

*intermedia* as occurring in Baluchistan, Gilgit, Kashmir, and the North-West Provinces at between 3660 and 5180 m on bare, deserted plains and cliffs, considering it as only a winter visitor to the north-western Himalayas. Ali & Ripley (1987) describe the species as a common winter visitor to Gilgit. Grimmett *et al.* (1998) also cite this, adding that it is occasionally recorded in Baluchistan and the Indus Valley in Pakistan. There do not appear to be any documented records from the Indus Valley in Ladakh.

On 2 March 2003, I was being driven along a road to the south of the Indus River, near Stakna (25 kms east of Leh, c. 3000 m asl). There had been heavy snow during the previous few days, and light snow continued to fall that morning. However, in places the wind had blown the snow to create small patches of bare, snow-free, stony, and sandy ground. These patches attracted small groups of passerines such as Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris*, Tibetan Snowfinches *Montifringilla adamsi*, and Brandt's Mountain Finches *Leucosticte brandti*. We stopped the car at 1230 hrs and I got out to watch a male Great Rosefinch *Carpodacus rubicilla* on an area of gently sloping, dry rocky terrain, close to an agricultural station. I immediately noticed two smaller, very stocky birds on the ground, which then flew to the top of a dry-stone wall about 15 m away, affording good views, even though light snow was falling. They were clearly sparrow-like, dumpy, with short tails. What was most striking was the bold head pattern, namely a broad pale crown stripe, bordered on either side by a dull darker brown stripe, with a pale supercilium below that. Both extended in a downward curve behind the ear

coverts. The greyish brown mantle was boldly streaked, whilst the paler under parts were more lightly streaked. In flight the tail appeared distinctly rounded with a striking, bold whitish tip. There was also a white patch at the base of the primaries. No call was heard. I watched the birds for about five minutes.

The combination of the bold head pattern, white-tipped tail and overall stocky build is diagnostic for the Rock Sparrow, which could only possibly be confused with a female House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*, which lacks such a striking head pattern. I am familiar with the species in southern Europe and a winter record from Ladakh is not unexpected, given the records from Gilgit.

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## The Black-browed Tit *Aegithalos bonvaloti* in Arunachal Pradesh: A new species for the Indian Subcontinent

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On 7 May 2013, at 0721 hrs, while birding at Namti (28°11'N, 97°01'E, 1459 m asl) near Walong, Anjaw district (Arunachal Pradesh, India) we noticed six to seven *Aegithalos* tits in a dry bush along the Walong–Kibithu road. As the tits appeared unfamiliar to us we immediately took their photographs. Within a few seconds they disappeared and were elusive during our subsequent visits to the site. However, on 8 May 2013 at 0557 hrs MS shot another picture of an adult *Aegithalos* tit close to Walong (28°09'25"N, 97°01'13"E; 1428 m asl).

Our first reaction after watching the birds at Namti was that we had seen a new species for the area as the birds resembled none of the *Aegithalos* tits that are known to occur in north-eastern India. After a quick reference to Meyer de Schauensee (1984) and Rasmussen & Anderton (2012), and comparing pictures of the birds on our camera monitors with plates in these

books, the birds were identified as Black-browed Tit *Aegithalos bonvaloti*. Later, based on the description and plates in del Hoyo *et al.* (2008), and MacKinnon & Phillips (2000) we were able to confidently confirm the identity of the birds. The birds seen by us on 7 May were in a roving group of six to seven birds, restless and persistently calling softly like other tits, and maintaining group cohesion. They seemed uninterested in our presence and did not behave warily. The birds were in a fairly open area covered with fern, and scattered stands of pines [150].

### Description

The main diagnostic features of a Black-browed Tit that can be discerned from the three accompanying photos are as following: The bird in [151] is most likely an adult in worn plumage with sides of head and markings on throat dull black, no cinnamon

on upper breast, but vestiges of dark grey feathers forming an uneven band, paler and buffer ear-coverts, underparts buff with traces of grey. Iris pale yellow, bill black and legs yellow.

The bird in [152] prominently displays a rather broad white coronal stripe and hint of ochre on forehead. The center of throat is black forming inverted 'V'; white moustaches are connected to broad white breast band. The tail is dark grey, outermost pairs of feathers show white outer web.

The bird in [153] shows sides of crown, lores, and upper ear-coverts black, lower ear-coverts cinnamon buff, upper parts greyish, tail dark grey, lower throat and upper breast white, side of breast, upper flanks and band across lower breast cinnamon, belly white and vent cinnamon. Iris white, bill black and legs brownish.

Knowing that Black-browed Tit and Rufous-fronted Tit *A. iouschistos* resemble each other, we compared our pictures of Black-browed Tit with pictures of Rufous-fronted Tit in different sources. Compared to the Rufous-fronted Tit, the Walong birds had a more black and white pattern on throat, the rufous and the greyish breast band was well demarcated from breast and belly. Moreover, all birds in Walong displayed prominently white coronal and moustachial stripes.

We also circulated our photos of the tits to James Eaton, Tim Inskipp, Krys Kazmierczak, Peter Kennerlay, Ben King, Hans Peters, Praveen J., Pamela Rasmussen, and Brian Small. Eaton (*in litt.*, email dated 14 May 2013 & 16 May 2013) said that these were Black-browed Tit based on his experience in Sichuan, China. Rasmussen (*in litt.*, email dated 26 May 2013) opined that the, "photos clearly show *Aegithalos bonvaloti*." Inskipp (*in litt.*, email dated 2 June 2013) stated that there was, "clearly no doubt about the identification." King (*in litt.*, email dated 24 July 2013) compared our photos with the specimens of *A. bonvaloti* from NW Burma [Myanmar] in the American Museum of Natural History (Michigan), and said that, "they are an excellent match."

## Discussion

The Black-browed Tit is a poorly known species with unassessed status (del Hoyo *et al.* 2008), and for which taxonomic problems abound, and in many cases these are still open to question. Vaurie (1959), and Snow (1967) treated *bonvaloti* as a conspecific of *iouschistos* due to their overall similarity and largely continuous distribution along the Himalayas, continuing into south-western China. Inskipp *et al.* (1996) treated it as a species. Wunderlich (1991) treated these as separate species as they are morphologically distinct, and their ranges meet with no evidence of hybridisation. Dickinson (2003) felt unable to unite *iouschistos* and *bonvaloti* (made up of the three eastern and south-eastern representatives: *bonvaloti*, *obscuratus*, *sharpei*),

and listed three species. Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) mention possible range overlap in south-eastern Tibet between *iouschistos* and *bonvaloti*, "but the two are highly distinct morphologically and evidently at least parapatric." Eck & Martens (2006) reviewed and discussed the proposed taxonomic changes and their reliability in terms of Biological Species Concept with respect to secondary contacts, hybridisation, introgression, bioacoustics, and molecular genetics. They were of the view that in the detailed text of Harrap (1996), with the excellent plates by David Quinn, it becomes evident that present taxonomic listings are relatively superficial and these will certainly change when more is known about contact zones, acoustics, and molecular genetics.

The distribution of Black-browed Tit is given as resident in central Szechwan (Sichuan) from Tatsienlu south-west through south Szechwan to north-west Yunnan by Meyer de Schauensee (1984), as, "common resident in south-east Xizang (Tibet) and SW China," (MacKinnon & Phillips 2000), and extreme north-east Myanmar, east of River Irrawaddy and south to Myitkyina (del Hoyo *et al.* 2008; Harrap & Quinn 1996). Smythies (1986) mentions Yunnan and south-eastern Tibet for its distribution range.

Although the sighting of the species in the Walong area of Arunachal Pradesh constitutes a first record for the Indian Subcontinent, it is not difficult to explain its presence here. While Ali & Ripley (1998) did not record it, Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) mentioned that it is "possible in NE Arunachal Pradesh (*bonvaloti*)" as the species is resident in adjacent areas, i.e., north-east of Arunachal Pradesh. Vaurie (1972) states it breeds in "Southern Tibet" and "Southeastern Plateau" [of Tibet]; he examined 25 specimens. George Forrest collected 17 specimens from pine forests during May–July 1918 in Lichiang or Likiang Range in north-western Yunnan (27°12'N, 100°13'E; Rothschild 1921). King (1988) found the species very common during a brief survey in April 1989 in south-western Sichuan. Kinnear (1934) records it from Adung Valley in north-eastern Myanmar, an area not too far east from the Indo-Myanmar border in Anjaw district of Arunachal Pradesh. Cheng (1987) included in its range Sichuan (northern part–Barkam, western part–Kangding to Btang, south-western part Muli), Guizhou (western part Weining), Yunnan (north-western part), and Xizang [Tibet] (southern part – Bomi and Zayu).

During our brief stay of three days in the Walong area we encountered Black-browed Tit three times but did not get any Rufous-fronted Tit. Incidentally, we were probably less than 100 km south-west of Zayu (=Gyigang) which, according to Harrap (1996), is the western limit of *bonvaloti* although Cheng (1987) lists *bonvaloti* for Bomi, within the range of *iouschistos*, and



150. Adult Black-browed Tit *A. bonvaloti* were seen in scattered stands of pines at Namti.



151. Adult Black-browed Tit *A. bonvaloti* in worn plumage.



152. Adult Black-browed Tit *A. bonvaloti*  
Photos: H. S. Sangha



153. Adult Black-browed Tit *A. bonvaloti*.  
Photo: Manoj Sharma

# Letter to the Editor

## Claimed sighting of Black Terns *Chlidonias nigra* in Gujarat, India

In a note in *Indian Birds* [6 (6): 165–166], Ketan Tatu reported sighting (and photographing) three or four Black Terns *Chlidonias nigra* at Bhaskarpura, Saurendranagar District, Gujarat, on 2 October 2009. I have only recently seen this, and other recent issues of *Indian Birds* (they were lost in the post), hence the delay in sending this letter.

The rather poor, and in two cases, very small, photographs accompanying the note show Whiskered Terns *C. hybrida* moulting from juvenile to first winter plumage. In spite of what the author says, the head pattern is typical for Whiskered in this plumage; Black Terns of the nominate (Eurasian) race always show solid, unstreaked, black caps contiguous with larger, solid black cheek patches extending well below the eyelines, in both immature and winter plumages. This feature is diagnostic when compared to the head patterns of both Whiskered, and White-winged *C. leucopterus* Terns. The breast smudges are not.

Rather faint breast patches are frequently present on sub-adult, and moulting adult, Whiskered, as reference to most good and relevant field guides would show. Such breast smudges also occasionally occur on moulting White-winged Terns. In Black Terns the patches are usually much more striking. In addition, at least one of the birds shows the slightly darker tail tips, which are a feature of Whiskered in this plumage. The classic tern identification guide by Olsen & Larsson (1995) describes and illustrates all the marsh tern plumages, and should be consulted when unusual tern sightings are suspected.

The author lists a series of past-published reports of Black Terns in India but omits to mention that Rasmussen & Anderton (2005) consider it hypothetical. The senior author found the sole skin was misidentified, as indeed were the birds ringed at Point Calimere in 1989–1991 as I saw the photographs of them. The *Handbook* (Ali & Ripley 2001) only mentions Alexander's 1949 record from Delhi, in spite of large-scale collection of bird specimens over the previous two centuries. Ganguli (1975), who knew Alexander better than the authors of the *Handbook*, considers that he may have misidentified a White-winged Tern. I remain unconvinced that Black Terns have ever occurred in India. I believe identification errors have occurred in the past because the full range of plumages of the two other marsh tern species has not been appreciated sufficiently widely among observers.

Asian migrants, such as Amur Falcon *Falco amurensis*, Lesser Kestrel *F. naumanni*, European Roller *Coracias garrulus*, European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster*, etc., that cross north-western India, on migration to Africa, winter in the eastern and southern parts of that continent. A route across India is therefore expedient. However, the Eurasian race of the Black Tern only winters in the seas off West Africa. Its shortest, and safest, migration route for the Asian population is therefore, westwards through Asia into the Mediterranean, and then down the Atlantic coast of Africa. Indeed, Black Tern is an extreme rarity in Eastern Africa and the Rarities Committee there considers any claims. It is highly unlikely that any individuals would wander directly southwards into India, but unlikely things do happen with birds! All future claims should be supported by incontrovertible evidence, ideally with very good photographs.

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Vaurie (1959) lists *bonvaloti* for Pendjama (=Penam Dzung).

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