

# Notes on six rare avian visitors to Pong Lake, Himachal Pradesh

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Abhinav, C., Dhadwal, D. S., & Dhiman, M., 2018. Notes on six rare avian visitors to Pong Lake, Himachal Pradesh. *Indian BIRDS*. 14 (5): 134–138.

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Manuscript received on 29 December 2017.

Pong Lake (31.87°N–32.09°N, 75.95°E–76.22°E, at maximum water level; c. 390–424 m asl), also known as Maharana Pratap Sagar, situated in Kangra District of Himachal Pradesh, is an important wetland of northern India. It was declared a Ramsar Site on 19 August 2002 (Pong Dam Lake 2002). It is one of the 'Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas in India', with IBA Site Code 'IN–HP–19' (Rahmani *et al.* 2016). It is a large man-made reservoir, on the Beas River, with an area of 156.62 km<sup>2</sup> (Pong Dam Lake 2002) and follows an annual cycle of filling-up in the monsoons and gradually draining off the water thereafter. The receding water leaves a muddy shoreline in winter. There is a unique stratification of habitat—deep water, shallow water, muddy shoreline, dry barren land, stony area, pasture, and agricultural fields, which are surrounded by village groves and forest—resulting in a great diversity of birds attracted to the wetland. The lake is located north of the Indian plains, making it a suitable staging point for birds migrating either way, over the forbidding Himalayas.

The lake is vast and there are many birding spots, but only three of these areas are routinely visited (Fig 1). Nagrota Surian, located in the north-eastern part of the lake, (32.03°N, 76.06°E) is the most prominent birding area, with the maximum diversity and concentration of birds. There is a vast extent of open land near the lake, which area further increases much in

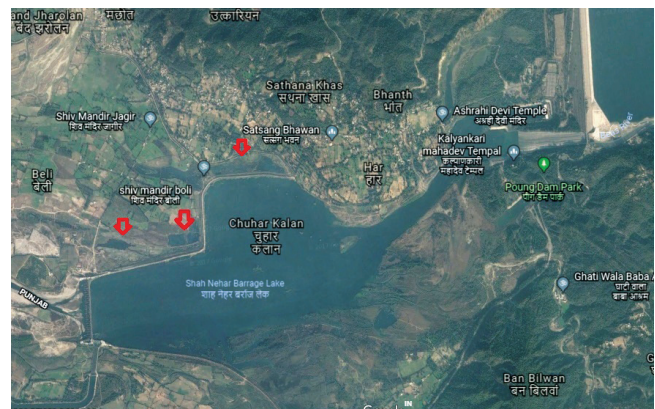


Fig. 2. Map showing more frequently visited spots around Shah Nehar Barrage Lake

summer, when the water recedes. Guglara (32.07°N, 76.00°E) is situated near Jawali, and has a lesser density of birds. The water released from Pong Dam is impounded about three kilometers downstream by the Shah Nehar Barrage at the border with Punjab (Fig 2). There is less fluctuation of water level in this area due to a regular outflow from the dam, and marshland has evolved in the surrounding area. This is accessible from the northern side, near Sthana village (31.95°N, 75.9°E; c. 325 m asl), and has good bird diversity.

DSD was posted as a Range Officer in Nagrota Surian from 2003 to 2012 and was again posted as Assistant Conservator of Forests in 2013. MD lives near Nagrota Surian. CA has been visiting the lake frequently since 2011. The three of us have frequently visited Nagrota Surian. The Sthana area was visited the least, CA and DSD making roughly five to ten trips annually. There have been several significant sightings of birds in recent years and we are reporting these.

## Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena*

On 13 December 2010, DSD observed a lone grebe [136], from a boat, near Bathu Temple (32.03°N, 76.00°E). It superficially resembled a Great-crested Grebe *P. cristatus*, but was slightly smaller and duskier. It was differentiated from the Black-necked-*P. nigricollis*, and Slavonian Grebe *P. auritus* by its larger size, larger bill, and dark iris (instead of bright red). Black on the head was extending a little beyond the eyes. The ear coverts were dusky and there was no sharp contrast between white and black on its head, as in a Great-crested Grebe. It had a stockier neck

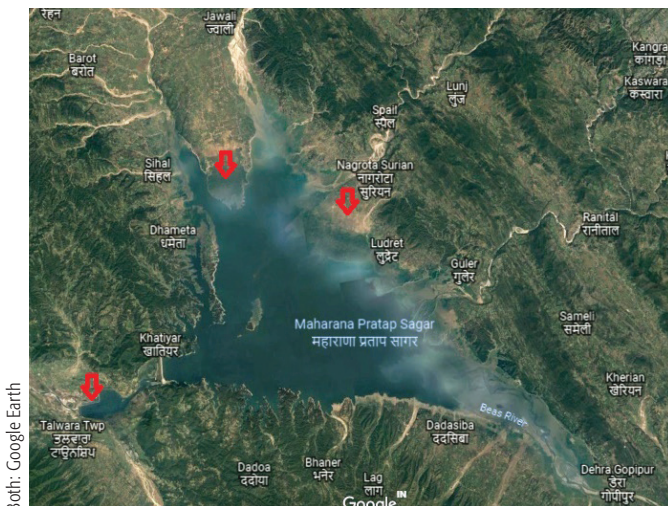


Fig. 1. Map showing three important birding areas of Pong Lake: Nagrota Surian, Guglara near Jawali and around Shah Nehar Barrage Lake





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136. Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena*.

than a Great-crested Grebe, with a diffuse grey band on foreneck. The bill was yellow, with a black culmen and tip. Based on these features it was identified as a Red-necked Grebe in non-breeding plumage.

The Red-necked Grebe is described as locally common (Grimmett *et al.* 2011), or as a winter vagrant (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), with only five other confirmed sightings from northern, and western India (Praveen *et al.* 2014). It was first reported for India from Pong Lake on 02 December 1985 (Gaston & Pandey 1988). Later Sanjeeva Pandey claimed that he saw 15 birds on 21 February 1989 (Pandey 1989). From 1989–1990 to 1994–1995 the number of birds seen were 17, 10, 21, 0, 2, and 6 (Pandey 1993; Pong Dam Lake 2002). But no further details were given. Such a high number of this rare bird seems to be unlikely, and probably another species was involved. Perhaps due to these unconfirmed sightings, Grimmett *et al.* (1998) describe its status as locally common. Thus we conclude that the present sighting is only the second confirmed sighting, and a first photographic record, for the state.

### Eurasian Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*

On 13 November 2014, at 1830 hrs, MD saw a large brown-coloured bird land in open ground, near a small pond in Nagrota Surian [137]. When approached, it extended its neck, bill pointed upwards, and made a harsh sound. After some time it relaxed



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137. Eurasian Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* on 13 November 2014.

and entered the pond and started feeding. By its colour, large size, black cap, and moustachial stripe it was identified as an Eurasian Bittern. There was no vegetation for it in the surrounding area, and even without cover it allowed a close approach. Probably it was migrating. It was not seen the next day, despite searching the pond and the surrounding areas.

On the morning of 26 November 2016, CA was birding in the marshes of Sthana village, when he flushed a bittern from the reeds. It was identified as Eurasian Bittern by its large size and colour. CA saw it again in the evening, feeding in a large open area surrounded by reeds [138]. Next day it was also seen feeding in the same place, preferring open areas over reeds. It was observed for around three hours. It was feeding continuously, ignoring human presence. This behaviour was unusual for a bittern, which usually is a skulker (Ali & Ripley 1987; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). DSD saw it on 28 November 2016. It was not seen again that winter. On 02 December 2017 it was again photographed in the same area near Sthana village.



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138. Eurasian Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* on 16 November 2016.

Though widespread, the Eurasian Bittern is described as a scarce- to rare winter visitor to the Indian Subcontinent (Grimmett *et al.* 1998; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). There is one old undated record of this bittern from Chamba (Marshall 1884). All observations till date have been in late autumn, with no clear winter records, despite the site being visited often and hence it might be a passage migrant through Pong. These are the first photographic records for the state.

### Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus*

On 15 February 2014 DSD observed a large mixed flock of Bar-headed Geese *Anser indicus* and Greylag Geese *A. anser* at Nagrota Surian. About 30 Greater White-fronted Geese *A. albifrons* were also scattered among these geese. DSD noticed four birds among these geese, which looked smaller and much darker than the Greater White-fronted Goose, or Greylag Goose. On 25 February 2014 these birds were again seen in a mixed flock near the same place [139]. The darker head and neck, different head shape, smaller size, and prominent yellowish eye-rings were clearly seen. By these features, DSD identified them as the Lesser White-fronted Goose (Robson 2014).

On 07 March 2015, at 1400 hrs, CA saw a Lesser White-fronted Goose at Nagrota Surian, feeding along with c. 40 Bar-headed Geese. On 22 March 2015 (1145 hrs), one bird was





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139. Four Lesser White-fronted Geese *Anser erythropus* on 15 February 2014.

again seen and photographed by CA, amongst Bar-headed Geese, probably the same individual. He was able to get close to it, and observe it carefully. The bill was significantly shorter and stouter than that of a Greater White-fronted Goose. The neck was shorter, and stouter, and it seemed darker overall. The white frontal patch reached the top of the forehead, and the lower belly had black barring, indicating an adult. This species was also recorded in the annual bird census on 02 February 2016 (Dhadwal 2016). More recently, on 08 March 2018, CA saw one individual of this species, amongst a mixed flock of geese at Nagrota Surian [140].



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140. Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus* on 8 March 2018.

The Lesser White-fronted Goose is described as rare (Grimmett *et al.* 2011), or as a winter vagrant (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), found mainly in the northern part of the subcontinent (Praveen *et al.* 2014). den Besten (2004) reported one bird on 17 April 2003 in Pong Lake (Robson 2003), but he didn't list the species in his book, as it was later identified as a juvenile Greater White-fronted Goose (Praveen *et al.* 2014). So the present sightings of this bird are the first for Himachal Pradesh. These multiple sightings, during the late winters of past few years, indicate that it might be a regular visitor to the lake.

### Red-breasted Goose *Branta ruficollis*

MD's visit to Nagrota Surian on the morning of 20 December 2014 yielded a pleasant discovery. He spotted a dark red-coloured goose [141], feeding amongst a flock of Bar-headed Geese. It was readily identified as a Red-breasted Goose. It kept feeding in the fields for the next three hours. After that it flew away with the flock. After searching for an hour in the evening,

DSD and MD saw it at 1700 hrs in a flock of Bar-headed Geese, c. 400 m from the previous location. It fed continuously, moving swiftly across the field while doing so. It flew away after c. 30 mins, not to be seen again.



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141. Red-breasted goose *Branta ruficollis*.

It is mentioned as a hypothetical species by Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) as previous sightings were largely unconfirmed (Praveen *et al.* 2014). But recently it was photographed in Bijnor, Uttar Pradesh (Panwar & Panwar 2014), making our sighting the second confirmed record from India and first for the state.

### Little Gull *Hydrocoloeus minutus*

The Little Gull *Hydrocoloeus minutus* is the smallest of all gulls (Olsen & Larsson 2004). There have been multiple sightings of the Little Gull from Pong Lake in the past 17 years, as enumerated as below:

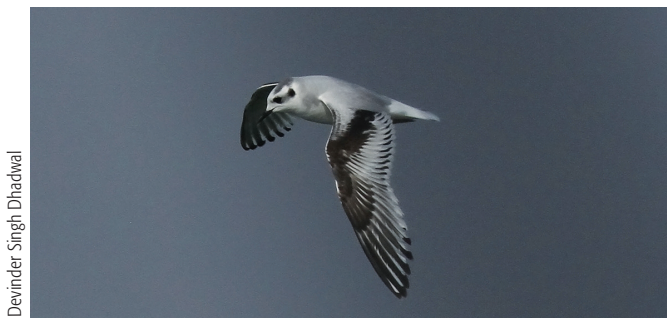
1. On 14 February 2008 DSD was watching birds from a boat near Nagrota Surian (32.06°N, 76.02°E) when he saw a tern-like bird with white upperparts and blackish underwings. It became apparent, on closer inspection, that it was a gull, based upon its body structure and an unforked whitish square tail. No photographs were taken but, as the bird remained near the boat for about ten minutes, detailed observations were made. It had a fine black bill, dark eyes, a prominent black ear spot, the dark cap reaching only up to mid-crown, and white forehead. The upperparts were greyish-white and the underwing was dark with a pale border. Based on these characteristic features it was identified as an adult Little Gull in winter plumage.
2. On 28 January 2011 at 1130 hrs, at the same place, DSD saw a small gull sitting on water [142]. It had a face pattern similar to the above mentioned bird. The underparts were white and the mantle and scapulars were light grey. The primaries, primary coverts, and median coverts were black. DSD saw another bird in flight, in the same area, with a similar head pattern [143]. The mantle and back was light grey and the upper tail was white with a clear contrast between them. The tail had a broken black band in which central tail feathers were white. The underwing and underparts were white while the upperwing was much darker. The upperwing was partially and narrowly bordered with a white leading edge. It showed white lesser coverts with two narrow black lines towards the leading edge of the wing. There was a broad black carpal band. These markings on the upperwings formed a zig-zag pattern described as 'M' or 'W' in literature (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Grimmett *et al.* 2011). The greater coverts were mostly white and a secondary bar was

also present. Both of these birds were identified as first winter Little Gulls.



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142. First winter Little Gull *Hydrocoloeus minutus* on 28 January 2011.



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143. Upperwing of first winter Little Gull *Hydrocoloeus minutus* showing the dark bars.

3. On 30 April 2012 at 1050 hrs a Little Gull [144] was seen on the shore of Pong Lake in Bhatoli (31.97°N, 76.13°E). The bird was unmistakable as it was in breeding plumage and had a sharply demarcated black hood. There was some white spotting on its forehead, indicating that it was still moulting. The hood covered the nape and it had no white eye-crescent, separating it from the Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*. The bill was black and the legs, orange. The underparts were whitish whereas the upperparts were light grey, with a much lighter mantle. The tips of primaries were white while the subterminal area was dull black. A little undersurface of primaries was also visible, and was black in the subterminal area. This bird was identified as a second summer bird, as these birds are almost like adult breeding birds but show black markings near tips of primaries P6–P10 (Olsen & Larsson 2004).



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144. Second Summer Little Gull *Hydrocoloeus minutus* on 30 April 2012.

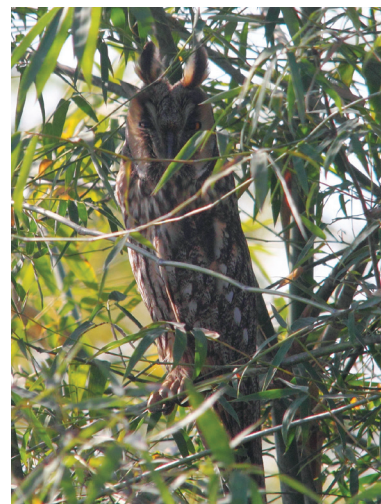
4. DSD saw one adult bird in flight, in non-breeding plumage, on 26 January 2014, in the same place as the first two sightings.

den Besten (2004) recorded three birds during his 90 counts in various sections of Pong Lake between 2001 and 2003. No photographs or further details were given.

The Little Gull is considered to be a vagrant (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Though the species has been reported earlier, it was included in the India Checklist based upon the Ladakh specimen, and our record of the breeding plumage photograph which was shared privately (Praveen *et al.* 2014). These are the first photographic records for the country and predate Lambert (2015). It is also the first record of this bird being found in breeding plumage in India. Eight birds from the past 17 years, mostly in full winter, suggest that it is not a vagrant but possibly a rare winter visitor to Pong Lake. This is a little surprising as it winters mainly at sea and the nearest, regular wintering ground is Caspian Sea, which is more than 2000 kms away from Pong Lake (Olsen & Larsson 2004). It is suspected that it might be more frequent in the interior part of Pong Lake, as this area is not frequented by birders.

### Northern Long-eared Owl *Asio otus*

On 17 January 2015 CA went to a bamboo plantation (c. 500 x 300 m) in Guglara, surrounded by a vast open cultivated area. The bamboo clumps were one-and-a-half to five meters in height and spaced equally wide apart. While walking through this plantation, four owls were flushed from two adjacent bamboo clumps. All were identified as Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus*. Then CA noted that one different-looking owl, with long ear tufts and slim body, was still sitting in a bamboo clump. It was identified as a Northern Long-eared Owl. It was differentiated from the Short-eared Owl by its longer ear tufts, orange eyes (versus yellow), more boldly streaked belly and flanks, and more rufous in facial disk. Slimmer build, smaller size, and bold streaking on flanks and belly, ruled out an Indian Eagle Owl *Bubo bengalensis*. (Grimmett *et al.* 2011; König & Weick 2008). On approaching, it partially closed its eyes and made its body thin and elongated [145], but after a few minutes it relaxed. It was confiding and allowed close approach.



145. Northern Long-eared Owl *Asio otus* with slim body and long ear tufts on 17 January 2017.

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On 13 February 2015, when CA again went to the same area, he flushed a Northern Long-eared Owl from a dense bamboo clump, along with two Short-eared Owls [146, 147]. In flight, the former's wings appeared more rufous than those of the Short-eared Owls. After this sighting, though the Short-eared Owls remained, the Long-eared Owl was not seen.



146. Facial pattern of Northern Long-eared Owl *Asio otus*.



Both: C. Abhinav

147. Flight shot of Northern Long-eared Owl *Asio otus* showing bold streaking on flanks on 13 February 2015.

The species is described as a rare and erratic winter visitor to north-western India (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). There are few sightings from north-eastern India (Ash *et al.* 2017). The oldest record from Himachal Pradesh is from a place near Chamba town where two owls were shot during winter (Marshall 1884). Hugh Whistler saw one in Kangra District on 26 February 1921 (Whistler 1926) and procured the mummified remains of a bird from Gondla, Lahoul and Spiti District, between 1921 and 1923 (Whistler 1925). Multiple historical sightings suggest that the species was not so rare, but there were no further sightings after these historical records. In neighbouring Punjab, the bird is fairly regular at Harike (Sangha 2017). Two sightings in the middle of winter season, almost one month apart, suggests that it

may have been wintering in that area along with the Short-eared Owls. This is the first photographic record for the state.

To conclude, in this note we have described two new birds for Himachal Pradesh and four first photographic records for the state. Four of them are national rarities (Praveen *et al.* 2014).

## Acknowledgements

We thank Praveen J, Manoj Sharma, and Harkirat Singh Sangha for their comments on an earlier version of the manuscript. We retrieved relevant literature from the online 'Bibliography of South Asian Ornithology' (Pittie 2017).

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