The first breeding record of the Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug milvipes* for the Indian Subcontinent in Ladakh, Jammu & Kashmir

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A great favourite with falconers, the Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug* is a large, powerful bird of prey with an exceptionally broad wingspan for its size. It was used for hunting hare (*Lepus* species) and Macqueen's Bustard *Chlamydotis macqueenii*, and quite exceptionally flown at gazelle (*Gazella* species) and eagles (*Aquila* species) (Osman 2001).

*Falco cherrug* occurs in a wide range across the Palearctic region from eastern Europe to western China, breeding in Austria, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, Ukraine, Turkey, Iraq, Armenia, the Russian Federation, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and China, and at least formerly in Turkmenistan and probably Afghanistan, possibly India (Ladakh), with wintering or passage populations occurring regularly in Italy, Malta, Cyprus, Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Libya, Sudan, South Sudan, Tunisia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, U.A.E., Bahrain, Kuwait, Iran, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Afghanistan, and Azerbaijan, with much smaller numbers or vagrants reaching many other countries (BirdLife International 2014; Global Raptor Information Network 2014).

The species has declined in numbers and has been up listed to Endangered category because a revised population trend analysis indicates that it may be undergoing a very rapid decline. This negative trend is a result of an unsustainable trend to capture the birds for the falconry trade, as well as habitat degradation and the impacts of agrochemicals. The rate of decline appears to be particularly severe in the species' Central Asian breeding grounds (BirdLife International 2014).

In Ladakh, Saker Falcon was reported by Mallon (1987) during consecutive winters (1980–1984), ‘in very small number’, around plantations and at villages along the Indus Valley, but he did not specify any location. One was recorded at Pannikhar, Suru Valley on 11 July 1977 (Williams & Delany 1979 in Holmes 1986). Rishad Naooroji and HSS observed it a few times during seven summer trips to Ladakh between 1997 and 2003, at Chushul, Mahe, Hanle road, Hanle-Chumur road, and Dungti.
(Sangha & Naoroji 2006; Naoroji 2007). Based on these sightings its status was described in Ladakh as mainly a passage migrant, and ‘possibly a scarce summer breeder’ (Naoroji 2007). Kovács et al. (2014) do express that there is a ‘possibility of breeding in Ladakh’ for this falcon.

In this century it has been sighted in Ladakh at Hanle in August 2008 and Tso Kar in August 2013 (Orientalbirdimages).

While birding near Tso Kar on 27 June 2014, we noticed one Saker Falcon in flight. However, it soon flew away towards the Tso Kar Marsh and was lost. When we were about to leave the area, HSS heard the call of chicks, and after a quick scan of the mountain face, a nest was discovered with four chicks! The nest was in a crevice below the topmost ridge of an overhanging rock. It comprised branches and twigs of Caragana versicolor and a wide array, unfortunately, of easily available man-made items, among which were cotton and woolen rags, and wires/cables. The rock below the nest was liberally spattered with the bird’s chalk-white droppings. The nest contained four chicks [174], and an adult was noticed flying twice to the nest with food. As the bird flew in from the direction of the marsh, it might have brought vole (Alticola sp.) to the young. The nest was observed for c. 30 minutes. Prolonged observations were not possible.

Discussion

Besides the breeding bird described above we encountered one more adult Saker Falcon at Tanglang La, 5328 m on 24 June 2014 [175]. This bird resembled the bird observed near Tso Kar. Both the birds had a darkish crown, a pale rufous cap, and a contrast between evenly barred flanks and pale unpatterned breast. We identified the birds as Eastern Saker Falcon Falco cherrug milvipes and later shared the images with Dick Forsman and Igor Karyakin.

Forsman said that it would be best to call them milvipes, which seems to be the preferred name for the eastern birds. Karyakin described them as Tibetan Saker Falcons Falco cherrug hendersoni that live at the highest altitude inhabiting Tibet. It is similar to progressus, but with wider stripes on back, dark head, horizontal stripes on the undertail and pants’ (Igor Karyakin in litt., August 2014).

![Image 175. Saker Falcon, Tanglang La (5528m) Ladakh, 24 June 2014.](image)

Eastern Saker Falcon is sometimes known as Shanghar Falcon (Ali & Ripley 1978; Kazmierczak 2000). In its main range it is found in montane areas and may be highly distinct genetically from the nominate race (Wink et al. 1998; in Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), and also differs from it markedly in overall shape and appearance. The sight records enumerated above, and the breeding record from Tso Kar area, probably indicate that Eastern Saker Falcon is a scarce breeding resident in Ladakh.

Due to the great extent of individual and geographic variation, it is extremely difficult to classify the separate Saker populations into distinct subspecies without a large series of museum specimens. All in all, Saker taxonomy is far from clear and more work is clearly needed. Some authors recognise several subspecies (Dementiev & Gladkov 1966; Dickinson & Remsen 2013), while more recent works recognise just two: Falco cherrug cherrug in Europe and western Russia, from the Altai Mountains to China, from northern Mongolia east and Falco c. milvipes in southern Central Asia (del Hoyo et al 1994; Forsman 1999). Fergusson-Lees & Christie (2001) recognise two subspecies, although altaicus is cautiously treated as a separate species.

The subspecies of the Ladakh birds is not conclusively known, but they are, in all probability, the same as that of the Tibetan facies in south-western China F. c. hendersoni, sometimes subsumed under F. c. milvipes.

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References


### A Record of Lesser- *Anser erythropus* and Greater-White-fronted Geese *A. albifrons* from Gujarat, India


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On 14 December 2013, one of us (SMV) accompanied a group of birders and photographers to the Nava Talav area (23º12’N, 71º44’E) of the Little Rann of Kachchh, on a birding and photography tour. As SMV approached the lake, he came across five foraging geese of the *Anser* species that seemed to resemble Greylag Geese *A. anser* from a distance. As the group neared the geese, a few things struck SMV as odd. The geese were much smaller in size than a typical *A. anser*. All of them had a faint white mark at the base of their beaks. One of them had a golden eye-ring, and the colour of their legs was orange. That is when SMV realised that they were looking at the much rarer white-fronted geese. After photographing the birds [176, 177], they went back to Grimmet et al. (2011) and identified the geese they had seen as four adult Greater White-fronted Geese *A. albifrons*, and one adult Lesser White-fronted Goose *A. erythropus*. There was a separate gaggle of c. 20 Bar-headed Geese *A. indicus* with which these white-fronted geese were loosely associating.

SMV informed AD about the sighting, who visited the same place on the morning of 25 December 2013 along with Kunan Naik, Yogendra Shah, and Krinal Hedau. AD also observed these five birds foraging on the lakeside in marshy vegetation, for a full day.

Many photographers have also photographed these birds in January 2014. There were two Lesser White-fronted Geese on 07 January 2014 (Ganpule 2014), and six birds on 27 January 2014 (Cullen 2014).