

Northern House Martin *Delichon urbica* in Arunachal Pradesh: a new species for north-eastern India

Harkirat Singh Sangha, Rishad Naoroji & Kiran Srivastava

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Harkirat Singh Sangha, B-27, Gautam Marg, Hanuman Nagar, Jaipur 302021 Email: harkirat.sangha@gmail.com

Rishad Naoroji, Godrej Bhavan 5th Floor, 4 A Home Street, Fort, Mumbai 400001 Email: rishadn@gmail.com

Kiran Srivastava, 17-C, Tower A, Viceroy Park, Thakur Village, Kandivali (E), Mumbai 400101 Email: kiranjo@vsnl.net

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On 19th October 2008 at 1410 hrs while birding close to the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) outpost at Mipi (28°56'33"N 95°49'25"E), Upper Dibang Valley district, Arunachal Pradesh, we noticed a flock of c. 30 martins (Hirundinidae) flying over the Mathun River and surrounding fields. The initial impression, after a quick look through binoculars, was of Asian House Martin *Delichon dasypus*. While the birds were hawking in a loose association, photographs were taken, as images would prove more conclusive. Having secured some pictures we tried to get more details through binoculars. Fortunately for us the birds continued hawking and we were able to observe them for about 10–15 min.

On returning to the circuit house at Anini (28°47'34"N 95°54'05"E) HSS had a proper look at the photographs. After zooming in on some of the better photographs and comparing with illustrations of martins in Grimmett *et al.* (1998), and Kazmierczak (2000), HSS realised that the birds were Northern House Martin *Delichon urbica*, a species not earlier recorded from north-eastern India.

The identification of the martins was fairly straightforward. The very extensive white on the lower back, including the upper tail coverts (more extensive than illustrations in Grimmett *et al.* 1998; Kazmierczak 2000; Rasmussen & Anderton 2005; and Turner & Rose 1989) contrasted sharply with otherwise black upperparts. The large white rump patch was striking even at long range. The under parts were white. The black tail was short and moderately forked. The vent and under tail coverts were white and extending almost up to the end of the tail. The flight was fluttery with frequent long glides. The birds, in too many ways, matched Northern House Martins!

Ali & Ripley (1986) considered Northern House Martin and Asian House Martin as one species. Due to similarity of plumage and morphology with Asian House Martin its distribution and status is unclear (Turner & Rose 1989). Northern House Martin is a summer visitor to mountains of northern Afghanistan, Karakorum of Baltistan and Hunza, inner Himalaya in Ladakh, and Spiti in Himachal Pradesh. It occurs on passage through western parts of the Indian Subcontinent (east at least to western Nepal), a few (mainly first winter migrants) winter in or pass through the Western Ghats, and have been sight recorded in the Maldives and Lakshdweep (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005). The species is not listed in Choudhury (2006). Thus the birds at Mipi constitute not only the first record of the species from Arunachal Pradesh but also north-eastern India.

The regional status of *D. u. lagopodum*, which has a larger white rump patch (including upper tail coverts) and shallower tail fork than the regional *D. u. meridionale*, is unresolved. It reportedly winters in Assam (Vaurie 1959) but most, if not all, specimens in the University of Michigan Museum of Zoology are *D. u. dasypus* (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005). However, *lagopodum* definitely winters to northern Myanmar, and so is likely to be present in the region (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005).

In Myanmar, Smythies observed or collected the Siberian–Mongolian race *lagopodum* on numerous occasions in the Pegu Yomas, Karen Hills and Karenni. Tickell observed it at Moulmein, Livesey in Taunggyi and Roseveare in central Myanmar (Smythies 1986).

It is likely that the species winters or occurs during passage in north-eastern India.

As a family they are easy to identify, but the family includes closely related and similar species and in some plumages identification is not easy. So it is likely the species has been overlooked among the more numerous Hirundines in north-eastern India.

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Fig. 2. Northern House Martin *Delichon urbica*

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Fig. 1. Northern House Martin *Delichon urbica*