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.

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

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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.

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

vis-à-vis an extralimital Black-eared Wheatear *O. hispanica* (Oscar Campbell *in litt.,* e-mail dated 26 December 2015). Most of the greater coverts appear to be grey-black and both these, and the primary coverts, are clearly fringed pale or whitish-buff, and both have been retained from juvenile plumage and contrast (although not greatly) with the newer and more black-centered median coverts. In late winter, an adult is likely to show a whiter crown or white appearing on the nape instead of being restricted to a pale supercilium but both are very similar in fresh/autumn plumage (Clement, ibid.). Hence, a record in late December additionally supports a first-winter bird. Here, the mantle, back, and scapulars appear to be dull grey-brown with little sign of any paler fringes forming a slightly scaled pattern (broader in first-winter plumages than in adult; but their lack also indicates a late autumn or early winter date as they have worn down), and both areas are too dark or grey-brown for either Black-eared-, or Finsch's- *O. finschii* Wheatear. A first winter Finsch's would be more like an adult of the same species with fairly extensive white or whitish on the back. The only other concern might be an extremely out of range Cyprus Wheatear *O. cypriaca*—but the long primary projection, and the whitish (not yellowish-orange to warm-cinnamon) under parts clearly rule this out (Clement, ibid.).

Pied Wheatears breed from Central Asia up to the north-western Himalayas, and they migrate to western Africa. The species is very rare from late November to late February in the UAE (Campbell, ibid.), and it is assumed that they would have already migrated to its wintering grounds by then. Hence, a late December record in southern India is indeed exceptional.

On 21 October 1964, Margaret E. Wilkinson identified a bird in Kanyakumari (Tamil Nadu) as a Pied Wheatear *O. picata* [=Variable Wheatear] (Wilkinson 1966) by referring to Whistler (1935: pp. 79–81). However, she substantiated her sighting by referring to Henry (1955: pp. 25–26) who described a bird seen in Colombo on 16 November 1943, and concluded was a Pied Wheatear *O. leucomela* [=*O. pleschanka*]: a completely different species! Hence, the confusion in English names, with insufficient supporting descriptions, diminishes Wilkinson's Kanyakumari record in its ornithological value. It is surprising how the editors of the *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society* allowed this lapse to slip through. Apart from the single accepted record from Sri Lanka, mentioned above, the Pied Wheatear has been recorded four times from Addu Attol, Maldives (Strickland & Jenner 1978). Hence, this is probably the first record of a Pied Wheatear from southern India; possibly the sixth for the southern part of the Indian subcontinent including the islands of Sri Lanka and Maldives.

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– Aasheesh Pitte & Praveen J.