

Black-necked Storks *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus* sighted along the India–Bangladesh border: Malda district, West Bengal, India

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On 21 August 2011, I was watching waterbirds near the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) field station at Alipore Border Out Post, situated c. 08 km from Malda town (English Bazar), West Bengal, India, along the India–Bangladesh border, in the eastern part of the district. This area is situated along Gangetic flood plains and has many low lying, shallow marshy areas, waterbodies and wetlands, which are excellent waterbird habitat, particularly during the monsoon. While observing birds from Indian side, on the roadside waterbodies, along the border fencing, at around 1025 hrs at a distance from c. 20 m, I saw six large storks foraging within the prohibited area of the no man's land, between the India and Bangladesh borders. They were in paddies, more towards Nawabgunj district, North-Western Province of Bangladesh. I observed the birds for more than 20 min. Their plumage was characteristic, with striking black-and-white markings, jet-black head, wingbar, and tail, which contrasted against the white plumage of the rest of the body, glossy dark green and purple neck, massive black bill and long coral-red legs. The colour of the iris of three birds was yellow (=female), and that of the other three was brown or black (=male). I identified those six birds as adult Black-necked Storks *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus* (Grimmett *et al.* 1998). I also noticed that each pair foraged close to each other, but maintained c. 6–8 m distance from the other pair. I suspect that these birds comprised three breeding pairs. I revisited the area on 28 August 2011 and saw four storks foraging in the same locality. Some local people informed me that the birds were present there since two weeks. It is not known if the storks use this area in other seasons too.

In the last few years, sightings of Black-necked Storks have become fairly common in the Gangetic flood plains of central West Bengal (Jha 2006; Sharma 2009), and from Bangladesh (Bangladesh Bird Club 2012). It has also been recorded historically from the northern part of the state, from the Buxa Tiger Reserve (Inglis *et al.* 1920a,b). Records also exist from Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary, Darjeeling district (Anonymous 1996), Mahananda Barrage, Garati Bheel, Chapramari Wildlife Sanctuary, and Rasik Bheel (Maheswaran *et al.* 2004). There are two very old records of this species from the southern part of the state from the Salt Lake, near Kolkata in 1939 (Home 1995), and from the Sunderbans (Mukherjee 1959). In Bangladesh, this species is thought to be a former resident, now a vagrant (BirdLife International 2012). In recent times, three Black-necked Storks were sighted on 08 March 2010 at Nagua Dhulia, Hakaluki Haor, Sylhet district, and earlier in December 2009, locals captured a single individual that was later sent it to the Dulahazra Safari Park (Bangladesh Bird Club 2012). One bird was also reported to be

held in captivity by fishery guards at Pashua haor, in the north-eastern region of Bangladesh on 10 March 1998 (Thompson & Johnson 2003).

My observations, and the sightings documented in literature, point to Black-necked Storks being far more common than previously known and resident in the India–Bangladesh border area. The Gangetic flood plains of India and Bangladesh are highly flood-prone, with annual seasonal flooding providing excellent wetlands for various species of waterbirds. Flooded rice paddy is the dominant crop here during the monsoon suggesting that the Black-necked Storks have a far wider distribution range in this region than merely the locations mentioned above. Observations of these storks using rice fields are increasing, similar to conditions for the species elsewhere in rice growing areas of the Indian Subcontinent (Sundar 2004). Increased conversions of wetlands to farmlands, and of crop fields to developed areas are potential threats to the species in this region.

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