

Occurrence of the Broad-tailed Grassbird *Schoenicola platyurus* in Pune District, India

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The Broad-tailed Grassbird *Schoenicola platyurus* is an Old World warbler from the family Locustellidae (Bush warblers). It is classified as Vulnerable by the IUCN (BirdLife International, 2016) and is endemic to India (BirdLife International 2016). It is a resident species in the Western Ghats of India and is suspected to have local movement (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). It is restricted to grassy highlands, principally in the Western Ghats (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). This note describes observations of this species at a new site in western Maharashtra, with evidence of possible breeding.

In June 2014, MG sent, for identification, the photograph of a warbler to CR, and SB, which he had taken near (18.37°N, 73.75°E) Sinhagad Fort, Pune District (Maharashtra, India). They identified it as a Broad-tailed Grassbird by its shape, and barred, rounded tail. We visited the location on the same day, where we spotted confiding birds, making it possible to take good photographs [138-139]. This is a tourist spot and is regularly visited by a large number of people, so it seems that the birds were not disturbed by the presence of people.



138. Broad-tailed Grassbird *Schoenicola platyurus*.



Photos: Chinmay Rahane

139. Broad-tailed Grassbird *Schoenicola platyurus*.

Sinhagad is a fort in the Western Ghats (1300 m asl), wherein the habitat consists of grassy sloping hillsides with intermittent bamboo and wild banana (*Musa* sp.). The birds frequently perched on bamboo, or wild banana, especially while calling. While we watched, one of the pair kept calling, and displaying, at short intervals, flying short distances, from one perch to another, while calling, for. We assumed that this was the male. This could likely be the breeding display. The bird actively displayed from 0830 till about 1000 hrs, and started again after 1500 hrs, continuing till about 1730 hrs. The birds took cover when a pair of Peregrine Falcons *Falco peregrinus* flew overhead. An individual was heard calling approximately a kilometer away from this pair while we were leaving the site, so perhaps there were more birds in the area. In July 2014 we observed the birds plucking fresh grasses, and sedges, from the ground and carrying these to the base of a nearby shrub, and were probably building a nest. We

did not search for the nest, fearing it would disturb the birds. In the following months, we visited the site once every week. We saw the birds on all these visits, but they were silent; perhaps they were nesting. This was confirmed when we saw the adults carrying larvae, and insects to the nest site, a sure indication of chicks having hatched [140]. Our visits became less frequent from August 2014 onwards, mainly due to inclement weather. We were able to observe broken eggshells at the nest site in September, which we assumed were of the grassbird. However, we do not have images of the same, not did we see any juveniles, and hence we are uncertain about whether the birds nested successfully. The birds were last seen on 10 September 2014.



Photo: Siddhesh Brahmankar

140. Broad-tailed Grassbird carrying insect to nest.

The species has been known to occur in the Western Ghats, mainly in Kerala, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu (BirdLife International 2016) though there are isolated records from Point Calimere (Hussain 1977), and the Vishakapatnam Ghats

(Price 1979), both the latter being queried by Rasmussen & Anderton (2012). The previous records from Maharashtra are from Bopdeo Ghat, Lonavla, and Rajgurunagar in Pune District; Ramshej Ghat in Nashik District, Amba Ghat in Kolhapur District, and Dhule District (Prasad 2004, 2005). All these sites, apart from the ones in Nashik, lie south of the present site. Raha and others, from Nashik, reported that the birds sang from regular perches and were quite bold; they have also regularly reported displaying birds, but haven't reported nesting in Nashik (Rahmani *et al.* 2014). We believe that the Sinhagad location is a new, and possibly, a breeding location for this species, and that it requires urgent protection measures in light of its IUCN status. Given our finding, it is quite possible the species breeds in similar habitat in the Western Ghats of Maharashtra. Since the grassbird is vocal, and active, in the monsoon, it would be useful to visit similar habitats, especially in the northern Western Ghats, to find out if these birds are present. More studies are required to ascertain the population estimate of this species at Sinhagad.

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Letters to the Editor

An intriguing bird sighting from the Kanchenjunga Conservation Area, east Nepal

In April 2008 I participated in a survey of the Kanchenjunga Conservation Area (27.34°N, 87.54°E) in eastern Nepal (Fig. 1); an area that borders the Sikkim region of India, and is not too far from the extensive forests of Bhutan. Kanchenjunga is the third highest peak in the world (8586 m). Its lower approaches are deep, steeply sided, and often, wooded valleys separated by high ridges.

Recent ornithological data from the region is lacking. Our expedition was to assess forest habitats in this remote region, record bird species, and identify key areas for birds and potential conservation threats. A full report of the trek is available separately (Inskipp & Inskipp 2008).

The expedition involved a 21-day trek from Basantpur, following the Tamur and Ghunsa Khola rivers northward, to the high altitude village of Ghunsa. From there we crossed over the Silele Pass to Tseram, and followed the Simbula Khola southward

to Toragden. We then crossed over into the Amji Khola, following this southward to the Kabeli Khola, and on down to the town of Taplejung.

On 21 April 2008 we descended from Tseram (3870 m), following the Simbula Kola southward to Torangden (3000 m), arriving at Torangden, our campsite (a single teahouse at roughly 27.55°N, 87.95°E), at 1530hrs. After some refreshments the team drifted off in different directions to explore the surrounding forest habitat.

Throughout the day we had passed through some of the best, and oldest, forest that we had encountered. Himalayan fir *Abies spectabilis* dominated at higher altitudes and gave way to hemlock *Tsuga dumosa* admixed with broadleaved forests at lower altitudes, with an understory of rhododendron *Rhododendron* species, and stands of bamboo *Bambusa* species in parts. The forest comprised many ancient trees with a high percentage of dead wood—both fallen, and standing. The valley had virtually no human residences.