

Chestnut-eared Bunting *Emberiza fucata* wintering in Jaipur, Rajasthan

Harkirat Singh Sangha, Sahdev Singh & Sudhir Garg

Sangha, H. S., Singh, S., & Garg, S., 2016. Chestnut-eared Bunting *Emberiza fucata* wintering in Jaipur, Rajasthan. *Indian BIRDS* 11 (1): 26–27.
 Harkirat Singh Sangha B-27, Gautam Marg, Hanuman Nagar, Jaipur 302021, Rajasthan, India. E-mail: harkirat.sangha@gmail.com [HSS]
 Sahdev Singh, Suraj Nagar West, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India. E-mail: sahdevsingh2004@yahoo.co.in [SS]
 Sudhir Garg, Vidhyadhar Nagar, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India. E-mail: sudhirgarg@gmail.com [SG]
Manuscript received on 04 March 2015.

While birding at Dera Amer, adjoining Nahargarh Sanctuary in Jaipur, on 25 November 2012 SS saw a bird feeding on berries of *Salvadora oleoides* that he did not recognise. On 20 January 2013 he saw three–four of the same birds, when they were part of a larger flock of White-capped Buntings *Emberiza stewarti*, which are fairly common during winter in eastern Rajasthan; all had come to drink at a water seepage point. Three birds were seen on 19 January 2014.

SS was able to photograph the birds, and later sent the images to HSS, who identified them as the Chestnut-eared Bunting *E. fucata*. Realising its rarity in Rajasthan, HSS and SS decided to visit Dera Amer on 09 February 2014. Luckily, they saw three birds as soon as they reached the site that morning. The birds were quite shy, and flew away, but a little later they had two more views of the birds in flight.

On 07 April 2014 HSS and SG spent about four hours in the scrub forest adjacent to the Papad wale Hanuman temple in suburban Jaipur, where SG had seen the birds two years ago, on 08 March, and 08 October 2012; but they only saw White-capped-, and Grey-necked Buntings *E. buchanani*.

Description

One of the birds observed at Dera Amer was a first-winter Chestnut-eared Bunting [42] and matched with the pictures shot by SG at Papad wale Hanuman temple. Based on brief field notes, and the pictures, it was certain that it was not White-capped Bunting, or Striolated Bunting *E. striolata* that commonly occur in Jaipur. A bunting with typically "complicated" plumage, it showed characteristics associated with first-winter Chestnut-eared Bunting. The chestnut colour of the ear coverts was almost entirely lacking, but ear coverts still appeared prominent and contrasted with the grey crown, and white supercilium and submoustachial stripe. The black malar stripe merged with the black streaks on the breast and upper belly. The chin appeared prominently buffish pale compared to a white throat. The dark streaking was more prominent on upper breast, which was white, compared to a pale buff belly and undertail coverts. The flanks were white, with smudgy streaks. The eye-ring was prominently white contrasted with a dark iris.

The above description ruled out every other bunting. With caution it can be concluded that it was probably a first-winter female bird. First-winter females are known to lack obvious chestnut, or brown on the face, and are more difficult to identify.

Distribution & migration

Chestnut-eared Bunting is generally not rare, but does not occur in high numbers anywhere (Byers *et al.* 1995). It seems to be

a relictual Palearctic species with three widely scattered disjunct breeding populations in the eastern parts of the Palearctic (Roberts 1992). It has a patchy distribution in Asia: the nominate form, which is the most northerly, and the most migratory race, breeds from Baikal Lake through northern China to Japan, and winters from southern Japan and southern China to Thailand. There are two other, less migratory forms: *E. f. kuatunensis* in south-eastern China, and *E. f. arcuata* in the western Himalayas and southern China (Byers *et al.* 1995).

The Himalayan population (*arcuata*) is an uncommon resident, subject to vertical movements from Chitral and Hazara in the western Himalayas, east to Garhwal, Kumaon and Nepal (Ali & Ripley 1999; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). In winters it descends from at least 1500 m down to the foothills, and adjacent plains [Saharanpur, Ambala, Kosi barrage, south-eastern Nepal (Inskipp & Inskipp 1991; Ali & Ripley 1999). There is one definite record of a male, procured from a party, "from Cantonments" [Ambala] on 17 March 1918 (Jones 1919), but no definite information of its winter movements are known (Roberts 1992). There exists a recent record, dated 06 December 2011, from Shampura (Jaipur, Rajasthan) (Mathur 2011). The Himalayan population may be augmented by birds from China, particularly in the east (Byers *et al.* 1995).

The only other recent record of its winter movements, away from the Himalayas, is from Berwala, in Panchkula, Haryana, on 03 November 2007 (Sharad Sridhar, *verbally*).

Habitat & behaviour

In winter it is found in bushes and grasses adjoining fields and marshes (Byers *et al.* 1995); in the vicinity of streams or marshes with tall grass and reed beds, interspersed with thickets (Roberts 1992); and in wet fields (Inskipp & Inskipp 1985). However, in Jaipur we found it in dry and open scrub forest where the predominant species were dhok *Anogeis suspendula*, khejri *Prosopis cineraria*, roonj *Acacia leucophloea*, kumat *A. senegal*, kankera *Maytenus senegalensis*, kair *Capparis deciduas*, and babool *Acaacia nilotica*.

We noticed the birds either in ones, or in a small flock of up to three. On all occasions they were not really confiding and took flight at our approach.

Discussion

Most of the buntings that breed in the northern hemisphere are migratory (del Hoyo *et al.* 2011). *E. f. fucata* breeds in Amurland, Manchuria, and Japan. It winters in southern China, and the Indochinese countries; in the Indian Subcontinent it winters in



42. First winter male, or female Chestnut-eared Bunting *Emberiza fucata*; Papad wale Hanuman temple near Jaipur.

Manipur, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, the Jalpaiguri duars, most of Bangladesh, the Bhutan foothills, and eastern Nepal (Ali & Ripley 1999). The species is also known for its vagrancy; it has occurred as far west as Sweden, in October 2011 (Anonymous 2011), and on Fair Isle, Shetland, in October 2004 (Shaw 2004), in the Western Palearctic.

E. f. arcuata breeds in the Himalayas, from Pakistan, eastwards to western Nepal and southern China (north Yunnan). It winters at lower altitudes in the western Himalayas (del Hoyo *et al.* 2011). Extraliminally it has occurred in Mt. Victoria, Myanmar, and twice from the north-eastern part of that country (Smythies 1986); Yunnan, Sichuan, and Kweichow (Ali & Ripley 1999).

However, its occurrence in Jaipur (27.53°N, 76.42°E), during four successive winters, and the fact that it was there in small flocks, does point to the birds wintering regularly here, and not being vagrants to the region. It probably occurs in the area, but was overlooked as they move in small parties, and are highly cryptic, and thus inconspicuous. Moreover, females, and juveniles are tricky to identify. Their call too comprises 'very high, thin, sharp single notes' and is often not identifiable in the field, besides being inaudible to many (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Thus they are difficult to separate from other female, and juvenile buntings in the area.

Thus it seems logical to conclude that birders elsewhere in north-western India do need to consider this species when faced with an unfamiliar bunting. Chestnut-eared Bunting can be notoriously furtive species on wintering grounds.

Acknowledgements

HSS and SS thank Udajjit Singh, whose small private forest at Dera Amer, Jaipur hosted

the Chestnut-eared Bunting flock, for his generous hospitality during our visits. HSS is thankful to Manjula Mathur who shared her unpublished information about the species.

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Editorial

We are ten years old! It's a satisfying, and a sobering moment. We are happy we've been able to provide this platform for Indian ornithology, and that birders have found it worthy of publishing their notes in. We are aware of our responsibility, both, to handhold people who are writing on birds for the first time, to whet all manuscripts rigorously, and to bring meaningful content to readers. To celebrate, we've designed a cover that carries all the covers of *Indian BIRDS* from the last ten years. It is our way of thanking all those who have contributed the photographs, or artwork that adorned our covers.

I am often asked whether *Indian BIRDS* is a journal, or a popular magazine? What is the audience it caters to? How scholarly, or serious is it? These questions are spot on, as *Indian BIRDS* is a specialist publication of the birds of South Asia, and that restricted field has only so many people interested in it; either specialists, or generalists. I would not like to cast *Indian BIRDS* into a slot. Rather, I would judge its role by its utility. The question that I ask myself, about it, is whether what it publishes is reliable? I introspect about its strengths often, and here is what comes to my mind: Manuscripts are rigorously peer-reviewed; authors are, more often than not, handheld to improve their manuscripts; science is simplified for readers; both, professional ornithologists, and serious amateurs read it; manuscript submissions are from a wide spectrum of contributors; it is widely cited; and, it covers a vast oeuvre of topics (at least 20).

The ultimate feather in a publication's cap is how and where it is cited. It is a great joy to learn that the online edition of the *Handbook of the birds of the world*, (HBW *Alive!*) has listed no less than 128 references from *Indian BIRDS*, amongst the highest for a publication from South Asia [http://www.hbw.com/reference/all?title=&author=&year=&journal=India+n+Birds&sort_by=title&sort_order=ASC].

A large number of birders, who send manuscripts to us, are writing

something of this sort for the first time. They require guidance in this art. Our large base of peer reviewers, and members of the editorial board have supported us in this endeavor. The result is that people continue to send us manuscripts after the first one is published. It's reassuring; we must be doing something right.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the editorial team of *Indian BIRDS* and, all those who have helped us referee manuscripts in 2015: Adesh Shivkar, Asad R. Rahmani, Avin Deen, Chris Bowden, Christian Cederroth, Dipu Karuthedathu, Girish Jathar, Gobind Sagar Bhardwaj, Hans Larsson, Mohammed Dilawar, Neha Sinha, Nigel Collar, Oscar Campbell, Pamela Rasmussen, Peroth Balakrishnan, P. O. Nameer, Pramod Padmanabhan, Raju Kasambe, Raman Kumar, S. Prasanth Narayanan, Samir Kumar Mishra, Sreekar R., Sumit K. Sen, Tarquie Sani, T. R. Shankar Raman, and Umesh Srinivasan.

I would also like to thank P. Rambabu, and K. Jayaram, who have worked behind the scenes for the past ten years: the former managing subscriptions, and the latter formatting the *Indian BIRDS* issues; and Prakash Patel, and Krishna Nagarajan who helped with our website.

2015 has also seen a major change at *Indian BIRDS*. Praveen J has voluntarily taken over the management of all manuscripts, till they are ready for copy-editing, and finalising. He liaises with authors, referees, etc., till a manuscript goes to print. The energy, and efficiency that he's brought to the process has speeded it up considerably.

In the current issue, Prasad Ganpule tackles the complexities of the Great Grey Shrike—its variation, identification, and status. This is a path-breaking paper for us, and a rarity amongst the literature on Indian ornithology; Justin Jansen informs us about a collector from the eighteenth century; and Sharma & Singh document aspects of breeding of the Spectacled Finch.

We will continue bringing to you, interesting write-ups in 2016 too. We wish you a year filled with great birding.

— Aasheesh Pittie