

# More wintering sites for the Near-threatened Tytler's Leaf-Warbler *Phylloscopus tytleri* in Peninsular India

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**T**ytler's Leaf-Warbler *Phylloscopus tytleri*, is categorised as a near-threatened species by BirdLife International (2001). It breeds in the Himalayas and winters in the Western Ghats. According to Rasmussen (1998), "...the species must certainly be to some extent overlooked in its winter quarters..." However, it is generally presumed that it occurs in low densities throughout Peninsular India and is sometimes locally common. In this note, I present records of personal sightings of this species from six localities in Peninsular India, of which four sites are new on the range maps for this species. Four of the sites are in the Western Ghats and three are listed as Important Bird Areas (IBA) (Islam & Rahmani 2004). All the sites fall under revenue land or state forest. The sightings are described in chronological order in Table 1 including dates, habitats, geographical locations and co-birders.

## Known distribution

Ali & Ripley (1987) comment on the non-breeding distribution of this species as, "...winter range little known, records are very scanty..." Rasmussen (1998), in a paper that elaborates on the non-breeding distribution, analyses all known specimen and sight records up till 1998 and consolidates the historical data with contemporary information. The paper cites specimen and sight reports from a few localities around Mahabaleshwar and northern Maharashtra, Goa, the Nilgiris and, specimen records from Londa in northern Karnataka. The paper also lists "...a well-documented record of two seen near Munnar, Kerala (Harrap & Redman 1989)," and, "two from around Mumbai (N. Jamdar *in litt.* 1997; T. Price *in litt.* 1998)". Two other reports with no further information available are also listed in the paper: "occasional" records from Wynaad, Kerala (Zacharias & Gaston 1999) and one record from Nagarhole (Lal *et al.* 1994). It is clear that the confidence level is highest for the specimen records and least for the sight records with no further information available. The recently published, well-illustrated field guides of Grimmet *et al.* (1998), Kazmierczak (2000) and, Rasmussen & Anderton (2005) have apparently adopted these details for depicting their distribution maps.

Prasad (2003) subsequently listed several sight records from north-western Maharashtra from the districts of Raigad, Pune and Mumbai, with good concentrations around Bhimashankar and Mahabaleshwar. Most of these sightings were reported in the birding discussion group of 'birdsofbombay', (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/birdsofbombay>). There are no further reports from Karnataka except for the recent spurt of sightings mentioned in this note. However, one of the warblers photographed by Vijay Cavale from Bannarghatta National Park near Bangalore (c. 800 m a.s.l.) has been correctly labeled as a Tytler's Leaf-Warbler (<http://www.indiabirds.com>), without further information. Rasmussen & Anderton (2005) consider the species to be locally common in the Nilgiris. However, Zarri & Rahmani (2005) did not come across this bird during their recent study nor do they list any recent sightings. This may be due to an oversight as it is definitely common at Sispara (see below), which lies at the edge of Mukurti National Park in the Nilgiris. No other sight reports are available from Tamil Nadu. Sightings from Kerala, after Redman & Harrap (1989), are few. A possible sighting in December 1993 by Manoj V. Nair and C. Sashikumar from Ponmudi in Ashambu Hills (Manoj V. Nair, *in litt.*, 1993) and a more recent sighting by Sathyan Meppayur during a bird tour in Periyar Tiger Reserve in February 2005 (Sathyan Meppayur, *in litt.*, 2005) are the only known sightings apart from the ones mentioned in this note. Hence, till now, the species is considered as a scarce winter visitor in the Western Ghats except for the heavy local concentrations around the hills of northern Maharashtra and the Nilgiris.

## Observations

**Panhala:** This is a hill station near Kolhapur town, south-western Maharashtra, historically the capital city and fort of Chhatrapathi Shivaji. It has forested and park-like habitats not found in the lower elevations of Deccan Plateau. I was off to this destination on a family trip and on some good advice (!), decided to drop in earlier than the rest for some birding. The following is an extract from my field notes made on 23.xii.2002, "...an unidentified warbler with no noticeable

wing bar, good supercilium, found in a dispersed flock—the call note (repeated infrequently as compared to the Greenish) is a single Magpie Robin-like (in tone, quality & loudness) 'sweetee'—I initially took this call for [that of] the Magpie Robin & later on saw the Warbler making this call. This one is not Greenish or Large-billed for sure..."

The call intrigued me a lot and later I could nail it down to this species. I contacted various birdwatchers to find a call recording of this species for confirmation. In vain, I had to wait till December 2006 when I was able to watch these warblers at leisure at Sispara, Silent Valley (Kerala), calling incessantly through out the day.

It may be noted that this was probably the sighting that was picked up by Anand Prasad for his checklist (Prasad 2003), under Tickell's Leaf Warbler (*P. affinis*) as, "...Panhala, Kolhapur, 1 probable on 23/12/2002...". I presume this because I had reported it in the birdsofbombay e-mail discussion group as a *Phylloscopus* without a wing-bar and was left unidentified then.

Though a checklist for the birds of Panhala or Kolhapur does not seem to exist, discussions with local bird watchers did not reveal any records of this species from this region.

**Kemmengundi:** This is a hill station in the Bababudan Hills, Shimoga district, Karnataka, the sighting was made near the Children's Park in the Shankara Shola. Vijay Ramachandran and Job K. Joseph were also present during the sighting. From my field notes made on 16.iii.2003, "...A small *Phylloscopus*, whitish under parts, greenish upperparts, no wing bar and no crown stripe, short tail, dark pointed bill with pale lower mandible. A very distinct white supercilium and a dark eye-stripe. Other confusing species in similar habitats is the Tickell's Leaf Warbler - bill seemed too long for the Tickell's. Calls not heard..." This again being the first sighting for all of us (my previous Panhala sighting got confirmed much later), we could not confirm its identity in the field. It took us another two years before becoming familiar with the bird in Munnar, when we could go back and confirm this observation from Kemmengundi. Until now, this has been the only sighting of this species from Bababudan Hills, despite being visited frequently in recent years (since 2003) by many birdwatchers. However, we have not got a chance to visit Bababudan Hills after becoming familiar with the calls.

**Munnar:** Munnar, a famous hill station in the Kannan Devan Hills, in the southern Western Ghats, is not a new location for this species as it has been reported earlier (Harrap & Redman 1989). However, a note here is included as it updates its status in the much-disturbed Munnar sholas, listed as the *Southern Montane Wet Temperate Forests* by Champion and Seth (1968). Strangely, it has not been reported from Eravikulam National Park, though in all likelihood it is present there. The densities in those habitats would be interesting to study in comparison with the Nilgiris.

K. V. Eldhose, who conducts regular endemic-bird tours in this area since 2002, has seen this bird at Munnar on almost all his winter trips. During one such bird tour on 11–12. iii.2006, when I accompanied him, the birds were seen on four different occasions in about eight hours of birding in

shola and grassland habitats; twice while birding in a shola about 10 km downhill from Munnar on the leeward side. The long distinct supercilium over the darker eye-stripe, lack of wing bars and shorter tail compared to other similar *Phylloscopus* warblers, were clearly noted. Though we did not hear the birds calling, none of us were familiar with its call then and hence could have possibly overlooked more sightings.

**Sispara:** Sispara lies at the extreme north of the famous Silent Valley National Park in Kerala, adjacent to the Mukurti National Park in the Nilgiris. The undisturbed habitat here is the typical sholas and grasslands found much across the Nilgiris. During a bird survey organised by P. K. Uthaman and Kerala Forest Department, I got to bird-watch in the sholas around Sispara for three days. Tytler's Leaf-warbler was exceedingly common, sometimes more numerous than *P. affinis*. On one field trip we recorded about six birds per minute, calling from the sholas. The birds always kept to the canopy of the shola, which is indeed quite low (10–12 m) and hence was quite easy to observe. An earlier survey conducted by P. K. Uthaman in mid-March 2006 also met with this bird at Sispara 'several times'; they noted this species as a warbler producing Magpie Robin like calls but left the bird unidentified in the field (E. Kunhikrishnan & Prasanth Badarinath *in litt.*, 2006).

**Elival:** Elival ridge is the southern-most high altitude area north of the Palakkad Gap, with habitat that is typical for this endemic species. During a bird survey, which P. O. Nameer and I organised along with Kerala Forest Department, in Siruvani Reserve Forest, I was able to visit the shola habitats of this region on 12.ii.2007.

By now, my warbler identification skills had sharpened and it was easy to pick the call of this leaf-warbler from an undisturbed shola on the southern face of the Elival ridge. Interestingly, one of us started searching for a Pied Bushchat *Saxicola caprata* in the grasslands after hearing the first call (!), quite a likely bird in such habitats, but of importance is the similarity of calls. About 5–6 birds were calling regularly during our stay of four hours in that habitat. Shashank Dalvi persued the birds and managed to clearly see a couple of them. However, the most interesting facet about this ridge is that the habitat on the northern side, which is sheltered from the direct south-western winds, is mostly a transition from evergreen to shola forests. In fact, we did not record a single Tytler's Leaf-Warbler calling on the northern side where we spent more time. On the southern side, which faces the winds, the habitat is typical of the high altitudes of the Nilgiris, with shola forests only in the hill valleys and the rest of the area being covered with grasslands. All our sightings were from this habitat indicating a highly specialised habitat preference in the Western Ghats during winter.

**Nandi Hills:** Though previous studies (Ghorpade 1974; Anon. 1996) have failed to record this species from Nandi Hills or anywhere near Bangalore, there are a few recent reports from these hills. Nick Lethaby came across this species for the first time at Nandi when he recorded one individual along with a Hume's Warbler *P. humei* on 8.xii.2006 (Lethaby 2006). K. V. Eldhose saw and heard

several individuals on 20.xii.2006 (K. V. Eldhose *verbally*, Dec. 2006), one bird seen by Mike Prince on 22.xii.2006 (Prince 2006) and subsequently, S. Subramanya and V. Santharam recorded one bird on 1.i.2007 (Subramanya 2007).

During my visit on 25.ii.2007, when I birded for about three-and-a-half hours, the bird was not very vocal – the most frequent utterances of the call were ‘one call for every three minutes,’ heard during the last one hour of birding. However, I found about 5–6 birds, which kept to the canopy, along with several other Hume's Warblers, around a playground on top of the hills. Though other *Phylloscopus* species were also recorded during the trip, none were present during the sightings of *P. tytleri* and *P. humei*. Perhaps this species might be a regular winter migrant to Nandi Hills in moderate densities.

### Conclusions

The wintering distribution of Tytler's Leaf-Warbler seems to be more widespread than it was earlier believed. However, the hypothesis of the species occurring in high densities, very locally, is supported by the observations from Sispara and Nandi Hills and, to some extent from Munnar and Elival. My identification skills for this species had not been honed during observations in Kemmengundi and Panhala and hence its population estimations from there were not possible. Its wintering habitat, though not described earlier, seems to be sholas in the Western Ghats while preferring suitable altitudes (c. 900 m and above) in the Deccan hillocks with a good tree cover. This matches more with the wintering habitat preferences of Tickell's Leaf-Warbler *P. affinis* rather than any other congeners. However, Tytler's Leaf-Warbler does not seem to have any strict preferences in associating

with any particular *Phylloscopus* species for foraging; it seems to associate freely with those congeners that are common at a particular locality.

Identification tips for separating Tytler's Leaf-Warbler from other *Phylloscopus* warblers are described in Rasmussen (1998), which is now freely downloadable from the *Forktail* website (<http://www.orientalbirdclub.org/publications/forktail/14.html>). However, learning to identify its call will go a long way in determining the species density.

### Acknowledgements

All the sightings were made while on a birding trip or bird survey along with several other birdwatchers some of them being organised bird surveys. Hearty thanks to all the people who accompanied me during the trip (see Table 1) and all the people who helped organise the bird surveys. Thanks to several others who responded to my query on the identification, calls and distribution of this species—Thejaswi Shivanand, Krys Kazmierczak, and Pamela Rasmussen, to name a few.

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**Table 1. Chronological sight records of Tytler's Leaf-Warbler**

Locality & coordinates	Date	Peer birders	Associating Congeners	Altitude in meters	Habitat	District, State	Biogeographical Area	Status
Panhala 16°49'N 74°07'E	23.xii.2002	Biju V.	<i>P. trochiloides</i>	950	Horticultural gardens, relict evergreen patch	Kolhapur, Maharashtra	Isolated hill in Deccan Plateau	Reserve forest; revenue land
Kemmengundi 13°33'N 75°45'E	16.iii.2003	V. Ramachandran & J. K. Joseph	<i>P. trochiloides</i>	1,400	Edges of a shola, horticultural gardens	Shimoga, Karnataka	Bababudan Hills, Western Ghats	IBA; reserve forest
Munnar 10°11'N 77°10'E	11–12. iii.2006	K. V. Eldhose, N. Lethaby & V. Ramachandran	<i>P. trochiloides</i> , <i>P. magnirostris</i>	1,800–2,000	Shola	Idukki, Kerala	Kannan Devan Hills, Western Ghats	Reserve forest
Sispara 11°12'N 76°27'E	10–12. xii.2006	Raju. S & Jayan N. P.	<i>P. affinis</i>	1,900–2,300	Shola	Palakkad, Kerala	Silent Valley, adjacent to Nilgiris, Western Ghats	IBA; national park
Elival 10°56'N 76°37'E	12.ii.2007	S. Dalvi, E. Kunhikrishnan & S. Nubro	<i>P. affinis</i>	2,000	Shola	Palakkad, Kerala	Palakkad Hills, Western Ghats	Reserve forest
Nandi Hills 12°53'N 78°12'E	25.ii.2007	J. Chacko	<i>P. humei</i>	1,400	Abandoned coffee plantations, horticultural gardens, relict evergreen patch	Bangalore, Karnataka	Isolated hills in Deccan Plateau	IBA; reserve forest; revenue land

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## — Short Notes —

# Indian White-backed Vultures *Gyps bengalensis* in the Sigur region of Tamil Nadu

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Davidar, P. 2007. White-rumped Vultures *Gyps bengalensis* in the Sigur region of Tamil Nadu. *Indian Birds* 3 (4): 149.  
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In June 2007, on a visit to Cheetal Walk, a property of the Sigur Nature Trust, located in the Sigur region (11°32'N 76°41'E), I spotted four White-rumped Vultures *Gyps bengalensis* circling overhead. They then disappeared further eastwards towards Sathyamangalam. In May 2007, Mr N. A. Naseer, a photographer, had sighted eight *G. bengalensis* resting on one of the trees further upstream along the Sigur River.

In May 2006, Dr William Noble had recorded 24 vultures feeding on a dead buffalo at Mangalapatti, which is about 50 km east of Sigur. To quote Dr Noble, “A buffalo had been shot not far from the place where we stayed at Mangalapatti. Tried to obtain images of the vultures as they flew in, but the blind was not adequate to prevent the vultures seeing me for they have such good eyesight. Gave up. However, on the way out in the Jeep just a bit later in the morning, we managed to use it as a blind and went off-road to reach as close as we could to a tree where vultures were gathered. Thus we managed to obtain some images before the vultures took off. There were also vultures gathered on other trees nearby. Not much farther down the road, we noticed vultures coming in

to a place up-slope, but did not stop to investigate the place if something else dead (undetermined). Conservatively, we saw a total of at least 25 vultures. But there were probably more than that, which offers some hope for the future.”

It is quite possible that the vultures I had seen in June 2007 were part of the same group sighted by Dr Noble, and probably have a nesting site somewhere in the region. The photographs sent by Dr Noble confirm these to be White-rumped vultures.

This site, Cheetal Walk, on the banks of the Sigur River used to host nesting colonies of White-rumped vultures on two large *Terminalia arjuna* trees in the 1960s and 1970s when the property was established. This nesting population had gradually declined since the 1970s and had completely disappeared by the early 1980's (Davidar & Davidar 2002). A few vultures were sighted in 2000, but were not seen again.

Let's hope the White-rumped vultures are back for good.

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