

## Correspondence

### A Rustic Bunting *Emberiza rustica* in Arunachal Pradesh: An addition to the Indian avifauna

The Rustic Bunting *Emberiza rustica* winters mainly in Central and Eastern Asia and has a large breeding area from the Nordic regions to Central Siberia. It is considered a vagrant to Nepal (Grimmett et al. 2011), but treated as hypothetical to South Asia by Rasmussen & Anderton (2012). Praveen et al. (2017) included it in the checklist for the Indian Subcontinent on the basis of two different sightings from Nepal (Praveen et al. 2017). More recently, it was photographed in Bhutan (Lilje 2017) but it has not been reported from India yet (Praveen et al. 2019).

During our recent birding trip to Arunachal Pradesh, while visiting a grassland habitat at Jia (28.05°N, 95.74°E) on 15 January 2020, we spotted a sparrow-like bird on an un-metalled earthen road between two large paddies. It was a damp overcast day and a drizzle had just started. We immediately stopped the car but the bird flew to perch in the open, on a branch of a small roadside tree beside thick bushes. Being on the favorable side in the car, BH and DPP could manage to get a few photographs [227] while others watched through the windscreen. Later, we came out of the car stealthily and finally could get more photographs.



Binanda Hathibara

227. Rustic Bunting at Jia, Arunachal Pradesh.

The bird sat there for a while and obliged us with a few decent images [228–229]. After a few minutes it flew away and settled in the paddyfield. We approached it cautiously, but instead found a flock of Black-faced Bunting *E. spodocephala* (three males and one female) feeding on leftover rice seeds, camouflaging themselves in the stubble. A Zitting Cisticola *Cisticola juncidis* also was present nearby but we could not find that bird again. It was gone.



Joydev Pathak

228.



Sandip Das

229.

Our first impression of this bird was of a Little Bunting *E. pusilla*, which is rather common. But extensive chestnut colour on the back and the rufous spotted flanks were confusing us. We re-verified our identification using Robson (2015) and were almost certain that it was a Rustic Bunting. The main identification pointers were: A prominent supercilium which is whitish and clearly broad and bold; whitish sub- moustachial line, throat, and belly; blackish crown, forehead, and malar stripe; brown cheek-patch with black outline and a small white spot at the rear; flanks coarsely spotted with rufous with rufous rump; and a small conical bill. One important feature that was missing in this bird was the erect crown feathers. The nearly similar looking Tristram's Bunting *E. tristrami* lacks a crest, and chestnut spotted flanks as well. Afterwards we went through more online images on [www.ebird.org](http://www.ebird.org) and [www.orientalbirdimages.org](http://www.orientalbirdimages.org) and noted that a crest may not, always, be visible.

The only other similar species is Yellow-browed Bunting *E. chrysophrys*, which is another vagrant, but broad chestnut streaks on flanks and lacking any yellow in the supercilium was going against it.

From the photographs, it may not be possible to age or sex this bird with certainty; it could be a winter plumage adult or possibly is moulting into adult plumage as it has wing and tail feathers that look fresh, and rounded (not pointed) tips to the tail (Peter Clement, *in-litt*, e-mail dated 04 February 2020).

Recent evidence shows a rapid decline globally, due to increased logging in breeding areas and large scale trapping in the non-breeding areas, and hence, it is listed as Vulnerable under the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (BirdLife International 2016).

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### Red-billed Starling *Spodiopsar sericeus* in Manipur: An addition to South Asian avifauna

The office of the Divisional Forest Officer (Thoubal Forest Division, Government of Manipur) organised a two-day nature training for civil societies on 12–13 February 2020 at three wetlands in Thoubal District, namely, Waithou pat (24.67°N, 93.97°E), Eekop pat, and Khoidum pat under the aegis of Nature Learning Centre, National Mission on Himalayan Studies (henceforth, NMHS). During that camp, RKJ & PE led the team to Waithou pat on 13 February 2020. While watching birds at 0830 h, RKJ photographed [230] a starling amongst six Asian Pied Starlings *Gracupica contra*. He called PE for help in identification, and the bird was tentatively identified as a Chestnut-tailed Starling *Sturnia malabarica*. When all the teams gathered at the Divisional Forest Office Thoubal, after the birding trip, we had a closer look at the picture and realized that the bird did not match any of the Sturnidae recorded till date from the Indian Subcontinent. We sent the picture by WhatsApp to Raju Kasambe, of the Bombay Natural History Society, who identified it as a Red-billed Starling *Spodiopsar sericeus*. We also posted the picture on Facebook Public Group, 'Ask IDS of Indian Birds'; members agreed with Kasambe. Though the wetland was searched on the next two days, the starling could not be found. However, the bird was again photographed on 16 February [231, 232]. Further field visits on subsequent days were unfruitful. Identification is straightforward from the photographs. No other species of starling has a combination of creamy white head with a diffused dark neck collar, red bill, and grey body. The black-tipped red bill and grey mantle (vs brown) indicate this to be a male (Robson 2015).



230. Red-billed Starling at Waithou pat, Thoubal, Manipur.



231. Red-billed Starling with Asian Pied Starling at Waithou pat, Thoubal, Manipur.



232. Red-billed Starling at Waithou pat, Thoubal, Manipur.

The Red-billed Starling is a resident of south-eastern China and a non-breeding visitor to northern Vietnam, and Taiwan, and with increasing winter records in Korea and Japan (Craig *et al.* 2020). This is also an addition to the avifauna of South Asia (Praveen *et al.* 2019).

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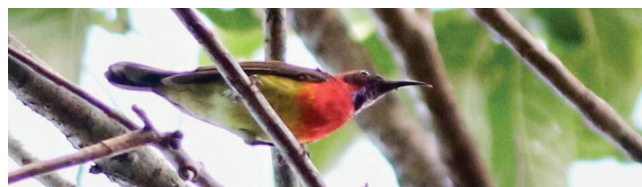
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### 'Scarlet-breasted' Gould's Sunbird *Aethopyga gouldiae dabryi* from India

During a recent birdwatching trip to Mizoram, we were observing a mixed flock of sunbirds and yuhinas at a site (22.68°N, 93.05°E) in Phawngpui National Park, at c. 1,600 m asl. The flock was high in the canopy in which we observed a single sunbird showing a purple throat, red breast, yellow belly, and a short tail. We took some photographs [233] and later identified the bird as a non-breeding male 'Scarlet-breasted' Gould's Sunbird *Aethopyga gouldiae dabryi* based on descriptions and illustrations of the nominate and *isolata* ssp., both of which do not show a broad red breast-band. We think the individual might have been a non-breeding adult, given the missing tail streamers.



233. 'Scarlet-breasted' Gould's Sunbird.

This race of Gould's Sunbird is considered a vagrant to north-eastern India (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012) on the basis of two old specimens of male birds: one (YPM VZ YPM ORN #020087),