

# Observations on the White-naped Tit *Parus nuchalis* in Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary, Karnataka

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The White-naped Tit *Parus nuchalis* is endemic to India with a restricted distribution that is largely confined to secondary forest mainly comprising thorny scrub-forest (Ali & Ripley 1987). It has a limited geographical range with a disjunctive distribution of two separate populations, in the western and southern parts of the country. In western India, it is recorded in northern Gujarat, central and south-central Rajasthan; and in southern India, in the broken hill-ranges of the Eastern Ghats spread through Andhra Pradesh (Jerdon 1863; Suresh 2007), Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka (Lott & Lott 1999) that connects to the Western Ghats. The White-naped Tit is listed as 'vulnerable' based on rapid population decline (BirdLife International 2009).

For nearly two-and-a-half decades, most of the Cauvery River valley's forests were inaccessible to birders, researchers, and life-science students due to the presence of security forces combing for poachers, and repeated conflicts between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu states over river-water rights. This volatile situation prevented the study of the region's avifauna, including the status of the White-naped Tit. We could visit Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary, as the area became more accessible in recent years. Here we present evidence of the year-round presence of White-naped Tits at different locations in Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary.

On 25 January 2009, KBS and ASP were birding near Gopinatham village (12°03'12"N 77°41'55"E), one of the many inhabited villages located on the eastern boundary of Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary, Karnataka. It was around 1645 hrs that we noticed two White-naped Tits land on an *Albizia amara* tree. One of them remained perched for about ten minutes, thus providing a good opportunity to photograph it. A rushing flight of Rose-ringed Parakeets *Psittacula krameri* right above the tree drove the tit out of sight. We did not see the tits the next day. Again on 27 January 2009 we observed two White-naped Tits on an *A. amara* tree at about 0800 hrs, feeding in the last dying leaves and many emerging flowers. Four Yellow-throated Sparrows *Petronia xanthocollis* foraging in the same tree did not tolerate their presence and drove them away.

Both these sightings were in the southern parts of the dry-deciduous forests (Fig. 1) around Gopinatham tank. This is a medium-sized water body located close to, and west of the village, catering to its water needs. A stream, 'Erkeyum' flowing between Nagamale (cobra hill), and Mailumale (peafowl hill) augments the water in the tank. Three sides of the tank, with the exception of the eastern bund, are covered by dry deciduous forest, with the vegetation extending right up to its shoreline. The vegetation predominantly comprises *A. amara* trees, shrubby undergrowth of *Barleria longiflora*, *Lantana camara*, *Solanum pubescens*, and *Cissus quadrangularis*. The habitat here is similar to the one described in Lott & Lott (1999).

The following insectivorous birds shared the White-naped Tit's habitat, during our two observations—White-browed Fantail *Rhipidura aureola*, Hoopoe *Upupa epops*, Rufous Treepie *Dendrocitta vagabunda*, Yellow-throated Sparrow, and White-headed Babbler *Turdoides affinis*. A pair of Common Woodshrike *Tephrodornis pondicerianus* was observed feeding a solitary fledgling. Four European Bee-eaters *Merops apiaster* were observed in the vicinity. Although our checklist finally showed 82 species, the Great Tit *P. major* was conspicuous by its absence.

Subsequent to the sightings, Praveen (2009) pointed out, in an online discussion, that all previous sightings of the White-naped Tit (Ali & Whistler 1942; Lott & Lott 1999) were from winter, and to establish that the birds were actually resident, it would be necessary to record their presence during the non-winter months.

Our trip on 6–7 June 2009, to the same area, yielded more sightings of the bird. We recorded two White-naped Tits (Fig. 2) on



Fig. 1. White-naped Tit *Parus nuchalis* habitat in Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary.

6 June 2009 at 1500 hrs, some four kilometers away from the Palar Bridge deviation (11°57'14"N 77°38'58"E) towards Gopinatham village. Stands of *A. amara*, *Chloroxylon swietenia*, and shrubs of *B. longiflora*, *Solanum pubescens*, and *Acalypha fruticosa* dominate the habitat here. We travelled a further 15 km and reached the place where we sighted the tit in January 2009. An overcast sky in the evening did not yield any sightings of the tit. On 7 June 2009, we searched for the bird in similar habitat, near the road to the Palar Bridge from the Male Mahadeswara hill, and recorded the tit at two different locations: three birds together, and a solitary bird within a distance of 300 m. We were again able to photograph one of the tits. Details of our sightings are presented in **Table 1**, and **Fig. 3**, and updated sightings for southern India are shown in **Fig. 4**.

Incidentally, we searched in vain, parts of the *Ellemala* and *Odakehalla* ranges in the western part of the Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary, on either side of the Mysore–Male Mahadeshwara Hill road, for the White-naped Tit. Here, the vegetation composition is similar to the one observed previously for the White-naped Tit. However, we recorded only Great Tit in this area. Four hours of searching, two hours each on the morning of 6 June and the evening of 7 June, were probably insufficient to ascertain the complete absence of the tit. At certain locations in Rajasthan, the Great Tit has been observed in the same habitat occupied by White-naped Tit (BirdLife International 2001), and given the contiguous nature of the habitats here, the possibility that they could occur together should be explored in the future.



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Fig. 2. *Parus nuchalis* sighted on 6 June 2009.Table 1. Updated sightings of the White-naped Tit *Parus nuchalis* in the Eastern Ghats

Sl. No.	Place of sighting	Date of sighting	Recorded by	No. of birds seen	Reference
1	Around Palar Bridge, Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary, Chamarajanagara District, Karnataka	6 June 2009	KBS, DTH, MS, TG, AS, MKV & ASP	Two	Present survey
		7 June 2009		Three+One	
2	Gopinatham, Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary, Chamarajanagara District, Karnataka	27 January 2009	KBS & ASP	Two	Present survey
		25 January 2009			
3	Arogyavarm, Chittoor District, Andhra Pradesh	18 December 2003	Jones	Two	Jones 2007
		1 January 2004			
		February 2005			
4	Santhamaralli, Yelandur Hobli, Chamarajanagara District, Karnataka	November 1999	Jugal Tiwari	Two	<a href="http://www.delhibird.net">www.delhibird.net</a>
5	Heganuru State Forest, Kanakapura, Bangalore Rural District, Karnataka	November 1995	Lott & Lott	Four	Lott & Lott 1999
		October 1995			
		January 1987			
		November 1986			
6	Bommasandra, Kanakapura, Bangalore Rural District, Karnataka	1 December 1985	Subramanya	Two	Lott & Lott 1999
		30 December 1984			
7	Satyamangala, Biligirirangan Hills, Chamarajanagara District, Karnataka (now in Tamil Nadu)	14 September 1934	Morris	One (Juvenile)	Ali & Whistler 1942
8	Bangalore, Karnataka	? 1930	Stewart	One	Ali & Whistler 1942
9	Masinagudi, Tamil Nadu	March 1997	Bishop	One	BirdLife International 2001
10	Veliconda range, Nellore, Andhra Pradesh	Undated	Jerdon	One	Jerdon 1863

We regularly visit vast marshlands, and water bodies, for winter waterfowl counts around Santhamaralli where Jugal Tiwari recorded the White-naped Tit (Tiwari 1999). We have not observed the White-naped Tit here, just the Great Tit, near the waterbodies, on a few occasions. *P. nuchalis* is known to move over 5–7 km for foraging if the forest is fragmented, and thus may cover larger distances in search of food. Ringed birds in Kachchh, Gujarat have been recaptured some 5–7 km away from the place of ringing (Jugal Tiwari, pers. comm.).

Although we noticed that *P. nuchalis* was not a difficult bird to spot in suitable habitat, we do not conclude that the species is common in the area. In the recent past, efforts to survey the interior regions of the Male Mahadeshwara Hills, and nearby areas, for the tit were severely hindered due to limited access and the presence of poachers, and security forces. We plan to conduct surveys in future to look for the species more intensively in the area. Observations of the species from the nearby Chittoor district in Andhra Pradesh (Table 1; Fig. 4) indicate that the distributional range of the species could be much wider in southern India, but that it may be found in small numbers in large tracts of fragmented habitats. Future threats to the tit's habitat at Male Mahadeshwara Hills could include quarrying for granite, and habitat loss.

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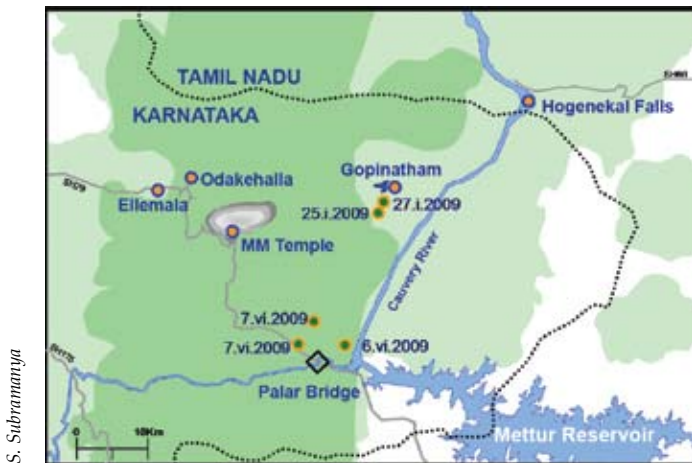


Fig. 3. Recent sightings of *Parus nuchalis* in Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary, Karnataka. Sighting dates are given next to sighting locations.

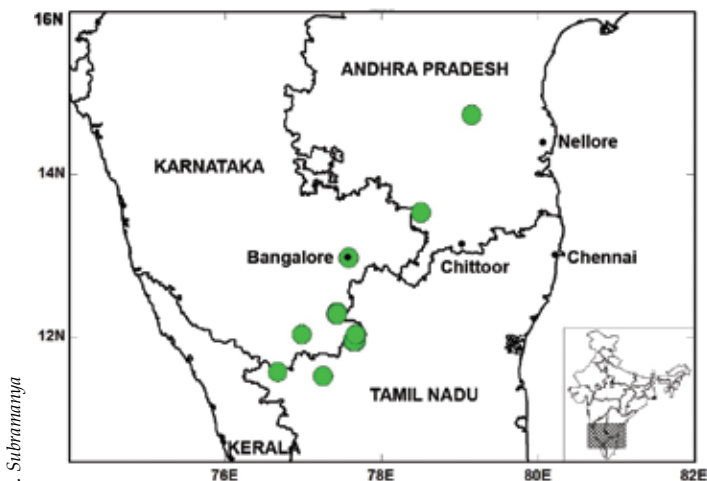


Fig. 4. Updated distribution of *Parus nuchalis* in southern India.

### Editorial Committee's note:

The two records of Uttangi (1994, 1995), of *P. nuchalis* from the evergreen to semi-evergreen biotope at Anshi National Park, and in the residential backyard of Dharwad town, need confirmation, and hence have not been included in the above paper. In addition, the habitats where he saw the birds do not fit the typical *Albizia* or *Acacia* dominated open jungle found in southern Karnataka (especially the Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary belt (Lott & Lott 1999) / Andhra Pradesh (Jones 2007), although it is stated that the Dharwad locality is at the edge of a transitional belt of thorn forest. Also, the Wynaad record of the species (Zacharias & Gaston 1993) is not confirmed as yet, and it is indicated that the identification of *P. nuchalis* during one of those Wynaad surveys, when the species is claimed to have been sighted, is doubtful (V. Santharam pers. comm., also Sashikumar et al., 2010, confirming the former).

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