Status of Red-throated Thrush *Turdus ruficollis* in the Indian Subcontinent, west of Nepal

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*Abhinav, C., & Rawal, R., 2019. Status of Red-throated Thrush *Turdus ruficollis* in the Indian Subcontinent, west of Nepal. Indian BIRDS 15 (3): 85–88. C. Abhinav, Village & P.O. Churkari, Kangra 176001, Himachal Pradesh, India. E-mail: drabhinav.c@gmail.com [CA] [Corresponding author] Raj Rawal, Village Rualing, PO Lote 175133, District Lahaul and Spiti. Himachal Pradesh, India. E-mail: raj955556@gmail.com [RR] Manuscript received on 23 November 2018.*

The Red-throated Thrush *Turdus ruficollis* winters in India, and breeds in south-central Siberia, northern Mongolia, and north-western China (Clement & Hathway 2000; Collar 2019). It is considered a regular winter migrant in the Himalayas, from Nepal further westwards into Arunachal Pradesh, and the hills of north-eastern India (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012); barring some isolated records from west of Nepal (Grimmett et al. 2011). In this note, we review the status of this thrush by compiling all known records from the Indian Subcontinent, west of Nepal, while describing our own records from Himachal Pradesh.

The Red-throated- and Black-throated *T. atrogularis* Thrushes were, both, once considered distinct species (Oates 1890), but subsequently they were treated as races of a single species, in some works (Baker 1921), while in some, the earlier status quo was retained (Baker 1924). Ali & Ripley (1987) considered them as subspecies. Later they both were included in the Dark-throated Thrush complex (Grimmett et al. 1998; Clement & Hathway 2000; Kazmierczak 2000), but now these are again considered distinct (Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Praveen et al. 2016; Clements et al. 2018; Collar 2019). This taxonomic lumping has, to some extent, masked the real status of the Red-throated Thrush when it was being reported under the Dark-throated Thrush.

On 23 February 2011, CA saw a thrush feeding on damp ground, around a pond in Sthana village, near Shah Nehar barrage, in the outflow area of Pong Dam, Kangra District, Himachal Pradesh (31.96°N, 75.91°E; c.325 m asl). It had grey upperparts and a whitish belly. It resembled a Black-throated Thrush, which is a common bird in the region, except for the dark rufous colour on the supercilium, throat, breast, and outer tail. It was shy and immediately took cover in the nearby reeds. The bird was photographed and identified as an adult male Red-throated Thrush. One adult male, probably the same individual, was seen on 17 March 2011, along with five Black-throated Thrushes at the same spot [101, 102].

On 25 November 2015, RR heard an unfamiliar call near his house in Rualing, Lahaul and Spiti District (32.61°N, 76.93°E; c.3,200 m asl). He saw a thrush sitting on a *Salix* sp. tree and took few photographs [103]. It stayed there for ten minutes and then flew away. It was not seen again. He posted its image on the Facebook group ‘Birds of Himachal’, where it was identified as Red-throated Thrush by CA and Ankit Vikrant. It was an adult male with an unmarked dark rufous throat, breast, and supercilium. There was extensive dark rufous in its tail.
Table 1. Other records of Red-throated Thrush from the Indian Subcontinent, west of Nepal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State/Country</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Details</th>
<th>Altitude in m asl*</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uttarakhand</td>
<td>Sitabani, Ramnagar Forest Division, Nainital District</td>
<td>14 or 15 February 1997</td>
<td>One female bird was photographed; reproduced in Pfister (2004)</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>Otto Pfister pers comm. dated 03 April 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mandal, Chamoli District</td>
<td>03 February 2019</td>
<td>One adult male photographed</td>
<td>1,490</td>
<td>Prince et al. (2019a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urgam, Chamoli District</td>
<td>04 February 2019</td>
<td>One adult male was seen</td>
<td>2,050</td>
<td>Prince et al. (2019b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mandal, Chamoli District</td>
<td>27 &amp; 28 February 2019</td>
<td>One bird was seen. More photographs of adult male from the same location and month by different observers are available in the Facebook group ‘Indian Birds’</td>
<td>1,600</td>
<td>Krishnan et al. (2019a, b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shyamket, Nainital District</td>
<td>28 February 2019</td>
<td>One adult male photographed</td>
<td>1,750</td>
<td>Ashok (2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mahesh Khan, Nainital District</td>
<td>19 March 2019</td>
<td>One adult male photographed</td>
<td>2,090</td>
<td>Wedderburn (2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Himachal Pradesh</td>
<td>Lahaul, Lahaul and Spiti District</td>
<td>Undated</td>
<td>Speke observed large flocks in May–June, in the Western Himalayas, which seems unlikely, as they are known to breed during May-July in Russia (Collar 2019). Perhaps some other species was involved</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Jerdon (1872); Whistler (1925)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chamba town, Chamba District</td>
<td>1879–1884</td>
<td>Two were shot after a snow-storm</td>
<td>950</td>
<td>Marshall (1884)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dharamshala, Kangra District</td>
<td>11 February 1923</td>
<td>Whistler saw two individuals after a heavy snowfall</td>
<td>1,585</td>
<td>Whistler (1926)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Keylong, Lahaul and Spiti District</td>
<td>18 October 1936</td>
<td>Three specimens collected in Lahaul Valley, perhaps from the same trip; now in ‘Field Museum of Natural History’</td>
<td>3,100</td>
<td>Anonymous (1936a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Toskang Nalla, Lahaul and Spiti District</td>
<td>21 October 1936</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Anonymous (1936b)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tsirot, Lahaul and Spiti District</td>
<td>22 October 1936</td>
<td>One individual photographed; probably a female / first winter bird, because it had a prominent black malar stripe and dark streaking on a rufous and grey breast. Upperparts and tail are not visible in the photograph</td>
<td>2,720</td>
<td>Anonymous (1936c)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prashar Lake, Mandi District</td>
<td>29 January 2011</td>
<td>Two similar looking individuals, with very less rufous in plumage, were ringed during ‘Bird Ringing Capacity Building Workshop’ by H.P. Forest Department and the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, UK. Peter Clement commented on one individual that it was probably an extremely poorly marked first winter female Red-throated Thrush but the possibility of a hybrid couldn’t be ruled out. Few sight records of these individuals after ringing from the same place and month.</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>Goller (2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nagrota Surian, Pong Lake, Kangra District</td>
<td>09 and 12 March 2017</td>
<td>Specimen of an adult hybrid male</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>Biddulph (1881, 1882)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>Gilgit, Pakistan-occupied Kashmir</td>
<td>January 1878</td>
<td>Occasionally found in winter in the Valley</td>
<td>&gt;1,600</td>
<td>Ward (1906)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kashmir Valley</td>
<td>Tso Kar, Rupsha, Ladakh</td>
<td>28 September 1936</td>
<td>One specimen collected; now in ‘Field Museum of Natural History’</td>
<td>4,550</td>
<td>Anonymous (1936d)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tikse, Ladakh</td>
<td>1976–1982</td>
<td>Was seen occasionally in early spring during the study period</td>
<td>3,250</td>
<td>Williams &amp; Delany (1986)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shey, Ladakh</td>
<td>1990–1999</td>
<td>One or two sightings</td>
<td>3,250</td>
<td>Otto Pfister pers comm., dated 02 April 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Danyore, Gilgit, Pakistan-occupied Kashmir</td>
<td>23 February 2014</td>
<td>One bird photographed; appears to be a hybrid between Red-throated Thrush and Black-throated Thrush</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>Shah (2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spitiuk, Ladakh</td>
<td>27 November 2017</td>
<td>An individual was photographed</td>
<td>3,200</td>
<td>Lonchey (2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Saspul, Ladakh</td>
<td>28 March 2018</td>
<td>One male bird was seen</td>
<td>3,440</td>
<td>Datta (2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>Kaghan Valley</td>
<td>February 1911</td>
<td>D. Donald shot one individual</td>
<td>950</td>
<td>Whitehead (1914)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kellar, near Rawalpindi</td>
<td>24 February 1926</td>
<td>Specimen of a female bird was collected</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>Whistler (1930)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balloki headworks</td>
<td>03 March 1974</td>
<td>One bird was seen</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>Vittery (1994)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Where the exact location of the sighting is not available, a rough average altitude of the place is shown in the table.
While researching the past records of the Red-throated Thrush, we found some older records from Himachal Pradesh. These records, along with those from the Indian Subcontinent, westwards of Nepal, are given in Table 1 and shown in (Figs. 1, 2). Several records that only mentioned *T. ruficollis*, without details of subspecies, or a description, from the period when the two species were considered races of one, are not included in the table.

![Map of Himachal Pradesh and surrounding areas](image1)

Fig. 1. Records of Red-throated Thrush from Himachal Pradesh (except Tsokang Nalla record).

![Map of northern Indian Subcontinent](image2)

Fig. 2. Records of Red-throated Thrush from the northern Indian Subcontinent. (Red dot=individual sightings; Red circle=showing record from Kashmir Valley and Tsokang Nalla; J&K=Jammu and Kashmir; HP=Himachal Pradesh; UK=Uttarakhand.)

Discussion

Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) mention its regional range and status as, ‘Himalayas from Nepal to Arunachal, South Assam Hills; rather common from Bhutan east and scarce elsewhere,’ and describe it as a ‘straggler, further west to eastern Afghanistan (pushut).’ Grimmett et al. (2011) show only two records, west of Nepal, in the distribution map; one from Lahoul and the other one is perhaps Whistler’s (1930) Kallar, Rawalpindi record. Grimmett et al. (2011) do not show any record from Uttarakhand, and Jammu & Kashmir. Roberts (1992) mentioned only two records from Pakistan, and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, one by Biddulph (1881), and another by Whistler (1930). Both of these specimens are presently in The Natural History Museum (Roberts 1992). The records given in Table-1 provide a more wholistic picture of the distribution of this species in the region, clearly indicating that it frequents appropriate habitats all along the western Himalayas.

Red-throated Thrush has been listed for Uttarakhand by Mohan & Sondhi (2017). This inclusion was based on Sharma et al. (2003) and on the broad distribution range given by Ali & Ripley (1987) (Sanjay Sondhi in litt. e-mail dated 28 Mar 2018). Ali & Ripley (1987) do not specifically mention Uttarakhand region while describing the species’ range but mention its distribution as “Winter visitor to the Himalayas from N.W.F.P. eastwards through Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh; the plains of the Brahmaputra, the Garo and Khasi hills, Bangladesh, Nagaland and Manipur.” Sharma et al. (2003) included it on the authority of Grewal & Sahgal (1995), which is largely based on unconfirmed sightings and best ignored (Manoj Sharma in litt. e-mail dated 30 May 2018). Thus all the above inclusions of the species, do not represent any confirmed sighting from Uttarakhand. Perhaps for the same reason, contemporary works of Indian ornithology (Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012) do not mention any records of the species from Uttarakhand. This makes the previously unpublished record by Pfister (2004), from Sitabani, the first confirmed record for Uttarakhand.

There has been an eruption of Red-throated Thrush sightings from Uttarakhand in 2019, as almost all (except one) records from the state occurred during February and March 2019; after the region experienced heavy snowfall on multiple occasions in winter. Few other sightings (Marshall 1884; Whistler 1926) also occurred after snowfall, as many species descend to lower elevations after snowfall. The Red-throated Thrush generally winters at high altitudes, e.g., between 2,400 and 3,900 m asl in Nepal (Clement & Hathway 2000). Most of the records from the region are also from an altitude of more than 1,500 m asl. However, birds may occur in the foothills, or even plains (Clement & Hathway 2000; Collar 2019), as in the case of the birds recorded from Pong Lake and Pakistan. Neither Dhadwal (2011) nor by den Besten (2004) mention the Red-throated Thrush from Pong Lake, and this record from Sthana, is the first record of this species from Pong Lake and the lowest altitude record from Himachal Pradesh. These two recent records reported by us, are an addition to the handful of records of this species from Himachal Pradesh.

As the Red-throated Thrush has been described as occasional winter visitor in Ladakh (Williams & Delany 1986; Pfizer 2004) and Kashmir Valley (Ward 1906), and there are multiple records of this species from the Indian Subcontinent, west of Nepal, it is perhaps not a vagrant to the region, as described by Grimmett et al. (2011), and Rasmussen & Anderton (2012), but a more frequent visitor. Some records of Red-throated Thrush might have been missed because they were reported as Dark-throated Thrush. It could also be an overlooked species, as females, or first winter males can be confused with Black-throated Thrush, or easily missed if seen in a flock of Black-throated Thrush. Furthermore, higher altitudes, which are preferred by the species, are less frequently birded during winter. The presence of hybrids between Red-throated Thrush and Black-throated Thrush complicates the situation as they are difficult to identify and our knowledge regarding hybrids is limited.
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References


