

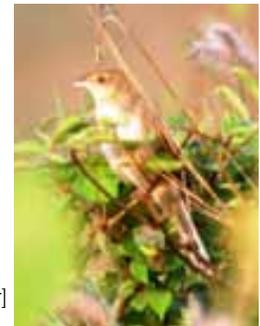
First sighting of Bristled Grassbird *Chaetornis striata* from Kerala

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45. Bristled Grassbird *Chaetornis striata* on *Corchorus aestuans* plant.

Bristled Grassbird *Chaetornis striata* is endemic to the Indian subcontinent, where it is patchily and locally distributed in India, Pakistan, and Nepal (Jerdon 1841; Baral 1997). Ali & Ripley 1987 described this species as common in at least Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal and parts of Bangladesh. BirdLife International (2001) has published the records of Bristled Grassbird from southern India (Table 1). Grewal (1996) reported its presence in Okhla, Delhi in 1996 after a gap of ten years. BirdLife International (2012) has classified it as Vulnerable. Inskipp (1997) has mentioned that although it has a wide distribution in the Indian subcontinent, there are not many records; he could trace only 32 references with original information and only a few in the last 25 years. There are recent breeding records from Noida area in Uttar Pradesh (Arya 2010), but there is no previous record from Kerala (Sashikumar *et al.* 2011).

This note describes the first sighting of a Bristled Grassbird from Kerala—at Varamkadavu (11°54'86"N, 75°24'68"E), a part of the Kattampally wetland, an Important Bird Area (Islam & Rahmani 2004), in Kannur district. A new concrete bridge was constructed here in 2007 and a 10 m wide approach road was laid by dumping earth across the wetland. The dominant species of plant growing in this wetland area was a reed namely *Eleocharis dulcis*, but along the edge of the new road, several species of shrub, grass, and saplings of trees like *Trema orientalis*, and *Macaranga peltata* have sprung up.

Details of the sighting

During a field trip to Varamkadavu on 24 February 2008 at 0800 hrs, we noticed a bird in a patch of shrub and grass. It perched on *Pennisetum polystachyon* (a grass sp.) and then on a twig of *Corchorus aestuans* for a while. KMK photographed it using a Canon 400D, and Sigma 175–500 mm lens (Fig. 1). The bird suddenly disappeared into lower bushes. A long wait for the bird to reappear was futile and we returned from the field. From the photographs, the bird was identified as a Bristled Grassbird after consulting experts. We saw the bird again on 20 March 2008 at 0800 hrs in a bush near the same location, but could not photograph it. PCR again sighted the bird there, on 23 March 2008 at 1500 hrs for a few seconds. We visited the area several times that season but the bird was not sighted again.

Table.1. Records from southern India (BirdLife International 2001)

Year	Location	Reference
Undated	Unspecified localities in A.P.	Ali 1938; Taher & Pittie 1989
1841	Nilgiri Hills, Tamilnadu	Jerdon 1841
1844	Nellore, A.P.	Jerdon 1862–1864.

The following year, PCR saw the bird on 16 December 2009 at 0900 hrs. Both of us observed it on an electric line stretching parallel to the road on 19 December 2009 at 0930 hrs. It moved to a branch of a *Trema orientalis* tree located nearby where it remained for a few seconds and soon flew away. On 24 December at 0845 hrs the bird was sighted again on the *T. orientalis* tree. KMK got good photographs of the bird spreading its tail feathers [45, 46]. PCR observed the bird again on 1 January 2010 and 9 January at 0800 hrs and with KMK on 10 January at 0815 hrs. PCR saw probably the same bird on 18 January and 20 January along with K. V. Uthaman and Jafer Palot on 23 January at 0845 hrs. The bird was found about 500 m away from the usual site near the bridge. It was inside the bushes for 30 min and appeared thrice at the tip of an *Eupatorium* plant for a few seconds each time.

Behaviour

Only one bird was seen on all occasions. It skulked among the tangle of shrubs and grass less than 2 m in height, emerging on top very briefly, diving down again. Occasionally, it uttered a *tre-trew* call.

Field characters

The bird is stouter and longer than a Paddyfield Pipit *Anthus rufulus*. A pale supercilium, and whitish throat and upper abdomen are visible. The beak is short and broad with a black tip. The bird is fulvous-brown with bold streaking on its back. The under parts are rather plain without visible streaking. The head is not well marked. Tail is grey-brown with white and black crossbars.



46. Bristled Grassbird *Chaetornis striata* spreading its tail feathers.

Acknowledgements

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— Gleanings —

Viseshakul, N., W. Charoennitikul, S. Kitamura, A. Kemp, S. Thong-Aree, Y. Surapunpitak, P. Poonswad & M. Ponglikitmongkol. 2011. A phylogeny of frugivorous hornbills linked to the evolution of Indian plants within Asian forests. *J. Evol. Biol.* 24: 1533–1545.

With their large size, spectacular beaks, and unique nesting habits, hornbills are charismatic members of the bird world. They also attract our interest because of their important role in consuming fruits and thus dispersing seeds produced by trees in the forests of Asia.

The paper under review considers not only Asian hornbills, which are relatively large and consume mainly fruits, but also African hornbills that are generally smaller than the Asian ones and have a more carnivorous/insectivorous diet. The study is the most comprehensive ever attempted concerning the phylogenetic relationships between hornbills. For the first time all 15 genera of hornbills were included and of the total number of 54 species, 31 were covered in this study. The investigation employed two different approaches analyzing mitochondrial DNA cytochrome b sequences of 1143 base pairs. There have been many other studies concerning the phylogenetic relationships among hornbill species using, in total, many different types of characteristics including DNA, but no previous study has included all the genera and so many species.

The diagrams presented showing relationships between hornbills nicely separate the present African and Asian species with minimal overlap. By dating the phylogeny it was determined that the initial radiation of hornbills began 53 million years ago (mya) in the early Eocene, and that this led to the origin of frugivorous hornbills around 48 mya in mid-Eocene, which was

followed quickly by an explosive radiation of the suite of hornbill genera and species that presently exist in Africa and in Asia. It is unusual among vertebrate animals for taxonomic forms that arise early (~48 mya) in geological time to persist to the present, as in the case of the hornbills.

An especially fascinating aspect of this study is the timing of the explosion in hornbill diversity with the arrival in Asia of the Indian flora ~48 mya (mid-Eocene). The authors find this more than a coincidence and invoke a convincing scenario. This incorporates the fact that the plate transporting more tropical India had by then drifted close to what constituted less tropical Asia, but the two subcontinents had not made actual contact. It is noted that an abundance of frugivorous hornbill species inhabited the regions then and that hornbills are relatively large birds that are capable of flying great distances. The authors suggest that hornbills, employing a combination of long distance flights and island hopping strategies between the two landmasses, were the dispersers of forest tree seeds between the Indian and Asian landmasses. A second invasion of Asia by floristic elements from India occurred ~39 mya (late Eocene) when India had drifted even closer to Asia, thus requiring shorter seed dispersal flights by frugivorous hornbills.

—Douglas A. James & Ragupathy Kannan