

Observations of Black-tailed Crake *Zapornia bicolor* in Shillong, Meghalaya

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Photo: Sudhanya R. Hajong

151. Black-tailed Crake *Zapornia bicolor*.

The Black-tailed Crake *Zapornia bicolor* is a small bird, first reported from Shillong by Godwin-Austin in the late nineteenth century. His report was based on a single specimen collected in June, and two more live specimens along with an egg (Godwin-Austen 1874). He kept the birds in confinement but they did not survive. Baker (1907) recorded two more specimens from Shillong in Khasi Hills. Since these earlier records, no recent reports of this bird from Meghalaya have been published, though its presence in other north-eastern Indian states are available, apart from those from adjoining countries—Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh (Inskipp & Round 1989; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Recently, Pradhan (2015) reported this species from the Himalayan region of northern West Bengal, in a wetland in Darjeeling, and made some observations on their status. Of the six pictures from India that are posted on the Internet, on the Oriental Bird Images website (www.orientalbirdimages.org), photographs have been shot in Sikkim, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh.

Here I report the presence of this crake in a small wetland near Shillong, along with my observations over a period of two years.

From 2013 to 2015 I have sighted, and recorded, during my morning excursions, a few adults and juveniles of this species in a small wetland (25.61°N, 91.90°E; 1402 m asl; 03 ha) located in the heart of the North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) campus in Shillong. In the initial stages of my observations during the morning, I heard a 'trill' call from the reeds, and could occasionally see one or two birds flying in the reeds. Later, to

properly identify the birds I spent a considerable time on the edge of the wetland, observing this bird through binoculars. On 27 July 2015, I was able to photograph one individual [151] that was foraging nearby; upon hearing me it ran away, pausing a while in an open spot, and giving me an opportunity to get a clear photograph before it disappeared among the reeds. Again, on 04 August 2015 three birds, one adult, and two young birds, were noticed pecking on the ground. On 07 August 2015 two more individuals were observed preening among the grasses on the western side of the marsh. They were uttering a low 'tuk...tuk...tuk...' call while foraging. I also heard an occasional, louder call: a long descending trill, which began with a 'waak...waak...' call.

My observations of their habits, and the habitat is similar to that reported by Baker (1927) who described that the Black-tailed Crakes prefer patches of jungles, scrub, and rushes around small pools, streams, and areas around rice paddies, which provide them with plenty of cover. The area is divided into an eastern patch of 02.39 ha (Fig. 1; A), and a small western patch of 0.11 ha (Fig. 1; B); these two sites are separated by a narrow road. They contain vegetation in the form of *Scipus mucronatus*, *Erocaulon* sp., and other grass species. This area is perennially wet, and probably benefits from an underground source of water that slowly seeps up from the eastern end of the marsh. This is also the main source of water for the now renovated NEHU fishponds (Fig. 1; C, D).

Villagers informed me that this marshy habitat is only about three decades old. Earlier, the entire area on the northern side of the main campus road (Fig. 1) was cultivated, for rice, and vegetables, by the villagers till NEHU procured it for its campus. Since then it has remained unused, and due to water-logging after the construction of the approach road, the area had become marshy. That the Black-tailed Crake has bred in such a small and fragmented habitat, within semi-urban settings, is an indication of its resilience amidst extensive habitat fragmentation.

I could not find any recently published literature on any aspects on these birds from the Khasi Hills. However, it is likely that they still inhabit suitable areas adjoining rice cultivation, wetlands, and forested areas, in the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya. In the Khasi language, the Black-tailed Crake is referred to as, 'Syiar-um', which literally means 'waterfowl'. I feel that given the extensive fragmentation of wetlands, and encroaching development, only the skulking nature of rails in general, and this 'great skulker' (Ripley 1977) in particular, has helped it survive in such small habitats.

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Fig. 1. Map of area where Black-tailed Crakes were seen.

village. I also thank Y. Kumar, Botany Department, and NEHU for identifying the aquatic vegetations. Lastly, I thank my family for tolerating my early morning bird- and nature-watching excursions.

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Occurrence of Forest Owlet *Heteroglaux blewitti* in Betul District, and the importance of its conservation in the Satpura landscape

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Introduction

The Forest Owlet *Heteroglaux blewitti* is a small-sized owl, endemic to India [152]. Owing to its localised distribution, and suspected-to-be-declining population, it has been listed as a Schedule I species in The Indian Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972 and is listed as Critically Endangered by the IUCN (BirdLife International 2015). The Forest Owlet made its debut in Indian ornithology in 1872 from present Chhattisgarh State. Till 1884, six more specimens of the Forest Owlet were collected from different parts of the country (Hume 1873; King & Rasmussen 1998), but thereafter, and for a long time, there were no records of the Forest Owlet, and it was therefore thought to be probably

extinct from the country (Ripley 1952, 1976). In 1997, after a long hiatus of 113 years, the Forest Owlet was recorded near Toranmal in north-western Maharashtra (King & Rasmussen 1998), marking its historical homecoming in Indian ornithology. Following its rediscovery, the search for the Forest Owlet began with renewed interest across the country and, including the present record it has been reported from nine locations in eight districts of the country (Table 1; Fig. 3.).

Sighting of Forest Owlet in Betul District

In 2012, we initiated a long-term study on the ecology of Forest Owlet in the reserved forests of Khandwa District in Madhya



Photos: WRCS

152. Forest Owlet *Heteroglaux blewitti*.



153. Forest owlet habitat in Betul District.