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Letters to the Editor

Red-tailed Wheatears in the Delhi National Capital Region (NCR)

In the ‘Snapshots’ column of *Indian BIRDS* (Vol. 14 No 3), Mohit Mehta and Piyush Dogra describe a recent sighting of a Red-tailed Wheatear *Oenanthe chrysopygia* from Jhanjharola village, Gurugao (Mehta & Dogra 2018)—although, for some reason, Sultanpur appears in the title. The note implies this is the first record, since the 1920s, for the National Capital Region (henceforth, NCR). Although Harvey *et al.* (2006) are quoted regarding the pre-1920s records, their preceding sentences state, ‘This local wheatear appears to be a rare winter visitor with recent mid-winter records from the dry, rocky country around Badhkal and Surajkund and also near Sultanpur and Bhindawas.’ These locations are all in the NCR, and the records were in the period 2000–2006, when the Red-tailed Wheatear was generally considered conspecific with the Rufous-tailed Wheatear *O. xanthopyrmyna*, and is so named in Harvey *et al.* (2006); a species now considered extralimital, occurring no closer to India than western Iran. There is one other published record of 1977, from Sultanpur (Sridharan & Bikhchandani 1981). During 2006–2017, there was at least one more photographic record of the Red-tailed Wheatear from the Sultanpur flats in April 2008 (Arya 2008).

For readers elsewhere, perhaps these terms need clarification. The “National Capital Region” or NCR is distinct from the “National Capital Territory”—as the former Union Territory of Delhi was renamed, under the Constitution (Sixty-ninth Amendment) Act, 1991—is the official term for a rather large area comprising up to 24 districts in the States of Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, and Rajasthan: extending as far northward as Karnal; westward to Jind, Bhiwani, Rewari, and Mahendranagar (all in Haryana); eastward to Meerut, Hapur, and Bulandshahr in Uttar Pradesh; and southward to Alwar and Bharatpur in Rajasthan—a total of a little under 60,000 sq km and over 54 million people (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. National Capital Region. The red spot indicates the Jhanjharola location of the Red-tailed Wheatear.

NCR was originally conceived under the National Capital Region Planning Board Act, 1985, as an instrument for harmonised economic planning and infrastructure development for the region around the national capital. A NCR Planning Board oversees coordination on a regional scale (including matters relating to water, environment, and tourism).

To add to the confusion, there is also the concept of a “Central NCR” or “Delhi Metropolitan Area”, which is the largely urbanised conglomeration of Delhi itself and its adjacent satellite towns of Noida, Ghaziabad, Faridabad, Gurgaon, Bahadurgarh, and Sonapat, covering about 2000 sq km in addition to the 1483 sq km of Delhi State.

In Harvey *et al.* (2006), and other books and studies of the birds of the 'Delhi area', such as Frome (1948a,b), Hutson (1954), or Ganguli (1975), the areas considered were typically within a 50 km radius around New Delhi (in earlier works), or 100 km in more recent ones (areas that can be covered in a day trip from the heart of Delhi). This would about cover the 'Delhi Metropolitan Area' plus a bit more of the rural countryside (in Uttar Pradesh, and the Haryana districts of Rohtak, Jhajjar, Mewat, and Rewari), but would fall very far short of the boundaries of NCR.

Hence, the pre-1920s sightings reported by Usha Ganguli remain the only reported sightings from the National Capital Territory (Delhi State), while there are several more records from the National Capital Region (NCR).

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On Red-necked Falcon *Falco chicquera* building its own nest, in Mori (2018)

In a recent note published by Mori (2018), I was surprised to read about a pair of Red-necked Falcons *Falco chicquera* that were "observed bringing nesting material to the nest" while nesting on a 70 m electricity pylon near the Chotila village in Surendranagar, Gujarat. Falcons in general, and this species in particular, are not known to build their own nests.

Details of Red-necked Falcons using the nests of other birds are available. The nest of a Red-necked Falcon pair that I studied in Bengaluru during 1978–1979, belonged to a Large-billed Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos* (Subramanya 1979, 1983). Naoraji (2011) mentioned that two nests used by the species close to Jasdan town, in the Saurashtra peninsula of Gujarat, belonged to a House Crow *C. splendens*, and a Shikra *Accipiter badius*, respectively. In the Kafue Flats floodplains of Zambia, 18 nests of Red-necked Falcons *F. c. ruficollis* that Osborne (1981) observed, consisted of old nests constructed by Pied Crows *C. albus* in *Acacia albida*; seven additional nests were in the natural depressions of frond bases, on the leeward side of *Borassus* palms, where no nest construction was needed; two were in nests constructed by African Fish Eagles *Haliaeetus vocifer*; and one was in a natural bowl of an *A. albida*. In subsequent years, the falcons re-laid in their old nests four times, changing to a new

crow's nest twice, from a crow's nest to a depression in palm site once, and from a depression in palm site to a crow's nest once.

Records of falcons occupying the nests of other birds that have similar nesting site requirements exist (Bent 1938: 21–22, 96, 102). Brown & Amadon (1968) clearly indicated the lack of a nest-building instinct among falcons. Further, Naoraji (2006) stated that *F. chicquera* does not build its own nest, while Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) reaffirmed these observations by stating that the species breeds in old crow or kite nests. Kemp *et al.* (2018) state the same for Red-necked Falcon, and del Hoyo *et al.* (2018) do so for the African *ruficollis*, which is accorded species status in their taxonomy.

Thus, using the nests of other birds appears to be a general 'rule' among Red-necked Falcons. I think that the nest in the photographs in Mori (2018), is that of either a kite, or an eagle; it is too large a structure, requiring more effort than the species in question would expend. Also, in the two years that Subramanya (1983) observed the nests of the species in Bengaluru, the nesting pair did not bring a single twig, or any nest material to the nest.

In light of these observations, it would be interesting to obtain additional information on the nest-building activity of the pair of Red-necked Falcons observed by Mori (2018). Also, it would be useful to know if he photographed the birds in the act of bringing nest material, or made further observations on this hitherto unrecorded nest-building behaviour of this species.

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