

Yellow-browed Bunting *Emberiza chrysophrys* in the Sundarbans: An addition to the avifauna of South Asia

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The Yellow-browed Bunting *Emberiza chrysophrys* is a medium-sized bunting. It breeds in Siberia from the upper Nizhnyaya Tunguska River, Bratsk and Irkutsk in the west to the Vilyuy River and Yakutsk in the east, and to the Chamar Daban Range, south of Lake Baikal, and on the Vitim River in the Stanovoy Mountains to the south; it is possible that it also breeds in north-eastern Mongolia. In winter, the bird is found in central and south-eastern China, from Jiangsu, southwards to Gaungdong and Hong Kong, and westwards along the Yangtze to eastern Sichuan (Byers *et al.* 1995; Copete 2018). This short note describes a sighting of the Yellow-browed Bunting from the Sundarbans, West Bengal, India.

Sighting

On 22 April 2018, at 0630 hrs, SK was walking on the Asit Baran School road, a human-made embankment on the Gomdi River (which is wrongly marked as 'Datta River' on Google Maps) near the Bali Island village in the Sundarbans, South 24 Parganas District, West Bengal, India. On the northern side of this road there were large open paddy fields (Fig. 1). On other side of the road, sparse mangroves grew on the banks of the river, predominant species being *Excoecaria agallocha*, *Avicennia marina*, and *Avicennia alba*. The river was approximately 0.8 km wide at that point and on the opposite bank there was the uninhabited dense mangrove forest of the Sundarban. At 0730 hrs, observed a small unfamiliar bird, the size of a House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*, flitting around in the mangrove trees (22.09°N, 88.76°E). SK pursued the bird enthusiastically and succeeded in photographing it from several different angles [56, 57]. The bird remained within the trees for the entire four minutes this sighting

lasted. SK realised the bird was a bunting (*Emberiza*), but failed to identify the species. SK continued birding for more than one hour, around the same spot, but he did not see the bird again.

Description

The bunting had a dark brown crown with a clearly visible white median crown-stripe, and brown lateral crown-stripes, all generously streaked with black [Pics. 1–2]. The broad white supercilium, which started from the base of the bill, was faintly pale yellow in the supraloral region, turning white as it passed over the eye, towards the nape. The brownish ear coverts were partially bordered by black and had a prominent white ear-spot

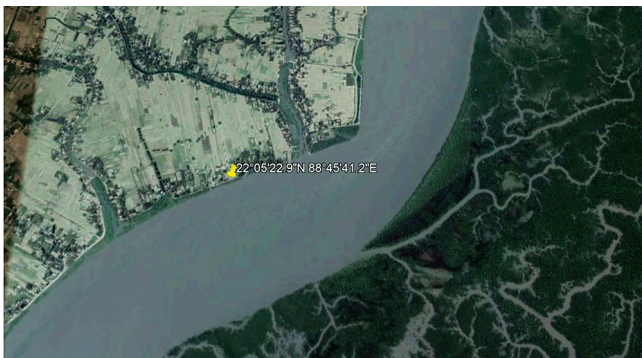


Fig. 1. Location of sighting of Yellow-browed Bunting on the Gomdi River, West Bengal.



56. Yellow-browed Bunting showing auricular spot and white submustachial stripe.



57. Yellow-browed Bunting with faint yellow on the supraloral region of the white supercilium.

posteriorly. A broad white submoustachial stripe and a black malar stripe were present. The underparts were mainly white with slight rufous on flanks and sides of breast. They had well-defined black streaking on the throat, breast, and the flanks; these were smaller and finer at the throat, becoming longer and bolder on the breast and flanks. The well-streaked mantle was brown with chestnut in its central part. Back and rump were rufous-brown. The median and greater coverts, and flight feathers, were dark brown with rufous-brown to whitish borders. The tail was dark with rufous-brown borders. The legs were flesh-pink in colour. The bill was stout and triangular; the upper mandible was horn black, and the lower mandible was pale pink with a black tip.

Identification

On 23 April 2018 SK posted the photos to a Facebook group 'Wildlife of WestBengal' (Kundu 2018), tentatively identifying it as a Rustic Bunting *E. rustica*, which is described as 'hypothetical' to the region by Rasmussen & Anderton (2005). Arka Sarkar and Kanad Baidya ruled out that possibility because of the presence of the white median crown-stripe, a supercilium that starts from the edge of the bill, and the absence of a crest. Moreover, this bird had black streaking on the underparts whereas Rustic Bunting has rusty streaking on its underparts (Byers *et al.* 1995). The bird was then suspected to be a Tristram's Bunting *E. tristrami*, which is a recent addition to the avifauna of India (Naniwadekar *et al.* 2013).

At this juncture it was also posted to other Facebook groups like 'Indian Birds' as a Tristram's Bunting (Patra 2018). After looking at the images, CA opined that the bird was a Yellow-browed Bunting because of the well-defined and bold streaking on underparts, a tinge of yellow in the supercilium, and a prominent white ear-spot. The possibility of it being a Reed Bunting *E. schoeniclus* was ruled out as this species has a unicoloured buffy supercilium and a grey bill. A distinct white median crown-stripe and a white auricular spot are also absent in a Reed Bunting (Byers *et al.* 1995; Beaman & Madge 1998; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).

Praveen J requested the expert opinion of Paul Leader, who confirmed that the bird in the photographs was a female Yellow-browed Bunting (*in litt.*, e-mail dated 30 April 2018), based on the following points:

- A Yellow-browed Bunting always shows a clearly bi-coloured supercilium, whereas, Tristram's Bunting has a uniform (often rather brown) supercilium.
- The very white underparts with black streaking are typical of a Yellow-browed, whereas, Tristram's shows a more extensive brownish wash to at least the flanks and breast, and has browner, less well defined streaking—making it appear rather dingy and comparatively poorly marked below.
- Tristram's typically has a rich brown rump and uppertail coverts, these are duller and greyer on Yellow-browed. The rump and uppertail coverts in the photograph are typical of Yellow-browed.
- Larger pale spot on the ear-coverts is typical of Yellow-browed and would be smaller or lacking on Tristram's.
- The fine streaking on the upper breast always extends on the lower throat in Yellow-browed (making the pale throat poorly defined along the lower border) whereas in most Tristram's the streaking stops at the lower throat resulting in a neater, well defined throat patch.

its preference to relatively open habitat, over the dense mangrove

forests on the other side of the river, additionally favour Yellow-browed Bunting over Tristram's Bunting, which is a forest species. Although the bright yellow in the supercilium can make the identification easy, it can be very inconspicuous (as in present case), or apparently absent in some females, and perhaps always is in the first years (Beaman & Madge 1998).

Discussion

The Yellow-browed Bunting has a tendency for vagrancy. It is a known vagrant to Belgium, Britain, France, Netherlands, Poland, and Sweden (Byers *et al.* 1995; Polakowski & Niemc 2015). Coincidentally, it was also photographed in Denmark on 28 April 2018 (Copete 2018; Liebermann 2018). These sightings are far beyond the established, known distribution range of the species. Most of these European sightings occurred during the bird's migration season, as in the present record. Moreover, within China, it is known to straggle further westward of its wintering range (ebird 2018). The nearest record is from Tacheng Nature Reserve, Yunnan, China, which is c. 1250 km from the present sighting (Rasmussen 2014).

The Yellow-browed Bunting has not been recorded from our region (Grimmett *et al.* 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Praveen *et al.* 2018) making this the first record for South Asia.

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