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Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra* in Sri Lanka in February 2015: First record for the island and the Indian Subcontinent

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On 08 February 2015, on a birding trip to Sri Lanka, while watching birds and mammals in Udawalawe National Park (at 6.445261°N, 80.889268°E; Fig. 1) KS found a bird, which he identified spontaneously as a Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra*. The other German birders (WP, MP, WM, and MZ) immediately confirmed this ID, since they were all familiar with that species. A quick look at Warakagoda *et al.* (2012), and Grimmett *et al.* (2011) showed that Whinchat was not mentioned in those field guides for Sri Lanka, nor for the Indian Subcontinent. Therefore it was obvious, that we had seen a very rare bird for the region.

Interestingly, some 20–40 m away, on the same track, was a Siberian Stonechat *S. maurus*, which is considered a vagrant to Sri Lanka (Warakagoda *et al.* 2012)

The first identification of the Whinchat was based on the following field marks: The jizz of the bird was that of a typical chat—thickset, sitting upright, with a rather short tail, and a large dark eye. The most obvious pattern was the broad and long supercilium, which was buff in front of the eye and almost whitish behind. The upperparts were dark brown with dark centers to feathers and buff fringes, giving a scaly and streaky impression. The underparts were buff on the breast and breast sides, and whitish on the belly. The primary projection was about three-fourths the length of the tertials. The short bill and the legs were blackish.

After some local phone calls it was clear that Whinchat was a 'first' for Sri Lanka and, presumably, for the Indian Subcontinent.

Fig. 1. Location of the observation in Udawalawe National Park, Sri Lanka. Map by GoogleMaps.

Hence the ID had to be unequivocally established. However, two features on this bird were not concurrent with a typical Whinchat: (1) The primary projection on this bird may have been a bit shorter than what is expected for a Whinchat, and (2) The white of the outer tail feathers was not visible. This was puzzling, since this feature normally should not be difficult to see at close range, and the bird was very close, about five to 30 m from our car. Since the bird stayed for at least 22 days, until 01 March (Rajeev 2015: 53), many observers saw it, and more photographs could be taken. These form the basis for a thorough identification process.

Identification revisited

The missing white in the tail of the bird while observing it and on every image taken in flight, as well as some possible discrepancies in the primary pattern, raised the question about the correct ID. Two potential alternatives that were discussed were Siberian Stonechat, and Stoliczka's Bushchat *S. macrorhynchus.* None of us were familiar with the latter, but it was discussed using the images available in Oriental Bird Images (http://orientalbirdimages.org/) that show a well-defined supercilium. Furthermore, some Siberian Stonechat pictures on Oriental Bird Images seem to have an extremely bright supercilium, showing a superficial similarity with Whinchat. Hence, we discuss these points further below, using these images as well as Clement & Rose (2015).

Stoliczka's Bushchat

This species is very localised and rare in north-western India, and may be extinct in adjacent Pakistan. It lives in semi-desert habitats and moves only short distances between breeding and wintering areas (Clement & Rose 2015). Very few scattered records, away from these localities, exist in the north and west of India (Grimmett *et al.* 2011). Thus, Stoliczka's Bushchat in Sri Lanka would be a very unlikely option.

In first-winter plumage Stoliczka's Bushchat can be surprisingly similar patterned to a Whinchat, with a bright, and two-toned, supercilium, dark brown feathers on the back with broad buff fringes, giving a streaky appearance, and un-streaked buff to whitish underparts.

However, two structural features of the observed bird point strongly against this species: The bill of Stoliczka's Bushchat is more slender and longer, and it is a more slender and much longer-tailed bird. Furthermore, its rump should be un-streaked, which was definitely not the case in our bird **[146]**. Also, Stoliczka's Bushchat lacks the cinnamon tinge on the breast, which our bird shows quite strongly on some of the images **[147, 148]**. It also has a shorter primary projection.

Palitha Antony

146. Whinchat in Udawalawe National Park, Sri Lanka, 17 February 2015, showing the upperwing pattern with no visible white spots at the base of the primaries, and the diagnostic rump.

Klemens Steiof

147. Whinchat in Udawalawe National Park, Sri Lanka, 08 February 2015. This bird is in heavy pre-breeding moult. The comparably short but strong bill, the broad, and two-toned supercilium, dark upperparts with buff feather fringes, buff or cinnamon tinged underparts, and a primary projection of ***c***. ¾ can be seen.

Sudheera Bandara

148. Whinchat in Udawalawe National Park, Sri Lanka, 21 February 2015. Compare the advances in moult with **147** and **148**, with more delicate head pattern and the developed cinnamon to orange breast.

Siberian Stonechat

This species has a vast range all over Asia, with almost all populations being highly migratory, thus having a high potential to occur outside its normal wintering range. At least four subspecies winter in the Indian Subcontinent, though it's a vagrant to Sri Lanka with just one prior record (Seneviratne & Seneviratne 2013).

Wolfgang Püschel

149. Siberian Stonechat in Udawalawe National Park, Sri Lanka, 08 February 2015. This bird was *c.* 30 m from the Whinchat and is the second record of this species for Sri Lanka.

The Siberian Stonechat has a very similar jizz, shape, and size to Whinchat. While the European Stonechat *S. torquatus* is a short-distance migrant, thus having short wings and a short primary projection, some subspecies of Siberian Stonechat migrate long distances, showing a longer primary projection and sometimes, a bright supercilium.

In contrast, Siberian Stonechat should show some features, which the observed bird did not have. The rump should be pale and largely un-streaked, while our bird showed a very streaky rump, which was only slightly paler than the back. Siberian in flight should show a whitish panel on the inner wing on the upperparts and darkish underwing coverts, which was not the case in both instances, in our bird. And quite often a Siberian Stonechat shows a whitish chin/throat, which was visible on the individual seen some meters away from the Whinchat **[149]**.
The images clearly show that the bird does not have these features.

Whinchat

This species is a long-distance migrant from Europe, and western Asia, to sub-Saharan Africa. Therefore, it has the longest primary projection of the three species mentioned so far **[147]**.

Jizz, shape, and structure of the observed bird all fit a Whinchat, though the primary projection was slightly shorter (but see below). Most of the features mentioned above match a Whinchat: short and rather stout bill, bright supercilium, streaked crown, scaly and streaky dark brown upperparts with dark-centered feathers and buff fringes, as well as buff to cinnamon breast and breast sides, and whitish (belly) underparts. The heavily streaked rump and uppertail coverts are an important diagnostic mark too **[146, 150]**. This is congruent to a Whinchat, but not to the other species mentioned above.

One of the most obvious features of a Whinchat, which was not seen by us in the field, nor is seen on any image of the bird, is the extensive white in the basal part of all, except the central tail feathers, which (almost) any Whinchat has, regardless of age or sex. In fact, this feature is highlighted for Whinchats in many works (Svensson 1991; Svensson *et al.* 2010; van Duivendijk 2011; Jenni & Winkler 2011; Clement & Rose 2015). In a closed tail the white should be visible along the entire length of the outer web of the outermost tail feather (TF6); at more than half of the length of the outer web of the next two tail feathers (TF5 and TF4); and at about one-third of TF3 (Hansen & Synnatzschke 2015). At best, the bird showed a faint whitish margin to the outer tail feathers **[146]**, but this might be visible on the other species too.

Svensson (1992) mentioned that the white could, sometimes, be concealed. This cannot be completely excluded for the Sri Lankan bird. Browsing through the some 100 images on the 'Internet Bird Collection' (http://www.hbw.com/ibc) we see that the white is always concealed on the upper side and only visible if the tail is spread open. On the underside it is sometimes concealed and sometimes visible. We did not see any white in the tail while observing the bird for about one hour, even though, quite often, it flew short sallies. It cannot be excluded that the tail feathers were concealed all the time, but we would rate this rather unlikely.

Hansen & Synnatzschke (2015) mentioned, with regards to Cornwallis & Smith (1963), that there are individuals with rufous brown, instead of white, in the tail. Also, Vinicombe *et al.* (2014) stated, that some individuals have dull buff tail patches, though there is no information if this feature is related to age classes, sex or a part of the range. This might be quite a rare feature, but it could, potentially, explain the plumage in our bird. In **[151]** the

Palitha Antony

150. Whinchat in Udawalawe National Park, Sri Lanka, 17 February 2015. The brownish underwing coverts and the streaked rump exclude Siberian Stonechat.

Klemens Steiof

151. Whinchat in Udawalawe National Park, Sri Lanka, 08 February 2015. The outer tail feather gives the impression of having a dark (dull buff) instead of white base.

outermost tail feather is clearly visible from below, along most of its length, and there is definitely no white in it. Instead of this, one has the impression, that there is a border between the dark proximal part and a slightly lighter basal part. This would conform to the information given by Hansen & Synnatzschke (2015), that the white can be replaced by dull buff.

To conclude about the tail, it seems likely, that the bird did not have white in the tail but dull buff instead, even though it cannot be completely excluded, that the white was always concealed.

The white spot on the upper base of the primaries is often concealed by the primary coverts (van Duivendijk 2011), thus is not an important field mark. It might be even absent in females (Clement & Rose 2015).

The primary projection of the Sri Lankan bird was long (more than ¾ of the visible tertial length), but definitely less than that of a typical Whinchat. This might be due to feather wear, because the margins of the scapulars, and mantle feathers might be heavily abraded by February, or even in active moult, showing more of the tertials than in fresh plumage. This has an influence on the tertial-primary ratio.

Since the Whinchat has a pre-breeding moult from January to March (Clement & Rose 2015), the slight changes in the appearance of the bird in February 2015 might be due to a moult instead of wear. Obviously, the cinnamon tinge in the breast feathers was more obvious on 21 February than on 08 February **[148, 147, 151]**.

The bird's age cannot be identified with certainty, but the absence of whitish spots on the primary bases of the upper wing could be an indicator of a first winter bird. This age class is also more prone to vagrancy.

Discussion

The breeding range of the Whinchat is spread over a vast distance in the northern hemisphere, from western Europe to central Asia, until about 94°E (Clement & Rose 2015). In Asia its range is mainly north of the steppe zone, i.e., north of ***c***. 50°N, though there is an isolated range in the Caucasian region. All birds spend the winter in sub-Saharan Africa, covering a few, to several thousand kilometers during their migration each autumn and spring.

Since the Whinchat is a very rare, or scarce, migrant on the Arabian Peninsula (Clement & Rose 2015), it is likely that the eastern populations leave their breeding grounds in a more westerly direction, turning southwards, towards Africa, later on their migration. This is speculative, because most countries of south-western Asia are not well-watched by birders, particularly for passage migrants. On the other hand, the Whinchat is an easy bird to spot as it favours open habitats, preferring to sit on top of low vegetation: hence its rarity in south-western Asia, as a migrant, might be real. However, as a long distance migrant the Whinchat has clearly the potential to occur far away from the main migration routes. It is likely, that the observed bird arrived in Sri Lanka in the autumn of 2014, moved as far south as possible, selected an open habitat, and stayed there over the winter.

Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) listed the species as 'hypothetical' for South Asia. Until 2012, 454 bird species have been recorded in Sri Lanka (Warakagoda *et al.* 2012). Our observation adds the Whinchat to the Sri Lanka list.

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An incidence of cannibalism in the Greater Spotted Eagle *Clanga clanga*

The Greater Spotted Eagle *Clanga clanga* is considered 'Vulnerable' under the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (BirdLife International 2017). It is, mainly, a migrant to the Indian Subcontinent (Naoroji 2006; BirdLife International 2015). It is a winter visitor to Gujarat (Ganpule 2016) and is regularly observed in small numbers in the Little Rann of Kachchh.

It is known to be a generalist feeder and has been recorded taking frogs, dead fish, reptiles, small birds, young storks, herons, and various waterfowl. It has also been observed scavenging on a terrapin that had been maimed or partly eaten by Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*, Red-headed Vulture *Sarcogyps calvus*, and Pallas's Fish-eagle *Haliaeetus leucoryphus* (Naoroji 2007).

On 25 October 2016, during a raptor survey in the Little Rann of Kachchh, Gujarat (23.13ºN, 71.44ºE), I observed a juvenile