

Pale Rock Sparrow *Carpospiza brachydactyla* from Manipal, Karnataka, India

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This note describes a sighting of the Pale Rock Sparrow *Carpospiza brachydactyla* from Manipal, Udipi district (Karnataka, India). End Point (13°36'46"N, 74°78'76"E), located on the northern edge of Manipal, is a flat laterite hill top comprising of short grasses and scrubland. Though now mostly converted into parks and sports fields, there is a small patch of the original lateritic habitat that remains intact.

The bird was seen on 2 October 2012 while we were looking for larks (Alaudidae) and pipits (Motacillidae) in the aforementioned habitat. The very pale individual struck us as interesting since it was clearly paler than the Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris* and two Greater Short-toed Larks *Calandrella brachydactyla* that were feeding alongside on the ground. The bird was incredibly shy and did not allow us to approach it. Its movements on the ground were slow and deliberate—fairly reminiscent of a lark that is busy feeding—and its flight was short, low, and direct. On landing, it would stay upright for a few seconds before continuing foraging. It flew only on close approach, preferring to stay on the ground otherwise. Its call was a short and soft “chrrr.” Clear sparrow-like features (including the stout but not overly thick bill, its stance more upright than larks, overall shape, etc.) were visible. However, its habits and call were unlike that of a House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* or a Chestnut-shouldered Petronia *Petronia xanthocollis*. I also considered *munia* spp., (Estrildidae) in the field, but eliminated them on call and shape; as well as the Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark *Eremopterix griseus* but eliminated it on behaviour and because I did not find the bill or proportions to be correct. I left the site vaguely feeling that it was a *Petronia* spp.

The images later showed and confirmed a long primary projection, with wing tips almost reaching the tip of the tail, as well as the beak shape and structure. The stance in Fig 1 was

useful in obtaining an idea on overall structure of the bird, with striking similarities to sightings in Rajasthan (Poonia *et al.* 2012), and Gujarat (Tiway *et al.* 2012) earlier in the year. Unfortunately the bird was too pale to derive any other strong features. Pamela Rasmussen opined (*in litt.*, email dated 7 December 2012) that it is a Pale Rock Sparrow in very worn plumage with one new inner primary, citing photograph 69 as evidence. Nick Moran (*in litt.*, email dated 12 March 2013) suggests that the primary projection and white-tipped tail are diagnostic pointers for identification. He also believes that the bird may not be leucistic as pale/bleached individuals occur regularly. Surat Singh Poonia (*in litt.*, email dated 14 November 2012) believes the bird is a Pale Rock Sparrow based on field notes as well as the beak shape, structure and primary projection. Abhijit Menon-Sen (*in litt.*, email dated 3 December 2012) and Saurabh Sawant (*in litt.*, email dated 2 December 2012) both agree that it is probably leucistic, and most likely a Pale Rock Sparrow based on structure and because no other species fit the description and images. Both have cited photographs 67-69 for their reasons. Mike Prince (*in litt.*, email dated 8 December 2012) believes that the bird does look like a Pale Rock Sparrow based on structure and beak shape and has expressed some doubt, but agrees it is leucistic.

In Asia, the bird is said to be likely only in the barren, rocky, desert and semi-desert habitats of the middle-east though a specimen was collected from western Afghanistan in 1969 (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). It is also expected to occur in western Pakistan but no records support the same (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). In India, there are only two previous records of the bird (both from early 2012) from Tal Chhapar and Rann of Kachchh respectively.

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Photos: R. Singal



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