

Long-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus scolopaceus*: An addition to the avifauna of peninsular India

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The Long-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus scolopaceus* is a recent addition to the avifauna of Indian Subcontinent (Holt 1999), and is considered a vagrant to the area (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Here, I report an instance where it was photographed in central Kerala, southern India.

While watching waders on 02 January 2016, at Vadakkekad (10.66°N, 76.00°E), Thrissur District, Kerala, I spotted a large long-billed wader that looked more like a snipe (*Gallinago* species), but shared some features with the godwits (*Limosa* species). Being unable to identify the bird then, I took a few photographs [123, 124], which I was able to send to Praveen J. He circulated the photographs further and obtained confirmation that the bird was indeed a Long-billed Dowitcher.

In the forenoon the next day, along with several birders, I searched for this species but could not locate it. However, I was able to find it in the evening, but unfortunately the birds took off before I could take more pictures.



Photos: P. Sreenivasan

123, 124. Long-billed Dowitcher amongst other waders.

From the two photographs, the following features are visible.

1. Thick, straight snipe-like bill, thicker than that of a godwit, a Redshank *Tringa ochropus*, or a Greenshank *T. nebularia*.
2. Shorter legs, compared to godwits.
3. Two-toned beak with a pale base; unlike the all-dark bill of an Asian Dowitcher *Limnodromus semipalmatus*.

This leaves us with the Long-billed Dowitcher, and the extralimital Short-billed Dowitcher *L. griseus*. Additional features that were present on this bird, and that favour a Long-billed Dowitcher, are as follows.

1. Bill twice as long as head (*versus* 1.5 times in a Short-billed Dowitcher).
2. Grey-washed breast with lightly barred flanks (*versus* light speckles on throat/breast of a Short-billed Dowitcher).
3. Short primary projection, showing a longer tail (*versus* a longer primary projection, showing much less tail).
4. Angle made by lores, with the bill, is more acute, than that of a Short-billed Dowitcher.
5. Supercilium is straight till the eye; Short-billed Dowitcher shows a slightly curved, bulging supercilium.
6. The dark brown centres to scapulars and converts indicate that the bird has retained some of its juvenile plumage. A Short-billed Dowitcher would normally show wavy internal markings on its scapulars, which are absent in this bird.

On 23 January 2016, I was able to spot this bird again at Uppungal Kole (10.69°N, 76.00°E), which is about 05 km north of the previous site; I managed to photograph it, both, at rest, and in flight. Most of the above-discussed features are also visible in these photographs [125, 126].



125. A close-up of the Long-billed Dowitcher.

Photo: P. Sreenivasan



126. Long-billed Dowitcher in flight.

The legs of Long-billed Dowitcher are expected to be greenish-yellow, or lemon-yellow, but in these pictures, the legs are a shade of orange. This could be because of the mud stains, making the bare parts' colours unreliable. The longer tarsi is considered another reliable feature for Long-billed, however for a lone bird, it is tough to estimate this accurately. The width of the tail barring is considered indicative for these two species, however in this bird, from whatever is visible of the two dark bars, it cannot be said with definiteness that they are wider than the three pale bars. Hence, that feature is not used here to argue for this species but that does not tilt the argument in favour of Short-billed either.

Based on this combination of features (Lee & Birch 2005, 2006), this bird could be conclusively identified as a Long-billed Dowitcher.

The species has been observed six times in India (Sharma *et al.* 2013); twice in Gujarat, and the others from northern India. This appears to be the first time it has been reported from peninsular India. Except for a May record from Harike Lake, in Punjab, every other record has been during January and February. This is probably the earliest date on which this species has been observed in India.

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Sighting of Purple-backed Starling *Agropsar sturninus* in Vellayani, Kerala

Dilip K. G. & Arun C. G.

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Purple-backed (Daurian) Starling *Agropsar sturninus* is widespread in the Oriental Region, occurring from Russia, through China up to most of the countries of South-east Asia, and the Sundas (BirdLife International, 2016). It breeds in North-eastern Mongolia, the Trans-Baikal region, the Amur Valley in China and in North Korea. Its major wintering quarters are southern China, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Sumatra, Java, and Myanmar. Though it has been considered a vagrant to the Indian Subcontinent till recently (Rasmussen & Anderton, 2012), it is now known to be a more regular winter visitor to the Andaman Islands (Sharma & Sangha, 2012). Here we report the first instance of its vagrancy in Kerala.

While on a visit to the Vellayani wetlands (8.45°N, 76.97°E) near Thiruvananthapuram city, a male Purple-backed Starling was seen at 08:30 hrs, on 14 November 2015, along with other birds like juvenile Rosy Starlings *Pastor roseus*, Common Myna

Acridotheres tristis, and Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocerus*. It had glossy purple upper parts, a small vertical nape patch, and a broken, conspicuous white wing bar. Further down its purple mantle, the broad whitish rump was visible very clearly. The pale grey head, and under parts, gave the bird a whitish look that initially attracted our attention while it perched on an electric line, in the company of other birds; and when disturbed by a moving motorbike the birds flew off and perched on a small tree. The bird moved about in the tree, in typical starling style, and after a while flew back to the electric line. Then the bird flew down to the bushes below, where it started feeding on *Lantana* fruits along with Rosy Starlings. We observed the bird for more than 20 minutes, and took several photographs [127]. It was still around after two hours when we returned. We identified it using field guides (Kazmierczak, 2009; Grimmett *et al.*, 2011).