greyish bill with reduced pale base to lower mandible	"Eep eep eep" and the rattle call. A new call heard this year was a soft "chrit chrit"

## Discussion

While an adult male Kashmir Flycatcher is easily identified, the field identification of a female is rather difficult. It also depends on ambient weather and light, which affect the saturation of colours. I noted that the rufous wash appears fainter when the bird is seen in direct sunlight (Fig. 6, Bird A), and darker in shade or at certain angles. This could lead to further confusion in identification. Thus, good, and several views are needed to determine the extent and strength of the wash on the underparts for correct identification.

The birds I saw did not exactly match any of the illustrations shown in pertinent works (Legge 1983; Roberts 1992; Ali & Ripley 1996; Grimmett *et al.* 1998; Kazmierczak 2000; Ali 2002; Zari & Rahmani 2004a; Rasmussen & Anderton 2005; Taylor 2006), which have differences in the art work, and textual descriptions for a female Kashmir Flycatcher, as they have in those of a first winter male.

The main pointers to identifying a female Kashmir Flycatcher, as given in published texts, are as follows (all figures refer to Bird A):

1. It has a variable rufous wash on its breast, a whitish belly, and throat, with breast and upper flanks variably mottled rufous. The rufous is more pronounced on the breast than on the throat (Fig. 1.)
2. The rufous wash is continued to the flanks and it has pronounced grey sides to the neck (Fig. 2).
3. It has a black rump (Fig. 3).
4. It has a black tail, which is darker than the back (Figs 4, 5).

I then searched for and collected photographs of the species. An image of a female Kashmir Flycatcher taken in February 1995 in Sri Lanka shows a faint orange-grey wash on the breast. It



Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.



Fig. 6.

also shows faint rufous flanks. Its bill looks pale with a distinctly yellow lower mandible. Other features are consistent with textual descriptions (see above). Two more images of a female from Sri Lanka were put up recently on the OBI website (<http://orientalbirdimages.org>). The bird in these images has a faint rufous wash on the breast and flanks, and the bill is completely yellow. Its other features like a black tail, grey sides of neck, and browner upperparts are consistent with standard descriptions.

Given these different descriptions, it is indeed difficult to identify the female Kashmir Flycatcher with certainty in the field. Along with variably washed and mottled rufous underparts, it may have a variable bill colour. It may be noted that its bill looks slightly longer, stronger and more pointed than the bill of a typical *parva*. These features should be considered while identifying the bird in the field.

Going by the different descriptions in the books cited above it seems possible that the Kashmir Flycatcher has a variable bill colour between sexes and ages.

My conclusion that Bird A, which I saw for 15–20 min, was indeed a female Kashmir Flycatcher was based not only on plumage descriptions, but also on its call/song (as described in Grimmett *et al.* 1998, *etc.*), and pale base to bill (Fig. 7), which was not at all like that of *parva*.

Bird B could be identified as a first winter male based on completely yellow lower mandible (Fig. 8), and the rufous wash on breast extending onto the flanks. A first winter male is unmistakable if the characteristic black border to the rufous breast is seen. Bird C was possibly a first winter female based on its tawnier underparts with scaled effect (Fig. 9). For Bird D, the scaled effect on the throat and breast (Fig. 10) is as shown in Grimmett *et al.* (1998; Pl. 101: 2b), and is diagnostic of a female/first winter Kashmir Flycatcher. Birds E and F were first winter birds and could not be visually sexed with certainty.

All six birds had some differences in the colour of their bills, and in the extent of rufous wash on their underparts. Thus it is very difficult to arrive at any firm conclusion with respect to the bill colour and the amount of wash on the underparts with the data available to me, and might be prudent to describe both as 'variable'. More data and observations of different individuals are needed to arrive at any conclusion regarding this.

According to Cederroth *et al.* (1999), "In all plumages, the longest upper tail coverts of *F. albicilla* are invariably blackish or black (finely tipped brown when fresh) and are darker than the tail, whereas in *F. parva* they are generally medium brown or dull, dark grey-brown, concolourous with or paler than the tail. Only rarely does *parva* show blackish-brown or blackish upper tail coverts (mostly in older males, which anyway are easily told)." In the six individuals of *subrubra* that I observed, the upper tail coverts were black and concolourous with the black tail, which can be seen for the Bird C (Fig. 13). When observed closely, this bird showed concolourous black upper tail coverts, which were finely tipped brown, similar to *albicilla*. Since this feature is rarely shown by *parva*, this might also be a good indicator in the identification of *subrubra*. Cederroth *et al.* (1999) further state that, "Female and first-winter *albicilla* have rather a clean whitish throat (with few exceptions) and are dull, greyish-tinged dusky-brown on the breast and flanks, with a variable but mostly faint warm buff tinge. In contrast, *parva* is a warmer and paler colour beneath, usually pale buff or saturated cream-coloured without a contrastingly white throat," which is again different from female and first winter *subrubra*.

A detailed record was kept of all the sightings along with observations of each bird's behaviour and other details like voice. Plumage details were recorded with a large number of photos taken with a Nikon D40x (10 mp) digital SLR camera and a Sigma 170–500 mm lens. Information of my sightings of Kashmir Flycatchers is given in Table 2.



Fig. 7.



Fig. 9.



Fig. 8.



Fig. 10.

Birds C, D, E, and F were definitely winter visitors since they were seen in the same area for practically the entire season, holding onto their territories for the entire period. 'B' was probably a passage migrant as it was seen only for 19 days.

### Vocalisations

The call/song of the first bird is given above. The calls of the other birds are described in Table 1. Other calls included a difficult-to-describe soft, throaty "krrrv," and a 'small' throaty sound uttered by Bird B. The birds also uttered a soft "chack," or a "chit," note when changing perch. Bird D uttered only the "trrr," call along with a "chit...chit...trr," and a "chack" call. I did not hear the "sweet-sweet-tit-tee" call/song for other birds. It could be possible that the calls of both the male and the female Kashmir Flycatcher are similar.

The vocalisations of a Kashmir Flycatcher as transcribed in the reference books also vary a little and are given in Table 3.

I only heard the 'complex' call described in Zarri & Rahmani (2004b) once (uttered by Bird B), and it is as described, and audible only from a short distance from the bird.

The song is described as a "sweet-sweet-did-he?" in all the reference books. This song is apparently heard only in its breeding areas in summer, but I heard it during the winter season from Bird A.

I observed that Bird C and Bird D used the same perches every evening before roosting. The roosting sites of the two birds were around 50 m apart. Bird C uttered the "chip chip chip + rattle" call for almost five minutes every evening. It flicked its wings and tail, described as 'flickering of wings' in Zarri & Rahmani (2004a), when uttering this call. Its throat bulged a little, and it dipped its tail when uttering the "chip chip chip" call. Sometimes the "chip chip chip" call was uttered for a very short time. Bird D uttered only the "trrr..trr..trr" call (rattle call) before roosting and did not utter the "chip chip chip" call but it did flick its wings and tail while uttering the call. It is possible that the juvenile birds may not vocalise much with the "chip chip chip" call. However, I observed for the first time the fourth bird uttering the "chip chip chip" call while feeding at c. 1300 hrs on 20 February 2011, and only twice thereafter.

**Table 2.** Sighting records of Kashmir Flycatchers

Individual	First seen on	Last seen on	Number of birds	Total number of days
Bird A	2 January 2009	2 January 2009	1	1
Bird B	24 November 2010	12 December 2010	1	19
Bird C	5 December 2010	14 March 2011	1	100
Bird D	15 December 2010	6 March 2011	1	82
Bird E	5 November 2011	20 March 2012	1	137
Bird F	15 November 2011	23 March 2012	1	130
Total			6	

**Table 3.** Vocalisation transcriptions of Kashmir Flycatchers

Source	Vocalisations
Rasmussen & Anderton (2005)	Dry, quiet rattle (with the first notes slightly offset) along with a winsome "wip", alternated with a dry "tch".
Grimmett <i>et al.</i> (1998)	A sharp "chack" and a rattling "purr" similar to the calls of <i>F. parva</i> .
Taylor (2006)	Low, dry rattle; a sharp "chak"; a "wip", sometimes alternated with a dry "tch".
Ali & Ripley (1996); Roberts (1992); Kazmierczak (2000)	A sharp "chack", "purr", "chip-chip-chip + rattle"
Zarri & Rahmani (2004b)	"Chit...trr..rr..chit" or "chrit chrit" and a "whip whip whip" and complex calls while resting.

The roosting time was around ten minutes after sunset. The birds would become active c. 10–15 min before sunrise when they would utter the "trrr..trr..trr" call. Bird C sometimes also uttered the "chip chip chip" call while becoming active. For Bird C, I was able to observe that for the last three days, its roosting behaviour changed. It uttered its usual call for only a very short time (only for about 30 seconds approximately) and it continued feeding almost up to its roosting time. However, the bird was not shy before its return migration as stated in Zarri and Rahmani (2004b) and allowed close views till the last.

### Sonograms

I analysed the calls uttered by Bird C before it roosted, using 'Raven Lite' (Charif *et al.* 2006) for sonograms.

I compared the "trrr" rattle call of *subrubra* (Fig. A) with the one in Rasmussen & Anderton (2005), and found them to be similar. These sonograms were then compared with those of *parva*'s rattle calls (Krabbe 1988; Svensson *et al.* 2005; Harrop 2009; Poelstra 2011). Again they were similar. I found that it is difficult to distinguish *subrubra* from *parva* based on the sonograms of their rattle calls.

I have heard calls of both *subrubra* and *parva* in detail and sometimes I felt that the rattle of *parva* is a little bit softer (but difficult to say). I may have missed subtle differences that would be revealed with better recording equipment and superior editing software. While *parva* and *albicilla* can be differentiated based on their rattle calls (Svensson *et al.* 2005), the same cannot be said for *subrubra* and *parva*.

Fig. B is a sonogram of the "eep eep" ("chip chip chip") call, and shows two distinct notes. A lower pitched one at c. 3.2 kHz and a higher one at 6.8–7 kHz. A comparison was made with the sonogram of the similar "tseep tseep" call of *parva* (van de Meulengraaf 2009; van Oosten 2010), and revealed a distinct difference between the sonograms. The sonogram of *subrubra* contains higher pitch note, which is absent in *parva*. The sonograms for *parva* of the "tseep tsee" call do not contain the higher pitch note seen in *subrubra*. A weak higher pitch note may sometimes be present (Aberg 2008a) but it differs from that of *subrubra*. Both calls sound remarkably similar to us. Thus, it could be possible to differentiate between *subrubra* and *parva* based on the sonograms of this call.

I further recorded calls of Bird E and Bird F. Calls included the "eep eep eep" and the rattle call. A new call heard this year was a soft "chrit chrit" when the two birds were chasing each other. Sonograms of the rattle call and the "eep eep" call for both the birds were made and analysed. They were the same for both, as obtained the previous year (Figs A, B).

The sonogram of the "chrit chrit," call is given in Fig. C. A similar loud "chree," call of *parva* is quite different from the soft "chrit chrit," of *subrubra* and the sonogram of the "chree," call (Aberg 2008b) also differs from the sonogram of the "chrit chrit," call. Sonograms of the "chrit chrit," and "eep eep," calls could be an important indicator in the identification of the female and first winter Kashmir Flycatcher. More studies will be helpful in providing further evidence of this.

However it is important to note that the calls were recorded for only three individuals. More recordings, especially of the 'complex' call, the "chip chip chip," call, the rattle call and the song of *subrubra* need to be made and analysed, and sonograms compared with those of *parva*, to assess whether the two can be separated on the basis of these calls.

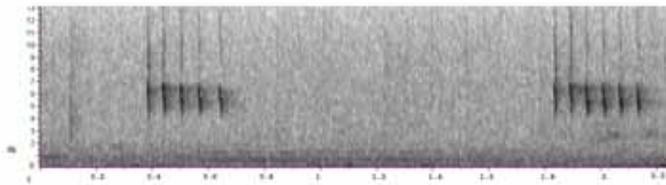


Fig. A. The "trrr" call

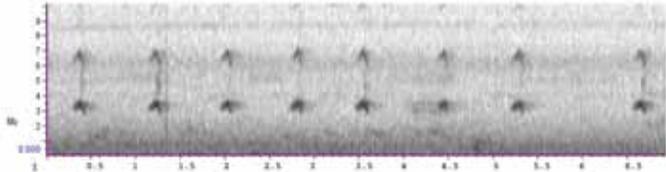


Fig. B. The "eep eep" call

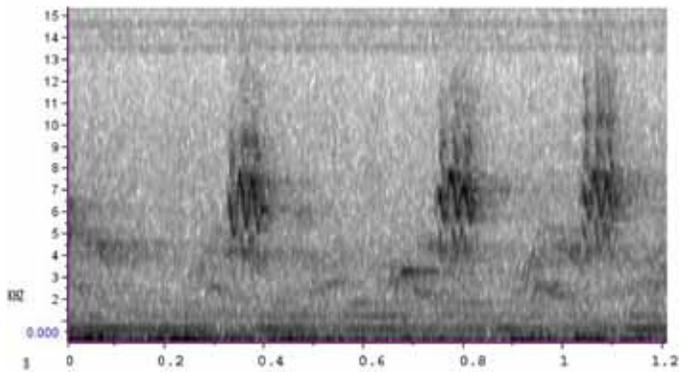


Fig. C. The "chrit chrit" call

### Tail-fanning behaviour

The general behaviour of Kashmir Flycatchers seen here was as per Zari & Rahmani (2004b), and similar to that of *parva*. They took flying insects from near the ground and also frequently dropped to the ground. They kept to the lower parts of bushes and trees. They cocked the tail and drooped the wings.

I also observed *subrubra* deliberately fanning its tail, once or twice in 15 min, for less than one second. It would cock up its tail fan it slightly, and when it brought the tail downwards, fan it completely open. The fully fanned black tail was striking. This behaviour is difficult to photograph, but I was able to do so for Bird C (Figs 11–13), and D (Fig. 14). I also observed this behaviour in birds B, E, and F. The birds did not flick their wings while fanning their tails thus.

This behaviour is not, I think, described in literature, and might probably be a good way to separate the female/first winter *subrubra* from a female/first winter *parva* or *albicilla*, as there do not seem to be any published reports of such a tail-fanning behaviour in these species. I feel that tail fanning is such a visible behaviour that it would have been noticed and described if the latter two indulged in it. However, during the breeding season in Poland, *parva* males expose "white tail patches and shakes tail," categorised as aggressive display in 10% of cases when exposed to models of conspecific intruders accompanied by song playback (Mitrus 2007). This could be a description of the tail fanning behaviour described above. Thus it is possible that adult *parva* males may fan their tails occasionally. However it seems that this behaviour is seen during the breeding season and not during its wintering here as I could not find any published reference of this behaviour. And an adult *parva* male is unlikely to be confused with a female/first winter *subrubra*.



Fig. 11.



Fig. 12.



Fig. 13.



Fig. 14.

Henry (1955) states that, "It has a habit of jerking the tail well above the back, in a spasmodic manner, at the same time flicking the wings, and uttering a curious little creaking rattle." Harrison (1999) says, "Flycatches from low perch, also feeds on ground hopping around flicking wings and tail showing the white tail panels." This may be a description of the tail fanning behaviour discussed above or it may be 'flickering of wings and tail' referred to in Zarri & Rahmani (2004a); but the tail fanning is difficult to miss. I believe it is a description of the 'flickering of wings and tail' that is given in these books, which is a normal behaviour for *subrubra* and it is not a description of tail fanning behaviour.

I watched *subrufra* fan its tail when other small birds were very near to it while it was feeding. I also observed this behaviour when no other birds were nearby—could it be a territorial display?

Birds B, C, and D fed along with Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides*, Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*, Blyth's Reed-Warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum*, Sykes's Warbler *Hippolais rama*, and Ashy Prinia *Prinia socialis* in different areas, separately, but were themselves chased away by a female Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros* from its feeding territory. The wintering pair bond (Zarri & Rahmani 2004b) was not observed here, even though the Birds B and C were together in the same area for one week. Both individuals remained separated, and fed separately. Birds C and D were together for a longer time but again they did not appear to form a pair. The same was with E and F. It is possible that only adult birds pair in winter, while first winter birds, winter alone. The birds allowed close views and were quite confiding.

## Conclusion

There are no earlier records of the Kashmir Flycatcher from Gujarat (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005; Grimmett *et al* 1998), but it is possible that it may be a passage migrant or a rare winter visitor here. Ali & Ripley (1996) state that it migrates through the Peninsula in September and October with an old record from Dhulia, (north-western Maharashtra), being the closest to Gujarat, though Prasad (2004) states that this record could probably be from Dhule District, Andhra Pradesh. In Roberts (1992), there is a record of an adult male from Haleji Lake, near Karachi, Pakistan, while on spring passage. This sighting is also relatively close to Gujarat. Hence it is possible that the Kashmir Flycatcher might occur in Gujarat during autumn, and spring migrations.

I saw the first bird on 2 January 2009, which is too late for its autumn passage, and too early for the spring passage. It is more indicative of a wintering bird. Bird B was seen from 24 November 2010 to 12 December 2010, C from 5 December 2010 onwards, and D from 15 December 2010, which are all indicative of wintering birds. E and F were also wintering birds.

Though the female/first winter Kashmir Flycatcher is difficult to identify, its song and call is unique, and it can be an easy way of finding and identifying this species. I request all birdwatchers to look out for and photograph this enigmatic species, especially female/first winter birds, in its known wintering grounds in the Western Ghats / the Nilgiri plateau (Zarri 2003; Zarri & Rahmani 2005) or Sri Lanka, or in its breeding grounds in Kashmir and surrounding areas. Other winter records for the species are from Ooty in the Western Ghats (Harrap & Redman 1990; Karthikeyan & Athreya 1993).

## Acknowledgements

I would like to specially thank Krys Kazmierczak for taking the time to go through the note. Without his help, guidance and support this would not have been possible. I would also like to thank Dr B. M. Parasharya for his encouragement, Dr Maulik Varu, and

S. N. Varu for helping with references, and my brother Rohit for his support. I would like to thank Kamlesh Prajapati and Bhavesh Sheth for all their help.

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