Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug* in northern Sikkim, India

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The Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug* has been listed as ‘Endangered’, under the IUCN Red List category, owing to the fact that it may be undergoing a very rapid decline mainly due to unsustainable capture for falconry trade, habitat degradation, and impact of agrochemicals (BirdLife International 2015). It has been earlier recorded in the Indian Subcontinent as a scarce winter visitor to Pakistan, and western India; towards the east it might extend up to Nepal (Ali & Ripley 1987). Naoroji (2007), and Grimmett *et al.* (2011) also showed a similar range but slightly extending eastwards, with a stray record from Bangladesh (Thompson *et al.* 1994). Hodgson collected the *milvipes* race in Nepal (Biswas 1960). But Sikkim, and the rest of north-eastern India seem to have remained outside its range, except for Kallol Mukherjee’s recent photograph from Buxa Tiger Reserve in northern West Bengal (Mukherjee 2015). Ali (1962) also did not record it in Sikkim.

I here report a recent observation of the species made on a visit to Sikkim. On 17 April 2014, after visiting Gurudongmar, while on our way to Cho Lhamu, a flying falcon caught my attention at 0950 hrs. We were north-east of Gurudongmar Lake, North Sikkim District (28.03°N, 88.71°E; 5,100 m asl), surrounded by a cold desert of sand and stones [32]. Then the bird landed, and I could observe it closely, and take a number of photographs. Its tail extended well beyond its closed wings—as against, ‘just beyond’ in *F. jugger*, and ‘almost equal to’ in *F. peregrinus*. It had a grey-brown crown, moustach, white supercilium, and rufous-brown and dark-brown dorsal barring, which eliminates both, *F. jugger*, and *F. peregrinus*, and bold barring on thighs, and flanks. Its throat, and breast, was white. Based on all these details, which are visible in the photographs, this was identified as a Saker Falcon. It seemed to be an immature bird, based on the presence of a strong moustachial stripe, and heavy ventral barring. Krys Kazmierzczak (pers. comm. 2014) also feels that it is not an adult. The pattern of barring on its back, as stated above, combined with its barred flanks probably indicate that it might belong to a sub-species of the ‘Eastern’ Saker Falcon; however, field identification of juvenile Sakar Falcons, to a definite subspecies, is tricky. When I re-visited the spot at 1025 hrs, the bird had disappeared.

Both Ali & Ripley (1987), and Naoroji (2006) mentioned that it winters from October to April in India. However, the landscape of breeding record of *milvipes*, from Ladakh (Sangha *et al.* 2014), and that of the present sighting, is similar. Hence, an April record in northern Sikkim would call for extra attention from visiting birders to be alert for this species in its potential habitats.

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References

Mukherjee, K., 2015. [Front cover photograph: Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug* at Buxa Tiger Reserve, West Bengal.] Indian BIRDS 10 (2): Front cover, and inside front page.  