

Sighting of Purple-throated-, or Van Hasselt's Sunbird *Leptocoma sperata brasiliana* in Karimganj District, Assam, with notes on its status in India

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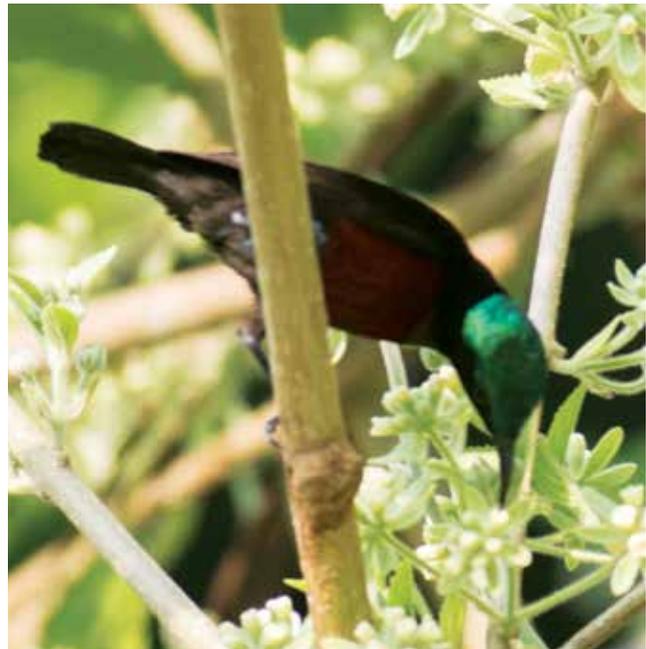
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The Purple-throated Sunbird *Leptocoma sperata* is a wide-ranging South-east Asian species distributed through the Philippines, the Sunda Islands, the Malaya Peninsula, and Myanmar, reaching the extreme south-eastern parts of South Asia (Cheke & Mann 2008). Regionally occurring, Van Hasselt's Sunbird *L. s. brasiliana* is sometimes regarded as a separate species, distinct from the races found in the Philippines (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). The species is considered local, or rare, in India, common in eastern Bangladesh (Sylhet), mainly from the month of October till the middle of January (Cheke & Mann 2008). Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) list it as a resident in the lower parts of the hills of southern Assam (north and south Cachar), and eastern Bangladesh (Sylhet, Tippera, and Chittagong).

This article describes the sighting, accompanied by photographs, of one male Van Hasselt's Sunbird from Karimganj District, Assam, in north-eastern India, along with a probable female. Here we also analyse past records of this species and clarify several ambiguities in terms of locations that may or may not fall within present day India.

Observations & Identification

On 15 March 2015, VAI, along with a group of three staff members of the Nature Club of Makunda Christian Hospital, Bazaricherra, Karimganj District, and a few local villagers went into the forests for biodiversity documentation. This involved a trek through thick forest for about 10 kms from the nearest human habitation, Srirampur village, close to Dullabcherra town in Karimganj District, to reach the site of observation (24.39°N, 92.37°E). At about 0830 hrs, several birds were spotted feeding on a large blossom-filled shrub, probably *Symphorema involucreatum*; most of the birds flew away when approached, but two sunbirds continued to feed on the blossoms. One of them had an iridescent green crown; seven photographs were taken of this bird before it flew away [79-84]. Unfortunately, the camera's settings had not been changed (after photographing a moth), and the bird was also very active, consequently most of the photos were not sharp. Since the bird had a metallic green crown, it was assumed that the bird was the locally common Ruby-cheeked Sunbird *Chalcoparia singalensis*. The party then heard calls of the hoolock gibbon *Hoolock hoolock*, and moved quickly to see those endangered primates.



79. Purple-throated Sunbird *L. sperata* showing iridescent green crown of the male.



80. Lateral view of the male Purple-throated Sunbird.



81. Purple-throated Sunbird showing iridescent purple of throat and maroon of upper belly.



82. Dorsal view of black with glossy blue tail of male Purple-throated Sunbird.



83. Top view of head and upper breast of male Purple-throated Sunbird.



84. Olive upper parts, yellow lower parts and faint eye ring of female Purple-throated Sunbird.

Upon returning, VAI processed the images and found that the bird was a Van Hasselt's Sunbird. The bird had the distinctive maroon coloured breast and under parts, iridescent purple coloured throat, apart from a green crown. One sharp image was obtained of the female sunbird. The picture showed a white eye-ring, yellowish throat and under parts, and a short bill; all congruent with a typical female of this species. The photographs were posted to the *Oriental Bird Pix* Google Group and Krys confirmed the identity of the male bird (Krys, *pers. comm.*, email

dated 16 March 2015); the images have since been accepted into the OBI database. It is very likely that the female was also of that species as they were a calling pair.

Discussion

While most references appear to indicate that this species is distributed, at least, over most of present day Tripura, southern Assam, and parts of Manipur, and Mizoram, there appear to

be a paucity of actual records to support those claims. Neither are there any photographs taken from India, nor are there any recent records of this species from the country. Authors seem to have freely quoted each other without realising that some of the territories mentioned by historical workers have been split after Indian independence, and during the reorganisation of Indian states, such that records from the erstwhile regions of "Assam", "Sylhet", and "Tippera", require closer scrutiny before they can be accepted as definite for India.

The political histories of Sylhet- (Bangladesh), which borders Assam (India), and Comilla- Districts (Bangladesh), which borders Tripura (India), are of interest here, along with the history of the Barak Valley of Assam, and the state of Tripura. Whilst India was a colony of the British, post 1857, the territories of Assam province included those of present day Sylhet. Subsequently, following the Partition of Bengal (1905–1911), Assam and East Bengal became a single large province. Following a referendum in July 1947, the erstwhile district of Sylhet became part of erstwhile East Pakistan, except for the Karimganj subdivision, which became a part of the Cachar District of Assam in India. In 1983, Cachar District was trifurcated into Cachar-, Hailakandi-, and Karimganj- Districts.

Tripura became a princely state during British rule in India; its kings had an estate in the plains and an independent area in the hills. Following India's independence in 1947, the plains estate, known as Plains Tippera (or just Tippera or Tipperah), became the Comilla District of Bangladesh. Hill Tippera (or Tipperah) remained under a Regency Council till 1949 when it became the Tripura state of India. Hence, prior to 1905, when most of the specimens were taken, the district of Karimganj was a part of Sylhet, and not Cachar. The entire Sylhet District was a part of Assam, and Comilla District was called Tippera.

About sixteen museum specimens of this species from South Asia were located in the collections of Natural History Museum, London (BMNH), Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), Cornell University Museum of Vertebrates (CUMV), Field Museum of Natural History (FMNH), Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), University Museum of Zoology, Cambridge (UMZC), and Yale Peabody Museum (YPM) (Table 1). Just four of them are labelled 'India'. The most recent collections from South Asia were by R. A. Paynter, in 1958, from Sylhet, and the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh. A. M. Primrose contributed

six specimens from Rema Tea Estate in southern Sylhet (now in Bangladesh). Primrose (1902), who was stationed there, indicated that this species is exceedingly common between October and January. C. M. Inglis contributed the remaining southern Sylhet specimens. Since Sylhet was a part of Assam ante 1905, the FMNH specimen is apparently labelled "Assam, India", while the BMNH specimen also mentions "Assam". These should now be treated as though from Sylhet, Bangladesh. A. O. Hume indicates that the species appears in "the Arracan Hills, Chittagong, and Hill Tipperah, where I have obtained it, and whence many specimens were sent me long ago by the late Mr. Irwin" (Hume & Davison 1878). Hume (1970) indicates having received a single specimen of this species from Irwin who sent specimens of many other species from Tipperah [not Hill Tipperah], and possibly Hume has muddled these two entities and also the total number of specimens he received of this species. BMNH specimen labelled "Commillah (?), Tipperah" in the Hume Collection is possibly the one supplied by Valentine¹. Major H. H. Godwin-Austen, during his surveys in the hills south of the Brahmaputra, which included present day Tripura, did not come across this species but mentions a specimen contributed by Mr. Ross Mangles from Tripura [=Hill Tippera] (Godwin-Austen 1874). This specimen is now in BMNH and *should count as the first for the country* (authors' italics). A specimen exists in the private collection of Frank S. Wright, collected in 1894, and contributed to CUMV in 1939 (CUMV: 14548), which was collected from Cachar (wrongly attributed to Manipur state). Though the other specimen in the same series (#14551) is labelled 'Bangladesh', and the provenance of these specimens is not fully established, Cachar has always been in India, and hence this should count as the only other specimen for the country. Two of the specimens labelled 'India' (UMZC 27/Nec/5/III/1, and YPM ORN 011654), and one labelled 'Assam' (BMNH 1886.12.1.811), lack more precise collection-locality data. However, all specimens are definitely from either late nineteenth- or early twentieth centuries; those that may have been collected from areas that are in present day Bangladesh, cannot be considered valid for India.

Subsequent compilations of Indian ornithology have mostly depended on these nineteenth- and early twentieth century specimens to chalk out the species' range. Oates (1890) has nothing new to say except that Godwin-Austen obtained

Date	Location	Collector/Collection	Code
1846	India	Strickland Collection. Collected by Blyth	UMZC 27/Nec/5/III/1
1869	Commillah (?), Tipperah	Hume Collection. Probably collected by I. Valentine	BMNH 1886.12.1.747
Undated	India	Collected by W. F. Rosenberg	YPM ORN 011654
May 1873	Assam	In Hume Collection. Collected by H. C. Parker.	BMNH 1886.12.1.811
Pre-1874	Hill Tipperah	In Godwin-Austen Collection. Collected by R. Mangles	BMNH 1895.7.14.2606
03 July 1894	Cachar, Manipur, India	In F. S. Wright Collection	CUMV:14548
Undated	Bangladesh	In F. S. Wright Collection	CUMV:14551
08 October 1900	Rema Tea Estate, Bangladesh	Collected by A. M. Primrose	BNHS: 9559
10 October 1900	South Sylhet, Bangladesh	Collected by C. M. Inglis	BNHS: 9657
September 1901	Rema or Kowai, Sylhet, Assam, India	In H. K. Coale Collection. Collected by A. M. Primrose	FMNH:98616
October 1901	Rema Tea Estate, Luckerpore Valley, South Sylhet, Assam	In H. Whistler Collection. Collected by A. M. Primrose	BMNH:1949. Whi.1.5625
12 October 1901	Rema Tea Estate, Bangladesh	Collected by A. M. Primrose	BNHS: 9658
02 September 1902	Rema, Sylhet, Bangladesh	Collected by A. M. Primrose	YPM ORN 043413-14
October 1902	Rema Tea Estate, Luckerpore Valley, South Sylhet, Bangladesh	Collected by A. M. Primrose	ROM:56324
24 February 1958	Rangamati, Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh	Collected by R. A. Paynter	YPM ORN 088041
29 April, 03 & 07 May 1958	Baramchal, Sylhet, Bangladesh	Collected by R. A. Paynter	YPM ORN 088042-44

¹ Irwin Valentine was then the Collector of Tipperah. He also served as Commissioner of Manipur and is also believed to have introduced polo in the British Isles when he returned in 1865 (Laffaye 2009).

specimens from Tippera, and that Hume recorded it from there, as well as in Chittagong. However, this already diluted two fine details – rather than he himself collecting, Godwin-Austen was supplied a specimen by another collector (see above), and that it came from Hill Tippera [not Tippera]. Baker (1926) lists its range as Assam, Tippera, Chittagong, Manipur, and Mizoram [=Lushai] with an additional comment that it is “very rare in Assam but straggles into Cachar and Sylhet on the south and to Lakhimpur on the north of the Brahmaputra”. It is unclear on what basis Baker claims the record from Lakhimpur, Manipur, and Mizoram as there have been no previous publications or specimens from those areas. Most likely they were his observations, largely unsubstantiated, and generally treated with caution (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). It is unclear whether Baker was aware of the Cachar specimen, even though he must have been referring to Oates when listing Tippera; Oates himself should have correctly written Hill Tippera. Ali & Ripley (2001) add Dibrugarh, Silchar, and Hailakandi into the Indian range with no further substantiation; however, they rightly give the range in Bangladesh as “south Sylhet, Comilla, Chittagong and down to Cox’s Bazaar”. It appears that Lakhimpur of Baker (1926) is what is referred to as Dibrugarh by Ali & Ripley (2001). Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) repeat Ali & Ripley for the range statement for Bangladesh but explicitly state north and south Cachar, giving an impression that there are multiple established records from Cachar. However, they caution that the “NE Arunachal report needs substantiation”. It is unclear as to which “NE Arunachal report” they are referring to, perhaps the Lakhimpur reference of Baker (1926). It may be noted that Lakhimpur, and Dibrugarh have always been in Assam!

In recent years, forests in Bangladesh, adjoining the Barak Valley, appear to be better worked in terms of ornithology than the hills in southern Assam. The sunbird is listed as a common resident in the evergreen forests of Chittagong- and Sylhet divisions in Bangladesh (Siddiqui *et al.* 2008; Khan & Aziz 2012). As per recent information, it is an uncommon resident in most of the eastern forests in Bangladesh and has been confirmed from 14 forest sites / protected areas in that country. Many of these sites are along the southern to eastern fringes of Greater Sylhet (e.g., Moulvi Bazar District), and largely close to the northern border of Tripura, with the closest location to Assam being Madhabkunda (24.64°N, 92.22°E) on the far east of Moulvi Bazar District. Other sites are in the forests of the Chittagong region, through the hill tracts, to Cox’s Bazar area. (Paul Thompson, in email dated 18 March 2015). An online search in the *Birds Bangladesh* Facebook group provided at least half a dozen clear pictures of males of this species, indicating that it is a fairly widespread species in appropriate habitats of that region, and well-known to bird-watchers.

Contrary to this, there are no records in recent times from Tripura, Mizoram, or Manipur. People who frequent hills south of the Brahmaputra have not seen this species (Shashank Dalvi, *verbally*, March 2015; T.R. Shankar Raman, *in litt.*, email dated 16 March 2015). Choudhury (2005, 2009, 2010) lists this species in the state checklists of Mizoram, Manipur, and Tripura but cites Ali & Ripley (2001) as his source. Males of this species have been recorded three or four times (undated) from the southern part of Hailakandi- and Cachar Districts of southern Assam during 1986–1988 (Anwaruddin Choudhury, *in litt.*, email dated 04 May 2015). It is quite likely that the species is regular in some of the forests in Tripura that are close to the Bangladesh border as this is common in the adjoining tracts in Bangladesh. However,

this shows how little we know of the ornithology of some regions in the hills south of Brahmaputra. In the absence of any verifiable evidence, we propose that this species be deleted from the checklists of Manipur, and Mizoram until fresh evidence is presented. Its distribution range in India should, at best, be limited to Tripura, and Cachar, and that too based on just three verifiable records, including the present one.

While the hotspots in the Eastern Himalayas, and the Brahmaputra Valley are heavily visited by amateurs and professionals, there is hardly any recent systematic avian documentation from the Barak Valley, comprising of the extant districts of Karimganj, Hailakandi, and Cachar. The location of the above observation is also rumoured to be near hideouts of militants, and is therefore not a popular place for birding. Active conservation work is largely unknown in states like Tripura where natural vegetation is fast depleting. The absence of mega-rarities does not help in focusing on the area, but that does not detract from the fact that several species present only in the south-eastern parts of north-eastern India can be found here. VAI has recorded species confined to hills south of the Brahmaputra, like Olive Bulbul *Iole virescens* (http://orientalbirdimages.org/images/data/karimganj_birds139b.jpg), and Stripe-breasted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos atratus* (http://orientalbirdimages.org/search.php?p=11&Bird_ID=239&Bird_Family_ID=&pagesize=1) from different locations in the district. It is possible that Orange-bellied Flowerpecker *Dicaeum trigonostigma* also occurs here. The forests are being actively cleared and it is imperative that the remaining biodiversity be assessed and conservation imperatives identified. Whilst the local tribal community is dependent on forest resources for their livelihoods, there are many non-local immigrants who are involved in the large scale felling of trees, and in the trapping, and poaching of wildlife. If local biodiversity turns popular amongst tourists, it is possible to use the local communities to protect the forests in return for a livelihood through eco-tourism.

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Some important photographic records from Gujarat

Rajni Trivedi

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A total of 536 species of birds were recorded from Gujarat state till 2004 (Parasharya *et al.* 2004). Subsequently I photographed some birds that were additions to the Gujarat list. Some of these have already been published in *Vihang*, a newsletter published in the Gujarati language. I present below photographs of some of these records, which are important for Gujarat ornithology.

Eurasian Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*

The Eurasian Bittern was first recorded, and photographed at Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary on 07 April 2009 (Sidani 2009b). Again



85. Eurasian Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* photographed on 07 April 2009.

I recorded a single bird on 08 February 2011 at Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary [85]. These were the first photographs of the species from Gujarat. Grimmett *et al.* (2011) show isolated record(s), with uncertain locations, for Gujarat, whereas Hancock & Kushlan (1984), as well as Rasmussen & Anderton (2012), show it as a winter visitor to the entire Gujarat state. However, there are very few specific past records of the species from Gujarat. Anonymous (1887) mentioned its presence in Gujarat. Ali (1954) did not come across the species during his survey of Kachchh and Gujarat, but mentioned a record of the species by Butler (1877) from near Deesa in northern Gujarat. Dharmakumarsinhji (1955) considered it a winter visitor to Gujarat and Kachchh, but as a rare



86. Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus*.