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Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* in Bhutan

The Northern Wheatear nests widely across northern Eurasia, southwards to the Middle East and North Africa, and its breeding range includes north-eastern Canada and western Alaska. Birds from its north-easternmost breeding grounds cross the Middle East and central Asia en route to winter in Africa (Kren & Zoerb 1997). Alaskan breeding wheatears, fitted with geolocators, have been documented to fly 14,500 km both ways, to and from wintering grounds in northern sub-Saharan Africa (Bairlein *et al.* 2012).

On a birding trip with Rockjumper Birding Tours to Bhutan, in March–April 2019, led by DE and André Bernon, and with Roberson among ten mostly American participants, we spent a couple of days birding the Puna Tsang Chhu from Punakha,

Punakha Province, downstream ten kilometers to Wangdu Phodrang. This stretch of river is now famed for its vagrant waders and waterfowl: Eight of the rarities discussed in Bishop (1999); 38 species of ducks, waders, and gulls mentioned in Tobgay (2017), many of them rare for Bhutan. A primary viewing spot is just north of Wangdu Phodrang, where the river's inlets and islets are just opposite Hotel Pema Karpo. We had excellent waterbirds at this site, including 51 Pallas's Gull *Ichthyaetus ichthyaeus*, on 31 March 2019. Yet, our initial stop on 30 March 2019 was 200 m southwards where barren agricultural fields and bits of scrub were across the road from the Puna Tsang Chhu.

We stopped at those dry fields to look for an Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina*, another Bhutan rarity, which had recently been discovered by others. We relocated and photographed it, and decided to see if other migrant land birds might be present. A nearby scrubby patch had at least 20 Little Bunting *Emberiza pusilla* and two Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica* (rare in Bhutan). Then DE spotted a Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* on an adjacent boulder. He sees many Northern Wheatears annually in his Swedish homeland, and immediately identified it. This female wheatear was smaller and shorter-legged than the Isabelline Wheatear present nearby, and was pale grey from crown to lower back, had contrastingly dark wings, and a very long primary projection. It was creamy-whitish below with a buffy throat and a white supercilium that was broader behind the eye. It disappeared shortly after everyone saw it and some obtained photos [118, 119].



118. Female Northern Wheatear, 30 March 2019, Punakha Province, Bhutan.

D. Roberson



119. Another view of the female Northern Wheatear, 30 March 2019, Punakha Province, Bhutan.

D. Eterius

After scrutinizing the record shots that were obtained on site, we conclude the following: This bird has, prior to its spring migration, renewed a few tertials and greater coverts whereas the rest of the plumage is very worn. This appearance indicates the second calendar year. Northern Wheatears of all ages undergo a partial winter moult and moult limits, as seen in this bird, can possibly be seen in both adult and second year individuals. However, adults are usually more uniform and fresh in plumage. These details suggest the wheatear was on its first spring migration northwards.

We knew at the time that the Northern Wheatear was rare but research showed it to be a first record for Bhutan (Spierenburg 2005; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Damle & Inskipp 2014). Given its long migration routes, vagrants have occurred widely on migration, both in North America and outside its usual routes in Eurasia (Roberson 1980; Cramp 1988). Damle & Inskipp (2014) reviewed all previous published reports from the Indian Subcontinent through 2013, and found about a half-dozen verifiable records for India, based on specimens or photos, and one from Nepal. A review of eBird found two recent spring records from north-eastern India: Arunachal Pradesh (14 March 2014) and Sikkim (30 April 2016). Our Bhutan record is geographically between these locations.

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Letter to the Editor

Radde's Warbler *Phylloscopus schwarzi* from the Indian Subcontinent—withdrawal of records

Praveen *et al.* (2017) reviewed the sight records for Radde's Warbler *Phylloscopus schwarzi* from Nepal and Bangladesh to assess the evidence for including it in the checklist of the birds of the Indian Subcontinent. The species was accepted into the subcontinental list based upon the two detailed notes of the sight records from Nepal, and multiple individuals recorded in Bangladesh in 1986 for which the context was available. Subsequently, Pamela Rasmussen wrote to Praveen J., about the possibility that those birds were Yellow-streaked Warblers *P. armandi*—a species that could occur in both, Nepal, and Bangladesh, and could look nearly identical, except for its calls. We contacted the observers once more to discuss their notes in this new light. All observers admitted that the Yellow-streaked Warbler was not considered while identifying those birds as Radde's Warblers. The only record for which calls were available was the one from Charali (Nepal) and the observer said that he "... would be surprised (and very disappointed) if I'd identified a bird calling like that as a Radde's back in 1979"; but he agreed that it is "... looking rather thin for a first and is probably best left boxed" (Richard Fairbank, *in litt.*, e-mail dated 15 March 2019). For the Pokhara (Nepal) record, considering the circumstances, the observer felt "... it's best I withdraw the record," (Tony Baker, *in litt.*, e-mail dated 17 March 2019). For the Gulshan (Bangladesh) record, the observer had noted the stubby bill, which is considered diagnostic in literature (vis-à-vis a Yellow-streaked Warbler) but for consistency, was "prepared to withdraw my records" (Bill Harvey, *in litt.*, e-mail dated 29 June 2019).

With a large number of photographers in the region, Radde's—as well as Yellow-streaked Warblers are expected to turn up eventually—until then, we withdraw this species from the list of birds of the Indian Subcontinent.

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¹ Newspaper of 24th carried a column with a statement from the forest department that it was seen three days ago. Exact date deduced.