

Lapland Longspur *Calcarius lapponicus* in Bhutan: A first record for the Indian Subcontinent

Tshering Chophel & Sherub

29. Lapland Longspur *Calcarius lapponicus* photographed in Bhutan.

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The Lapland Longspur *Calcarius lapponicus* (aka Lapland Bunting) is a widely distributed migratory passerine. It breeds in moist open grassy and lowland tundra, above the tree line, in the Arctic region of northern Eurasia, Greenland, and northern North America. In winter, it moves southward to southern Canada, and northern, and central USA, sparingly in north-western Europe, and more frequently eastwards from Ukraine, through southern Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and China, where it winters up to the Yangtse River, till c. 30°S (Byers 1995).

On 21 February 2014, a Lapland Longspur was sighted at Dawaling Ju (27.66°N, 91.43°E, c.1960 asl), in Bumdeling Wildlife Sanctuary, at 1100 hrs (local time). Dawaling Ju is located in Ngalmang village, Bumdeling, at Trashigang in eastern Bhutan. The bird was observed on a drift log on the riverbed, which is also the roosting area of the wintering Black-necked Crane *Grus nigricollis* of Kholongchu. On the ventral side of the log was a resting colony of the migrant Indian Rock Bee *Apis dorsata*. The bird remained for a week at this location.

The bird was initially thought to be a Russet Sparrow *Passer rutilans*. However, the presence of a rich rufous nape, and a prominent whitish supercilium indicated otherwise, and so the bird was examined more carefully. On the first day of sighting, we could not photograph the bird, as it flew away. On 22 February a photograph was shot [29]. The photo was shared with Piet Van Der Poel, who later shared with John D. Farrington: both felt

this could be a Lapland Longspur. Several photographs that were captured later, were unfortunately lost.

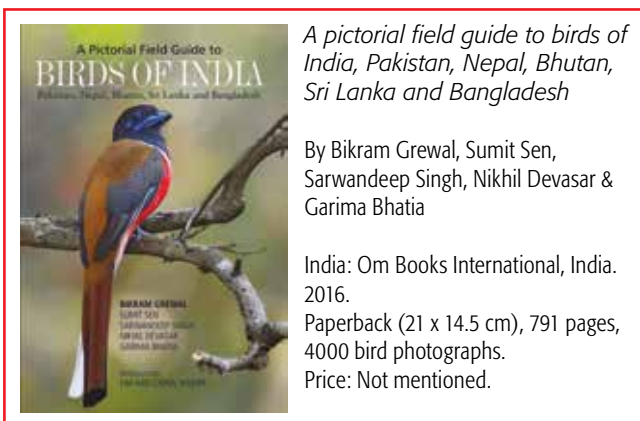
In non-breeding plumage the species can be confused with several *Emberiza* buntings, but from the features visible in the photo, it appears bulkier in appearance than others, has whitish wing-bars, and chestnut greater wing-coverts—all pointing towards the Lapland Longspur. It is probably not possible to determine the age, or sex, of this bird from this photograph, however, the richness of the nape colour, and the well-marked face indicate this could be a male.

The closest record of this bird, to Bhutan, is a record from Chengdu, Sichuan (30.66°N, 104.00°E) [Cheng 1987]. There is no previous record of it from the Indian Subcontinent (Grimmett *et al.* 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).

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Review



A pictorial field guide to birds of India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh

By Bikram Grewal, Sumit Sen, Sarwandeep Singh, Nikhil Devasar & Garima Bhatia

India: Om Books International, India. 2016.

Paperback (21 x 14.5 cm), 791 pages, 4000 bird photographs.

Price: Not mentioned.

Contents: Introduction (Birds of Indian subcontinent) by Carol & Tim Inskipp (pp: 4–13), Descriptive text (pp: 14–711), Vagrants & Doubtful Species (pp: 713–722), Acknowledgements (pp:

724–726), Bibliography (pp: 727–731), Descriptive Parts of a bird (pp: 732), A glossary of ornithological terms (pp: 733–735), Checklist: Birds of the Indian subcontinent following Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) (pp: 736–748), Checklist: Birds of the Indian subcontinent with status (pp: 749–772), Index (pp: 773–788), Maps (pp: 789–791).

My first impression of this book, which I am sure, would be that of any other user, is, *excellent photographs!* This is definitely 'one book' which has the largest collection of photographs of birds from the subcontinent. The artistic layout, including well-clipped flight photographs embedded neatly over a larger base photograph of the species in its habitat—visible for several different species—feels as if all the birds in the panorama were a part of the same scene. This style mimics, to some extent, the pathbreaking design of the *Crossley guide* (Crossley 2011). The book has used space liberally, to showcase the photographs, without compromising on aesthetics. Some species like the

Indian Paradise Flycatcher *Terpsiphone paradisi*, and the Great Slaty Woodpecker *Mulleripicus pulverulentus* take up two full pages, while most species are restricted to a half page. It is however unclear where a particular photograph was taken, or who was behind the lens, but a long list of photographers, at the back of the book, acknowledged their contribution. In fact, four of the authors are well-known ace photographers from the country. However, credits against photos would have highlighted each photographer's work, and given them great satisfaction. Perhaps in a 2nd edition, at least page numbers on which each person's photos appear, could be added against their names in the acknowledgements list. It is heartening to note the number of distinct subspecies that have been illustrated; though some of the pictures are too small to discern critical features, such cases are rare.

The book starts with a short treatise on the birds of the Indian Subcontinent by Carol Inskipp, and Tim Inskipp. For a student of Indian ornithology it is a must read, as it provides a brief summary of birds found in all biogeographic regions and habitats, touching lightly, but deftly, upon every aspect of the subcontinent's avifauna. I would like to see it made available online, or even be recommended to serve as a chapter for an undergraduate course. It is reasonably up to date, though I was pleasantly surprised to read here about the very few recent reports of the Chestnut-breasted Hill Partridge *Arborophila mandellii*. Though the number of its photographs from the field have been a trickle, there are several audio reports from north-eastern India on the websites, www.ebird.org, and www.xeno-canto.org.

One of the banes of a photographic guide is the chance of misidentifying birds. With more than 4000 colour photographs, I think this book has remarkably few instances of debatable identification. The Pomarine Jaeger *Stercorarius pomarinus* photograph (p. 211) is of a famous bleached specimen that stumped most experts, and is believed to be either a Parasitic-S. *parasiticus*, or a Long-tailed Jaeger *S. longicaudus*; it is not a Pomarine (see Karuthedathu 2014). The picture of the Kerala Laughingthrush *Trochalopteron fairbanki meridionale* (p. 509) is that of the nominate race, and was taken by the photographer in Munnar, where only the nominate race is found (see Praveen & Nameer 2013 for photographs of both subspecies, including this picture). The picture of Hume's Leaf Warbler *Abrornis humei* (p. 452) showing a pale lower mandible and single wing bar is probably a Greenish Leaf Warbler *Seicercus trochiloides*. One of the Yellow-browed Warbler *Abrornis inornatus* pictures (p. 453: bottom) that shows a yellow *Phylloscopus* with no wing bars (instead of two) is most likely a Tickell's Leaf Warbler *P. affinis*. One of the flight images of the Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* (p. 177: bird on left), the one that shows an upturned bill, and lack of white wing bars, is a Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*. However, barring these isolated cases, the degree of accuracy achieved in correct identification of species, is commendable.

The book is tagged as a field guide, but it is bulky. It does not contain field identification tips, pointers/arrows on photographs, or notes that help differentiate similar species; the descriptions do not highlight what to look for in these photographs, to identify a species, nor do they talk about any unillustrated, alternate plumages. It would have been useful if the authors had inserted a section on 'How to use this book'; many of the travails of a potential reader would have surfaced in its writing.

It is unclear to me what taxonomy the book follows, as I could see traits of both Rasmussen & Anderton (2005), and Grimmett

et al. (1998). However, it is clear that the authors faced a stiff challenge with recent taxonomic changes. For example, under the account of White-throated Fantail *Rhipidura albicollis* (p. 358), we find a mention of race *albogularis* as "...found in Peninsular India..." and this follows the taxonomy of Grimmett *et al.* (1998). However, on the facing page (p. 359), *albogularis* race is given a full species status and a separate account, following Rasmussen & Anderton (2005). Now the map of White-throated Fantail (p. 358) shades the entire Peninsular India including the entire range of White-spotted giving an incorrect impression that both taxa are sympatric in Peninsular India. Both, Plain- *Dicaeum minullum*, and Nilgiri Flowerpecker *D. concolor* (pp. 642, 644) are included, while the Andaman Flowerpecker *D. virescens*, which one would normally expect to be split in such a case, does not find mention. It's the same with the Andaman Green Pigeon *Treron chloropterus*, which is not depicted, while the Grey-fronted- *T. affinis*, Ashy-headed- *T. phayrei*, and Sri Lanka Green Pigeon *T. pompadora* are (pp. 227–228). Indian- *Bubo bengalensis*, and Eurasian Eagle Owl *B. bubo* (pp. 260–261) are both said to be found 'throughout the region', while the latter is a Palearctic species, restricted to the Himalayas and associated mountains. Both, Lesser- *Curruca curruca*, and Desert Whitethroat *C. minula* (p. 465) share the same distribution text, that they cover most of the southern part of the Indian Subcontinent, while the latter should have been restricted to north-western India. Allopatric Vigor's- *Aethopyga vigorsii*, and Crimson Sunbird *A. siparaja* (p. 651) have both been shown to occur in the Western Ghats, and central-, and north-eastern India. The voice of Collared Scops Owl *Otus bakkamoena lettia* described (p. 258) is the typical song of the nominate 'Indian Scops Owl' (p. 257).

The maps do not show up well. One would expect the map of restricted range species to be zoomed in—a norm followed in all contemporary field guides—here one cannot see the details in the maps of several East Himalayan, Sri Lanka, and Western Ghats species. Some of the maps are inaccurate, e.g., the widely distributed Indian Spotted Eagle *Aquila hastata* (p. 126) is shown only in the northern subcontinent.

The subject editing is disappointing. Under vagrants and doubtful species, three raptors have the same description statement (p. 715)—a case of a 'copy-paste mistake'. One also wonders what the Legge's Hawk-eagle, a species restricted to Sri Lanka and the Western Ghats, is doing in the vagrant/doubtful list. The White-headed Starling *Sturnia erythropygia* (p. 564), an Andaman endemic, has a distribution all over India; I suspect it is an error brought about by copying the distribution of Purple-backed Starling *Agropsar sturninus*—a species that should have made it to the book. The distribution of the Western Ghats narrow-endemic White-bellied Shortwing [=White-bellied Blue Robin] *Brachypteryx major albiventris* (p. 587) extends till Uttar Pradesh. The Sri Lanka endemic Green-billed Coucal *Centropus chlororhynchos* (p. 252) is said to be seen in the northern foothills, north-eastern India, and the Eastern Ghats; an error evidently arising from the descriptive 'Green-billed'—the distribution is a direct copy from Green-billed Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus tristis* (p. 249).

I wish the authors correct these errors in the next edition, as this could turn into one of the finest works on Indian ornithology, in terms of both illustrations, and authenticity.

There are two checklists for the Indian Subcontinent, at the end of the book. Reader would prefer a combined single checklist, updated with the latest taxonomic and IUCN status, thus removing several discrepancies that now exist.

In summary the quality of photographs that illustrate this book, and the breadth and depth of its coverage of the Indian Subcontinent's bird species, makes it the best buy in its genre of photographic bird guides. It would enhance any birder's library.

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Letters to the Editor

Carcass feeding by Black-headed Ibis *Threskiornis melanocephalus*

On 24 February 2016, while birding at Ekling or Kailashpuri Lake (24.73°N, 73.70°E; c. 660 m asl), Udaipur District (Rajasthan, India), we came upon a carcass of a domestic cow with three Cattle Egrets *Bubulcus ibis*, and two juvenile Black-headed Ibis *Threskiornis melanocephalus* near it. We stopped to observe the birds' behaviour, 10 m from the carcass. We seem to have initially disturbed the birds by our presence, but soon the egrets came back and started feeding around the carcass. After ten minutes, the juvenile ibises also returned, and started feeding on the carcass [30]. They walked slowly around the carcass, probing, and pecking at the carrion as they fed. One ibis appeared to dominate over the other, forcing the other away from the carcass, at least twenty times during the one hour of our observation. Egrets were not seen feeding on carrion, but focused on catching insects attracted to it. After one hour, both ibis flew away.



31. Black-headed Ibis feeding on carcass at Udaisar Lake.

Of the 29 ibis species worldwide (Threskiornithidae: Threskiornithinae; Matheu & Hoya 2016), only two, Sacred Ibis *T. aethiopicus* (Hancock *et al.* 2001), and Indian Black Ibis *Pseudibis papillosa* (Ali & Ripley 2007), have been reported to feed upon carcasses. The Black-headed Ibis normally feeds upon fishes, frogs, mollusks, insects, worms, and sometimes, on vegetable matter (Ali & Ripley 2007; Matheu *et al.* 2016); carrion is an addition to the food items consumed by this species.

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30. Black-headed Ibis *Threskiornis melanocephalus* feeding on a carcass at Ekling or Kailashpuri Lake.

In another instance, we observed three Black-headed Ibis feeding on a carcass of cow on 11 March 2016 at Udaisar Lake, Udaipur (24.55°N, 73.80°N; c. 540 m asl), along with Cattle Egrets with similar insect catching activities [31].