

The first record of West Himalayan Bush Warbler *Locustella kashmirensis* for Nepal

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In late July and August 2016 we carried out a bird survey along the Annapurna Base Camp trek, Annapurna Conservation Area, west-central Nepal. On 07 August we walked the uppermost leg of the trek from Machhapuchhre Base Camp (28.51°N, 83.90°E; 3692 m) to Annapurna Base Camp (28.51°N, 83.87°E; 4143 m). The trail follows a small western tributary, Tolangyo, of the Modi Khola, and runs through subalpine grassland with abundant herbaceous plants, in flower, and with scattered large boulders.

Soon after dawn we left our Machhapuchhre Base Camp lodge and within a climb of 50 m we heard a bird song neither of us recognised, but thought may be a bush warbler: two drawn out insistent rasping notes, reminiscent of an insect and continually repeated. At the time the weather was cool and cloudy and there was no insect activity. Between 3740 m and 4000 m we heard at least seven individuals singing (Fig. 1).

Initially we could not catch sight of the bird; then HC managed to photograph one individual singing from the top of a large boulder [129].

The following notes were made in the field. The bird was a medium-sized warbler with rather rounded wings and short tail, indicating a bush warbler. The under parts, including the breast, were buff-coloured, the flanks were slightly darker buff, and the under tail coverts were barred medium brown. The chin and throat were white and there was a line of irregular blackish markings bordering the sides of the throat and a less marked, indistinct blackish line bordering the greyish ear-coverts.

The supercilium was buff-coloured. The upper parts were plain medium brown. The barred under tail coverts indicated it was either a Spotted Bush Warbler *Locustella thoracica*, or a West Himalayan Bush Warbler *L. kashmirensis*. Alström *et al.* (2008) split the nominate and *kashmirensis* races of Spotted Bush Warbler into two separate species.

When we checked the literature after returning from the trek, we learned that the individual photographed was a buffy morph because of its buff-coloured breast and supercilium. Alström *et al.* (2008) pointed out that the buffy morph is unique to West Himalayan Bush Warbler and this statement is repeated by Kennerley & Pearson (2010). This species has both buffy and grey-breasted morphs, but Spotted Bush Warbler is only represented by the grey-breasted morph (Alström *et al.* 2008). In addition, the birds' song that we heard is diagnostic of West Himalayan Bush Warbler and distinct from the song of Spotted Bush Warbler, which utters a *trick-i-di*, etc. (Grimmett *et al.* 2011). Unfortunately, it was not possible to tape record the birds' singing because of the loud noise of running water nearby. However, on our return we listened to a tape of West Himalayan Bush Warbler singing from Uttarakhand, made by Gunjan Arora (<http://www.xeno-canto.org/328036>), and it sounded identical to the birds that we heard. As the birds were singing in the species' probable breeding season, in suitable breeding habitat and within the species' probable altitudinal breeding range, they were probably nesting at the location.



Hathan Chaudhary

129. Singing West Himalayan Bush Warbler.

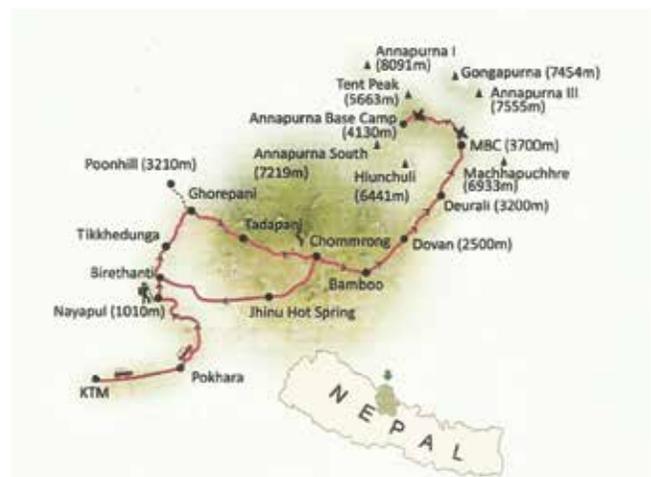


Fig. 1. Trekking route and location of West Himalayan Bush Warbler records between two X marked on map.

Discussion

There are three Nepal records of Spotted Bush Warbler in the breeding season, all of which were recorded before the species was split. No photographs or sound recordings were made of the Nepal birds. Known details of these records follow.

On 22 July 1977, Thiollay (1977, 1980) found a nest and eggs at 3850 m on Lamjung Himal (not far to the east of our records) (Fleming *et al.* 1984; Inskipp & Inskipp 1991).

In June 1978, 1979, 1980 or 1981, Lelliott (1981) found the species common on the ridge west of the Mardi Khola Valley at 3350 m, the valley to the east of the Modi Khola (Fleming *et al.* 1984; Inskipp & Inskipp 1991).

Neither of the above two observers identified the birds to subspecies and they identified the birds as Spotted Bush Warbler *Locustella thoracica* [= *Bradypterus thoracicus*].

A fledgling specimen was collected on 03 August 1983 from the Chyul-wang Valley, western tributary of the Buri Gandaki at 3400 m in north-central Nepal by Jochen Martens. He noted, 'The fledgling was very young and unable to escape on the wing. The family crawled through the dense plant layer of a luxuriant growth of grasses and herbs with a multitude of flowers'. Only glimpses of the individual birds were seen and no vocalisations were described. The birds were assumed to be *Locustella thoracica thoracica* [= *B. thoracicus thoracicus*] (Martens & Eck 1995).

Confirmation of West Himalayan Bush Warbler in the Modi Khola watershed, Annapurna Conservation Area extends the eastern known limit of its breeding range from Uttarakhand, India to west-central Nepal and casts doubt on the identification of the previous three Nepal breeding season records.

Three individuals were seen, and six to seven heard singing, at the same location on 03 and 04 September 2016 by Manshanta Ghimire (pers. comm. September 2016).

Further fieldwork is needed to determine the breeding season distributions of West Himalayan Bush Warbler in Nepal and to find out if it winters in the country and if so, its wintering distribution. This may only be possible for buffy morph birds and grey morph birds that are singing. In addition, more fieldwork is needed to confirm that Spotted Bush Warbler breeds in Nepal and if so, to clarify its distribution.

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First record of Chinese Pond Heron *Ardeola bacchus* from Bhutan

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On the morning of 19 May 2013, I visited the Punakha Dzong near Punakha in Bhutan with my family. The dzong is situated at the confluence of the Po Chhu- and Mo Chhu rivers. When I scanned the river for birds at 1000 hrs, I saw two Chinese Pond Herons *Ardeola bacchus*, in breeding plumage, foraging in shallow waters. The Chinese Pond Heron is easily distinguishable from the Indian Pond Heron *A. grayii* in breeding plumage as it has a black back and a reddish neck and head, whereas Indian Pond Heron has a reddish back and a yellowish neck and head [130]. I did not know about the significance of the sighting until David Bishop pointed out through eBird that this might be the first confirmed record of the species in Bhutan.

Punakha is located in western Bhutan at an elevation of 1200 m in Punakha Dzongkhag, one of the political districts of the country. Its climate is mild, with hot summers and relatively warm winters. Rice is grown extensively in the region along the river valleys, and seasonally flooded paddy fields form excellent habitats for pond herons.

The Chinese Pond Heron breeds in eastern Russia, China, Japan, Taiwan, Korea, parts of northern Myanmar, and South-East Asia (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005; Robson 2009). It is perhaps a scarce breeding resident in parts of north-eastern India and a vagrant in Bangladesh (Kazmierczak 2000; Grimmett *et al.* 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), and this region is possibly the western-most limit of its breeding range. It has been