

A photographic record of the White-winged Wood-duck *Asarcornis scutulata* from Pakke Tiger Reserve, Arunachal Pradesh, India

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The White-winged Wood-duck *Asarcornis scutulata* is native to Asia and ranges across north-eastern India, Bhutan (Choudhury 2007), Myanmar (Yin & Tun 1977), Bangladesh, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and Indonesia (Green 1992; Choudhury 1996, 2000). Once widely distributed through South-east Asia to Java and Sumatra, it is now considered extinct in Java and Malaysia (BirdLife International 2012). In north-eastern India, species distribution centres mostly in Assam (Ali and Ripley 1987; Choudhury 2002; Choudhury 2006), Arunachal Pradesh (Talukdar 1992) and Manipur (Higgins 1913). It mainly inhabits swampy areas and remote rainforests at altitudes ranging from 200 m to 1400 m above msl. Globally, less than 800 individuals are estimated to be left in the wild, of which 450 individuals are known to be present in India (BirdLife International 2012). The species is considered Endangered according to the IUCN Red List and a Schedule I species under the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. The species has been sighted on few occasions (Datta *et al.* 1999) in Pakke Tiger Reserve (PTR), Arunachal Pradesh and in Nameri National Park (Das 1995; Das & Deori 2012) in Assam, adjacent to PTR. Here we report a recent sighting and photo record of the species from PTR. Previous reported sightings of the White-winged Wood-duck from said area are from January 1991 and April 1992 (Choudhury 1995; Singh 1991; Datta *et al.* 1999). A more recent record from Arunachal Pradesh was from Namdhapha Tiger Reserve, when two females and one male were sighted at an altitude of 1705 m asl (Umesh *et al.* 2010).

In June 2009, the Wildlife Institute of India and Department of Science and Technology under the Government of India initiated a project on the dhole *Cuon alpinus* in PTR. Since then we have been systematically recording and maintaining an avifaunal checklist. We first sighted a pair of White-winged Wood-ducks in February 2010 [97] in a small muddy pool (27°00'N, 92°53'E; 220 m above msl), about two kilometres away from the Dekorai anti-poaching camp in PTR. The forest type where the sighting occurred was tropical evergreen dominated by *Syzygium cumini*, *Dillenia indica*, and *Duabanga* sp. (Champion & Seth 1968). During the entire duration of our research from June 2009 to April 2011, we managed to sight the species only once.

64% of total geographical area in north-eastern India is under forest cover (Champion & Seth 1968). However, this is rapidly declining across the region. The already small and fragmented population of the White-winged Wood-duck, is threatened by extinction due to the rainforest habitat destruction; especially disturbances in riparian forests. In much of its range, hunting and egg collection are also possible reasons for their decline.

The survival of the species mainly depends on the protection of dense and undisturbed primary rainforest. Many gaps exist in our knowledge of the species pertaining to its basic biology, behaviour, habitat preferences, and population status exist. Long-term studies are required to fill this void and especially to ensure the species' survival in this Himalayan biodiversity hotspot of north-eastern India.

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Photo: K.M. Selvan

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Sabine's Gull *Xema sabini* from Puthankadapuram, Kerala, India: a first record for South Asia

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Sabine's Gull *Xema sabini* is a long distance migrant. Mainly pelagic, it breeds in the Arctic and has a circumpolar distribution through northernmost North America and Eurasia (Olsen & Larsson 2003). It migrates south during autumn, winters in the cold waters of the Humboldt Current off the coast of Peru and Ecuador, and off south-west Africa in the Benguela Current region (Burger & Gochfeld 1996). It is a small gull, which can only be potentially confused with a first-winter Black-legged Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla*. However distinctive features discussed later in this note, separate this species from the Kittiwake. The gull has not been reported previously from South Asia (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). In the Oriental Region, there is a breeding population in north-eastern Siberia and there exist records from Japan, Korea, and Sumatra (Olsen & Larsson 2003). It has also been seen in the equatorial and northern Indian Ocean from Mozambique and Somalia (Olsen & Larsson 2003).

This note describes the sighting of a single, possibly second-summer Sabine's Gull from Puthankadapuram beach, Thrissur district, Kerala (10°35'N, 75°59'E), which is c. 5 km from the nearest town of Chavakkad.

A solitary gull appearing similar to a Kittiwake, was photographed by PPS on 3 May 2013 at 0830 hrs along with a mixed flock of tern species. PPS posted two pictures [98, 99], on the Birdwatchers of Kerala Facebook discussion group showing the bird sitting on the beach; one picture showed a Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* for size comparison [100].

Since the Black-legged Kittiwake was recorded from the same site in February 2013 (Das *et al.* 2013), PJ and DK initially thought the gull to be that species. The black colouration on the nape matched with a first-winter Kittiwake, but the bi-coloured

beak, prominent white tips to the flight feathers, lack of a dark carpal bar while the bird was at rest, and the absence of a dark patch behind the eyes made identification inconclusive. PPS saw the bird once again on the morning of 4 May but could not photograph it. PJ and PPS together analysed more photographs on the same evening—and one hazy photograph of the bird in flight [101] had the same upper wing plumage as a Sabine's Gull. Realising the rarity, PJ contacted MP and DK immediately and sent them the photograph for further analysis. Meanwhile, PJ & PPS could not find the bird amidst flocks of terns on 5 May despite an extensive search.

The direct size comparison with a visibly smaller Common Tern in the picture tilted the discussion heavily towards a Kittiwake. The bi-coloured beak, which is a distinctive feature of Sabine's, could be argued also for a Kittiwake, resembling the transition from the black beak of a first-winter to the yellow of an adult (a second calendar year bird). The absence of a dark carpal bar, a feature for Sabine's, could also stand for a Kittiwake that had moulted its dark "M" feathers to yield a more Sabine's-like upper wing pattern. The bill and head shape were a bit tricky to assess from photographs as they depended on the angle from which the picture was shot. The bird in the photos neither rendered a 'cute' small-billed appearance, nor the characteristic rounded head of a Sabine's. The shape of the bill, particularly the upper mandible, did definitely not fit the description of a Kittiwake either. The legs appeared clearly longer, much longer than of individuals in any Kittiwake photographs and were distinctly flesh-coloured, which favoured an immature Sabine's; although leg colouration can be variable in Kittiwakes. Though the Kittiwake certainly bears white tips on its primaries, the amount of