

browed Bunting *S. chrysophrys*, but noting that the yellow supercilium, the white throat, and the heavily streaked breasts and flanks of the Yellow-browed Bunting were absent in this bird, its identification was established as Tristram's Bunting.

It is interesting to note that the Tristram's Bunting was accompanied by a single Little Bunting. Subsequently, Rofikul Islam photographed a Tristram's Bunting at the same site on 16 March 2016 (images posted on Oriental Bird Images online database); it was foraging with a mixed flock of Little Buntings, and Rufous-breasted Accentors *Prunella strophhiata*. At the same location, Ravi Mekola saw a male Tristram's Bunting on 28 March. Though several birders, and photographers, visited the spot since then, no more sightings have been reported. Hence, the bird seems to have stayed for nearly a month after our first sighting, and was probably a part of the Little Bunting flock that stayed back on its northward migration.

Little Bunting *Schoeniclus pusillus* in Munnar Hills, Kerala

James A. Eaton & Jijo Mathew

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On 26 February 2016, at 0830 hrs, we were birding along the main road, from Munnar to Thekkady in Kerala, along with seven other birders who formed part of a Birdtour Asia tour group. At a spot (10.04°N, 77.12°E) past Lockhart Gap, JAE heard a 'tik' call overhead and instinctively called out, 'Little Bunting', being familiar with the species' distinctive call from its wintering grounds in South-east- and eastern Asia, not realising the significance of the record! Fortunately, the bird, which was flying at least 30 m overhead, turned around and flew down to land just 20 m from some of us, allowing us to confirm his hunch, as the bird displayed a combination of chestnut ear-coverts that were bordered black with a pale spot, chestnut lores, black lateral crown stripes, and grey nape, thus ruling out all possible confusion species and confirming it



Both: James A. Eaton

22. Little Bunting clearly showing chestnut ear-coverts.

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23. Little Bunting showing chestnut lores, black lateral crown stripes, and grey nape.

as a Little Bunting *Schoeniclus pusillus*. Realising this might be significant, JAE quickly took a couple of record shots [22], before the bird flew off downhill. At 0840 hrs, while birding 100 m downslope the 'tik' was heard once more, and the Little Bunting was relocated feeding by the side of the track, allowing views for a further two minutes [23].

A subsequent literature survey revealed that there were no prior records from Kerala (Praveen 2015), nor from peninsular India. There is one specimen record of a male, obtained by an anonymous collector in Darbhanga, Bihar on 11 February 1909 (Inglis 1909). Ara (1976) reported it as a winter visitor, without mentioning about its regularity, from Kechki, Jharkhand. Shivraj Kumar Khacher and Lavkumar Khacher identified a pair of buntings in Jasdan near Rajkot, Gujarat, as this species, without providing further details (Khacher 1996). It has been

photographed in the Indian Sundarbans on 20 October 2013 (Patra 2013).

The Little Bunting breeds across northern Eurasia, from northern Sweden right across to the eastern-most parts of Russia, and winters south to north-eastern India, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam (Copete 2016). Vagrancy of the species has been well documented, with records from most western European countries, the Canary Islands, Morocco, Turkey, the Middle-East, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Malaysian Borneo, the Philippines, western USA (Alaska and California), and, even, north-western Mexico (Ramírez 2013; Copete 2016). Vagrant birds have often been recorded over-wintering (Copete 2016). Given its tendency towards such wide-ranging vagrancy, and the very limited numbers of the species recorded in the Asian bird trade (JAE *pers obs*), there can be little doubt that the bird in question was a wild individual.

Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka* at Bekal Fort, Kasaragod, Kerala

Premchand Reghuvaran

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On 20 December 2015, I visited Bekal Fort (12.38°N, 75.00°E), Kasaragod during a family outing. Here I noticed a bird perched at the bottom of a brick tower. Initially I thought it was a Common Stonechat *Saxicola torquatus* and I took some pictures [24] before it flew into the thick grass. Despite searching for it I could not locate the bird again. Later a confiding Grey-necked Bunting *Emberiza buchanani* took up all my attention, as it was a lifer for me.

After reaching the guesthouse where we were staying, I checked the photos of the presumed stonechat and felt they differed from the illustrations of stonechats, and wheatears, in my field guide (Arlott 2014). I could not find any bird that matched, and hence assumed it might have been a strange plumage of a stonechat.



Premchand Reghuvaran

24. Pied Wheatear.

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When I posted my bird list on eBird (www.ebird.org; Premchand 2015), Dipu Karuthedathu pinged me through whatsapp and suggested that it might be a wheatear (*Oenanthe*). I posted the pictures on the Facebook group, *Birdwatchers of Kerala*, for identification. Praveen J. consulted Oscar Campbell, and Peter Clement about the photos. Both readily identified the bird in the pictures as a first winter male Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka*. Below I explain, with pointers, as to why it is a Pied Wheatear.

The dark-grey and dull-white combination is indicative of a wheatear species, which is purely black and white in its adult plumage, eliminating all sandy-brown wheatears. The paler coloration of the crown and mantle indicate that these would not turn black in adult breeding plumage, eliminating all black-crowned species. The *capistrata* race of a Variable Wheatear *O. picata* can be eliminated based on the extent of white on the throat, and the pattern on the face and head. A Hooded Wheatear *O. monacha* is eliminated based on the bill length, which leaves only Pied Wheatear amongst the Indian wheatears. An adult male Pied Wheatear is similar in fresh plumage but more likely to have more black on the upper parts, especially on the greater coverts, which would be more uniformly black or blackish (Peter Clement, *in litt*, e-mail dated 18 January 2016), hence this has to be a first-winter bird.

On this bird, the overall tone of the back is very greyish, there appears to be some blackish coming through on the mantle, the primary projection is very long, and the black wash on the face extends well down the breast, and appears to almost meet the point where the wing bends. These are pro-Pied Wheatear features