

# Eversmann's Redstart *Phoenicurus erythronotus*: A new record for Punjab, and a review of its status in India

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## Abstract

We discovered a female Eversmann's Redstart *Phoenicurus erythronotus* in a small, mixed woodland area near Harike Wildlife Sanctuary, in February 2019. Judging from known records, accepted in this paper, we conclude that it is likely to be scarce, but regular, in winter, and on passage, particularly in Jammu & Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh, but potentially also in Uttarakhand. It may be overlooked due to the relative lack of birding in, or access to, these areas at the appropriate times of year, or misidentified due to confusion with similar species. Unusually harsh winter weather conditions may well be the reason that this particular bird was discovered in the Indian plains, considerably further south from its expected range in India, but as previously noted in historical records from the plains of Pakistan.

## Introduction

Eversmann's<sup>1</sup> Redstart *Phoenicurus erythronotus*, also known as Rufous-backed Redstart, breeds in Central Asia from the Lake Baikal area, north-western Mongolia and southwards to south-eastern Kazakhstan, western China, Kyrgyzstan, and northern Tajikistan. In the non-breeding season, it usually occurs at lower levels from the Tien Shan southwards to Iran, with some individuals migrating to the north-western parts of Pakistan and India, and west-central Nepal (Collar 2019). Clement & Rose (2015) considered it to be unpredictable or erratic in occurrence or numbers and highly nomadic in its wintering range. It is also known to shift wintering grounds from year to year and month to month, depending on climatic conditions (del Hoyo & Collar 2016).

We discovered a female Eversmann's Redstart in a small, mixed woodland area near Harike Wildlife Sanctuary, Punjab, in February 2019. The circumstances of this observation, together with identification pointers, vis-à-vis the most likely confusion species, are discussed, and a critical review of its status in India presented.

## Observations and identification

On 09 February 2019, the authors, together with Komal Agrawal [KA], decided to explore a small wooded area, of about 0.3 sq. km, at Dineke (31.15°N, 74.92°E; 205 m asl) near Harike Wildlife Sanctuary. The area was open scrub woodland consisting primarily of *Acacia catechu*, shisham *Dalbergia sissoo*, and sarpat grass *Saccharum spontaneum*, with sandy patches in between, surrounded by intensive large-scale cultivation and the Sutlej River flowing parallel on one side at the opposite bank [181].



181. Open scrub woodland habitat at Dineke.

At 1632 h MGP noticed a female redstart fly to a low perch about one to two meters above the ground. On landing it did not shiver its tail in the manner of the Black Redstart *P. ochruros* seen a few minutes earlier. It was also paler below and had clearly visible white wing-bars. MGP immediately drew the attention of PS and KA to the bird, and all watched it through binoculars and telescope from a distance of 30 m or more. MGP and PS tentatively identified it as a female Blue-capped Redstart *P. coeruleocephala* based on the wing-bars and dismissed Blue-fronted Redstart *P. frontalis* as it lacks them. During prolonged and closer views, the bright orange rump and extensive orange in the tail were obvious [182]. Realising that these features did not fit Blue-capped, and further noting that the outer tail feathers were completely orange without the black tips of Blue-fronted, PS called it out as an Eversmann's Redstart. Coincidentally MGP and PS had been discussing the prospect of finding this species, together with Tim Inskipp and Gunjan Arora, whilst birding in Uttarakhand the previous week, and hence were familiar with the significance of its occurrence, plus some of its identification features.

1. Eduard Eversmann, a German naturalist, most known for his travels and studies in Russia in the early half of the nineteenth century, has one other bird, which occurs in India, named after him: the Yellow-eyed Pigeon *Columba eversmanni*.



182. Eversmann's Redstart: rump and tail pattern.

The bird was watched well until 1707 h when it flew an apparent short distance but could not be relocated. It would usually perch at a distance of one to two meters from the ground, frequently flying short distances to different perches, always at a similar height. It often dropped to the ground to pick up prey, when it would sometimes return to the same perch. It didn't allow a particularly close approach, but in typical redstart fashion usually perched fairly prominently, giving us good views from a comfortable distance. Compared to the other redstarts, including Black, it appeared similarly sized or slightly larger, and noticeably slenderer with relatively long wings. It also frequently held its tail cocked and wings slightly drooped [183], like a Red-breasted Flycatcher *Ficedula parva*. The tail was flicked up, but never visibly shivered.



183. Eversmann's Redstart: typical cocked tail and drooping wings stance.

The most prominent plumage features were the two clear white wing-bars, formed by the white tips of the median and greater coverts, and the white fringes to the tertials and secondaries, the latter forming a clear pale panel on the folded wing. Three or four of the innermost greater coverts had broader white fringes, compared to the narrower buff fringes of the outermost, further accentuating the pale wing panel [184]. This contrast in greater coverts between the recently moulted adult inners and retained juvenile outers would probably age the bird as a first-winter, though Shirihai & Svensson (2018) state that some females 'are difficult even in the hand'.



184. Eversmann's Redstart: wing pattern including moult contrast.

Overall, the bird was paler than both, the Blue-capped-, and Blue-fronted Redstarts. It was greyish-brown above with indistinct orange fringes to the scapulars and lower back, and pale greyish-brown below, without any orange tones. A small brown ear covert patch, and lores, and buff eye-ring, were distinctive on close views [185]. The forehead was no paler, contra some of the literature. The rump and tail were a bright warm orange: the outer tail feathers were completely orange, with no wheatear-like black tips, present on the female Blue-fronted Redstart. The central tail feathers were blackish. Although difficult to observe clearly, brief views of the spread tail suggested that all rectrices, other than the central pair and not just the outermost, were completely orange.



185. Eversmann's Redstart: head pattern with brownish ear coverts.

All: Pujia Sharma

The bird called quite frequently: a trilling 'trrr-trrrr' similar to Blue-capped, but slightly slower, deeper, and drier (Prince 2019b).

The long-winged and slender structure, behaviour including tail cocking, and plumage features, including the brown ear-covert patch, white wing-bars and wing panel, orange rump and fully orange tail sides, confirm the identification as a female Eversmann's Redstart. A video of its behaviour is available (Sharma & Prince 2019) and an account and description entered into eBird (Prince 2019a).

This particular individual seemed a typical specimen, as per the species account in Shirihai & Svensson (2018). Rasmussen

& Anderton (2012) mention a 'whitish forehead', which was not present. A careful scrutiny of images of other individuals from various works, and Online sources, show this to be barely discernible and unlikely to be of identification help. The illustration of the female in Grimmett et al. (2011) shows darker, orange-washed underparts but we can find no mention of such strong tones in other works, while Clement & Rose (2015) mention that the female can be 'slightly warmer brown on flanks'. We did not note any orange to the underparts of the Dineke bird, nor do any specimens at the Natural History Museum (NHM), London, show this feature (Tim Inskipp, *in litt.*, message dated 21 March 2019), although some photos of first-winter birds (e.g., Shirihaï & Svensson 2018: 254) suggest that some individuals may show a hint of orange to the vent.

The cocking of the tail and drooping of the wings is a known behavioural feature, previously documented by Whistler (1920). Similarly, the lack of tail shivering is noted in multiple works disagrees with Roberts (1992) who noted that many individuals he watched shivered their tails exactly like Black Redstarts.

The following afternoon, 10 February 2019, we revisited the same area where the Eversmann's Redstart was found the previous day and, after a short search, PS relocated the bird at 1642 h. She noticed it using some of the same perching spots as on the previous day. KA and MGP joined PS shortly, and they all continued to watch it on and off until 1720 h. During this time the bird covered a relatively small area of about 100–150 m radius.

Interestingly, the birds seen by Whistler (1920) in the plains of Pakistan near the Chenab River were in a similar habitat of '*kikur*' (*Acacia* sp.) trees along the canal's banks, or in small acacia groves, in arid areas.

## Discussion

### Historical records

Ali & Ripley (1997) described Eversmann's Redstart as a 'Winter visitor in variable numbers, as a rule not abundant. The western Himalayas in Chitral, less plentifully in Gilgit, Kashmir Valley, Kulu, Simla, west-central Nepal'. Historical and recent records appear to support this conclusion.

Roberts (1992) observed that, in Gilgit, it haunts willow (*Salix* sp.) and tamarisk (*Tamarix* sp.) patches along the main river valleys, and it was found from December to March in Gilgit's lower valleys. He also mentioned that the species occurred in Chitral more plentifully than further eastwards in Gilgit. This concurs with Biddulph (1881) who 'procured several specimens' from the Chitral Valley, but just two from Gilgit.

As well as those discussed below, there are c.61 historical specimens in BMNH (The Natural History Museum, Tring, UK) described as being from Pakistan, including several from Gilgit and Chitral, plus one from 'Cashmere' [=Pakistan-administered Kashmir] in the Hume Collection there (Tim Inskipp, *in litt.*, e-mail dated 21 March 2019).

### Jammu & Kashmir, and Ladakh

Scully (1881) noted that Eversmann's Redstart is a winter visitor to Gilgit, 'common at an elevation of 5,000 feet [=1,524 m] from the middle of October to the first week in March' and collected at least 16 specimens. Biddulph (1881) also collected two males in December and January. W. Abbott collected a female on 10 December 1895 in the Vale of Kashmir (VertNet 2019). Ward

(1906) mentioned that most of his specimens were obtained in the early spring near Somagai (location not traced). Ward collected two more specimens on 15 November 1905, and 28 December 1907, the latter from Dachigam (RMNH 2019). Osmaston (1927) considered it not very common but a regular cold weather visitor to the Kashmir Valley, where it was found singly or in pairs from November to January.

Meinertzhagen (1927) obtained a male on 01 March 1925 from Barramula (=Baramulla), noting that it was the only one seen throughout March in Kashmir. As with many of Meinertzhagen's records, however, this may be of dubious origin, but is well within the known range, and season, for the species. One female was collected on 19 October 1934 from Khalatse in Leh District but without details of the collector (VertNet 2019).

### Himachal Pradesh

Oates (1890) noted, 'The most easterly locality from which I have seen a specimen of this bird is Kotokhai in the Himalayas'. Baker (1924) quoted the same, and the Kotokhai (=Kotkhai, Shimla, Himachal Pradesh) specimen has not been traced. There is an unsexed specimen taken on 25 January 1920 in the erstwhile princely Keonthal State (now in Shimla-, and Kinnaur Districts, Himachal Pradesh) in the 'Simla Hills' in the collection of A. E. Jones (Abdulali 1987). In a letter, dated 03 February 1920, to Whistler (1920), A. E. Jones confirmed that he had just received a female in the flesh from Simla [=Shimla]. Jones (1948) later elaborated that, 'It has been recorded, years ago, from Kotkhai and I had a female sent to me from Tara Devi, 6,700 feet (=2,042 m). These were probably storm-driven birds. Whistler has given us two records from Kangra, both occurrences in February'. Here, Jones (1948) specifically referred to the Kotkhai specimen, as mentioned in Oates (1890), as different from the specimen sent to him from Tara Devi. Therefore, the specimen currently housed at the Bombay Natural History Society (henceforth, BNHS) is the same one from Tara Devi, now in Shimla District, which was sent to Jones (1948) and would historically be part of the then princely hill state of Keonthal.

Whistler (1926) saw a female on 10 February 1921 on the golf course in lower Dharamsala, and a male on 11 February 1922 at a spit of sandy ground with thorn bushes in the Chakki riverbed. Koelz collected 13 specimens at Chiassu [=Chanshu] and one at Lipe [=Lippa] between 17 November and 01 December 1930 (VertNet 2019), and in January 1933 noted that the species was rather common along the river at Kullu, whence several were collected (Koelz 1940; VertNet 2019). One other Chiassu specimen from 01 December 1930 lacked a collector's name (VertNet 2019), but was presumably Koelz's.

### Uttarakhand

There is just one historical record of a skin of an adult male collected from 'Himalayas, Garhwāl' but no date or named collector was given (Reid 1890). This record was apparently overlooked by Baker (1924) and all subsequent authors, including Mohan & Sondhi (2017). The specimen was not listed in Reid (1886) but was included in the subsequent edition (Reid 1890). Anon. (1889) revealed that, in the Minutes of the January 1888 meeting, 83 skins of birds from Garhwal District were donated by the 'Museum Collector'. These were the only bird specimens from Garhwal that he donated during that period, according to the monthly museum reports from April 1885 to February 1888, so it is highly likely that the Eversmann's Redstart specimen was

included in this batch. It was probably collected by Juman, a shikari the Committee agreed to employ in September 1886. Zarrin (2016) examined the extant collection but did not mention it, however there is little doubt that the specimen existed at the time of Reid (1890), and a re-examination of the archives of the State Museum in Lucknow would be worthwhile to confirm its current existence.

## Recent records

### Jammu & Kashmir, and Ladakh

Mallon (1987) observed two males on 06 February 1981 in the Hemischu Valley, and one, in the same locality, five days later. He confirmed (*in litt.*, e-mail dated 17 March 2019) that he found the birds in a patch of *Hippophae rhamnoides* and that they were his only sightings during four winters spent in Ladakh from 1980 to 1984, of which the first two winters comprised extensive surveys in the lower hills, and the latter two were concentrated in the higher zones; the latter habitat was thought to be less suitable for the species. Pfister (2004) described the species as 'a rare passage migrant in winter (December–February) through the lower valley bottoms of western central Ladakh', and may have based this comment on Mallon's (1987) record. The photograph included in Pfister (2004) was taken in Kyrgyzstan; not Ladakh (Otto Pfister, *in litt.*, e-mail dated 26 March 2019).

Macfadyen (1984) reported a female on 19 May 1984 during an eight kilometre walk from Sonamarg towards Zoji La Pass, recording in his notebook at the time, 'Redstart female, brown, white eyering, tail orange not rufous as most redstarts, orange extends to vent, white wing bar, centre of tail dark brown, extends across tail at tip but not as a separate bar like white-capped; tail cocked upwards vigorously but infrequently' (Matthew Macfadyen, *in litt.*, e-mail dated 20 February 2019). Interestingly, this is the only Indian record from as late as mid-May. There are two recent photographic records: Soni (2018) photographed a male on 23 January 2018 near Jodhpur village in Doda District, which is also included in Sharma et al. (2018), leading the latter to suggest it being a 'rare winter visitor'; Singh (2013) included an undated photograph of a female from near Sunderbani, in Rajouri District, and its actual date could not be confirmed by the observer (Rajendra Singh, *in litt.*, e-mail dated 27 March 2019).

In addition to these, there are several records from Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, e.g., see Shah (2016) [186]. Here it is a regular passage migrant, being recorded in each recent year, from 2013 to 2018, with numbers peaking in November and March. These records included a juvenile on 24 August 2014 but, otherwise, the earliest autumn date was 28 October 2017. Birds were commonly recorded in November and December, with fewer observations from later in the winter, when some birds are known to be present near villages in the lower valleys (below 2,500 m). None has been observed between May and July (Imran Shah, *in litt.*, e-mail dated 06 March 2019).



Imran Shah

186. Male Rufous-backed Redstart, Gilgit-Baltistan. © used under CC BY-SA / Cropped from original.

### Himachal Pradesh

den Besten (2004) referred to the species as a vagrant, with three individual records, in the Dhauladhar range around Dharamsala, between 1997 and 2003. However, he (*in litt.*, message dated 24 March 2019) is unable to recall any details of the observations; therefore we have treated his records as unconfirmed in this paper. Das (2014) photographed a female on 20 December 2014 in Bhojnagar, Solan District, and Kumar (2012, 2016, and 2018a,b,c) in Udaipur, Lahaul District, photographed a male in January 2012, a male being pursued by a male *Güldenstädt's* Redstart *P. erythrogastrus* in December 2016, and up to six birds in November 2018. (See Fig. 1; Table 1.)

### Unconfirmed records

A thorough investigation revealed several other reports of Eversmann's Redstarts but after critical assessments, based on original accounts and descriptions, their documentation was considered insufficient to include in this analysis. For completeness, these are listed below (Table 2).

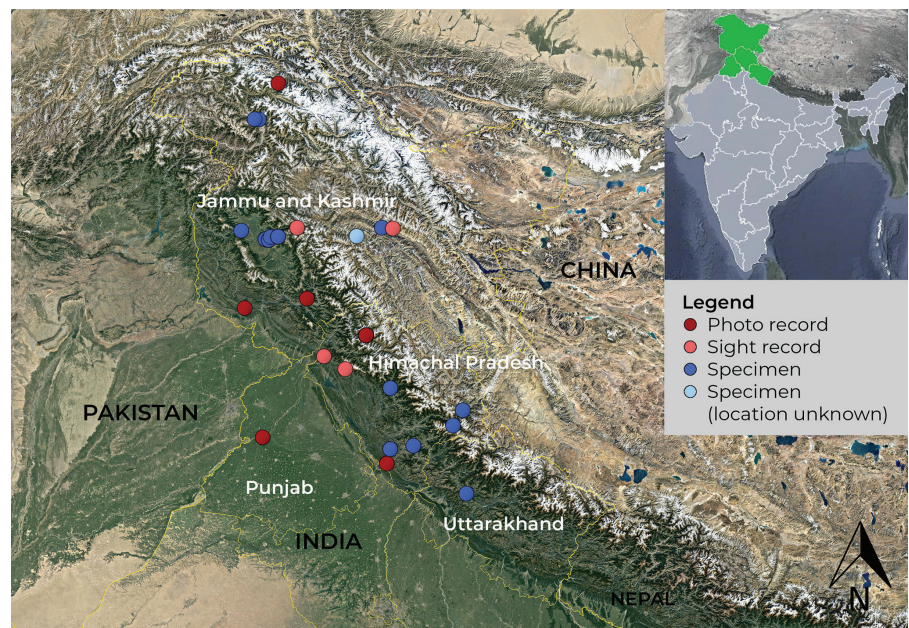


Fig. 1 Eversmann's Redstart records in India. Map prepared before 31 October 2019.

**Table 1.** Records of Eversmann's Redstart from India, listed state-wise and chronologically

Locality	Type	Date	Comments	Reference
<b>Jammu &amp; Kashmir, and Ladakh</b>				
Gilgit	S	October 1878–March 1879	11 males, 5 females	Scully (1881)
Gilgit	S	December 1878, January 1879	2 males	Biddulph (1881)
Vale of Kashmir	S	10 December 1895	USNM Birds #152716 (female), W. Abbott	VertNet (2019)
Kashmir	S	15 November 1905	RMNH.AVES #129658 (female), A. E. Ward	RMNH, Leiden, Netherlands (2019)
Dachigam, Kashmir	S	28 December 1907	RMNH.AVES #129659 (male), A. E. Ward	RMNH, Leiden, Netherlands (2019)
Somagai (Location not traced)	SNT	—	'Early spring' - specimens untraced	Ward (1906)
Gupkar, Srinagar, 5,200 ft (1,585 m)	S	30 November 1922	NHM #1949.Whi.1.3995 (male), B. B. Osmaston	NHM, London
Gupkar, Srinagar, 5,300 ft (1,615 m)	S	9 December 1922	NHM #1926.7.1.121 (male), B. B. Osmaston	NHM, London
Srinagar, 5,200 ft (1,585 m)	S	17 January 1923	NHM #1926.7.1.122 (female), B. B. Osmaston	NHM, London
Srinagar, 5,200 ft (1,585 m)	S	21 February 1923	NHM #1926.7.1.120 (female), B. B. Osmaston	NHM, London
Baramulla, Vale of Kashmir, 5,500 ft (1,576 m) (Elevation as per specimen label, contra Meinertzhagen (1927))	S	1 March 1925	NMH #1965.M.11039 (male), R. Meinertzhagen	Meinertzhagen (1927)
Khalatse, western Ladakh	S	19 October 1934	CMNAV #54105 (female), collector unknown	VertNet (2019)
Hemis Shukpachan, Hemischu Valley, western Ladakh, 3,400 m	SR	06 February 1981 & 11 February 1981	Two males and one five days later.	Mallon (1987); Pfister (2004)
8 km walk from Sonamarg toward Zoji La Pass	SR	19 May 1984	Female	Macfadyen (1984)
Near Sunderbani, Rajouri District	P	2011	Female	Singh (2013)
Gilgit	SR, P	2013–2018	Several records, 'regular passage migrant'	Shah (2016), Imran Shah, <i>in litt.</i> , email dated 6 March 2019.
Near Jodhpur village on Gundana road, Doda District	P	23 January 2018	Male	Soni (2018); Sharma et al. (2018)
<b>Himachal Pradesh</b>				
Kotokhai (= See text)	SNT	Ante 1890	Specimen untraced	Oates (1890)
Keonthal State, Simla Hills, 7,000 ft (2,134 m) (= See text)	S	20 January 1920	BNHS #16491 (sex unknown) in the collection of A. E. Jones. Confirmed female from Jones (1948) and from Whistler (1920)	Abdulali (1987)
Golf course, lower Dharamsala, 3,500 ft (1,067 m), Kangra District	SR	10 February 1921	Observed on two occasions	Whistler (1926)
Chakki, 1,200 ft (366 m) (=Chakki River, western border of Kangra District)	SR	11 February 1922	Male	Whistler (1926)
Chiassu, Rampur-Bushahr (= Chanshu, Kinnaur District)	S	17 November–01 December 1930	AMNH Birds Skin #304109–304119 (7 males, 4 females), and MCZ #152036–152037 (1 male, 1 female) in the Koelz Collection. FMNH Birds #305167 (sex unknown), presumably from same collection	VertNet (2019)
Lipe, Rampur-Bushahr (= Lippa, Kinnaur District)	S	19 November 1930	AMNH Birds Skin #304120 (female) and AMNH Birds Skin #304121 (sex unknown) in the Koelz Collection, the location of the latter deduced from date of collection	VertNet (2019)
Kulu (= Kullu, Kullu district)	S	08–10 January 1933	UMMZ #79243–79250 (6 males, 2 females)	Koelz (1940)
Udaipur, Lahaul District	P	06 January 2012	Male	Kumar (2012)
Bhojnagar, 1,090 m, Solan District	P	20 December 2014	Female (identified by Bill Harvey, <i>in litt.</i> , email dated 25 December 2014)	Das (2014)
Udaipur, Lahaul District	P	08 December 2016	Male	Kumar (2016)
Udaipur, Lahaul District	P	13, 15, & 20 November 2018	Six individuals including a first-year male	Kumar (2018a,b,c)
<b>Punjab</b>				
Dineke, Firozpur District, 205 m	APV	09–10 February 2019	Female	This work
<b>Uttarakhand</b>				
'Himalayas, Garhwal'	S	No date provided, but probably c. 1888	Adult male skin, but no date, and 'Museum Collector' not named.	Reid (1890)

Abbreviations: A=Audio recording; P=Photograph; S=Specimen; SNT=Specimen not traced; SR=Sight record; and V=Video recording.

Table 2. Unconfirmed records of Eversmann's Redstart from India, listed chronologically

Locality	Date	Comments	Reference	Remarks
Corbett National Park, Uttarakhand			Lamba & Bhatnagar (1979); Lamba (1985); Grewal & Sahgal (1995); Sharma et al. (2003); Tak & Sati (2008)	Several checklists included the species, but all are misleading. Lamba (1985), Grewal & Sahgal (1995), and Tak & Sati (2008) all included references to other sources, but these are all irrelevant, as they provide no actual information about the occurrence of Eversmann's Redstart. Lamba & Bhatnagar (1979) included no references.
Around Dharamsala, 1,500–1,600 m, Kangra District	1997-2003	Listed as a vagrant with three individuals during the period	Besten (2004)	No account, or description available.
Pangot, Uttarakhand	23–24 January 2004	Sight record, female	Dodd (2004)	Incomplete description, e.g., no mention of tail.
Nainital, Uttarakhand	17 December 2004	Sight record, male	Stratford (2004)	Account provided by the observer (Jos Stratford, <i>in litt.</i> , e-mail dated 22 February 2019) although, with no field description taken, the authors prefer to treat it as unconfirmed.
'Northern India'	December 2006		Shackelford & Singh (2006)	Listed in checklist only and not mentioned in detailed account.
Pangot, Uttarakhand	27 January 2010	Sight record, adult female	Lebrun (2010)	No account, or description provided.
Koti Charawag, Himachal Pradesh	29 January 2016	Sight record, male	Sharma et al. (2016)	Brief sighting of a male (Saurabh Sawant, <i>in litt.</i> , e-mail dated 05 June 2019). No description provided.
Dachigam National Park, Jammu & Kashmir	25 May 2016	Sight record, male	Anonymous eBirder (2016)	Incomplete description, e.g., no mention of tail. Multi-observer sighting only recorded and recalled by one observer.

## Status summary

The nearest Indian record to the Harike record is from c. 150 km north-eastwards, from the Chakki riverbed (366 m asl) (Whistler 1926). The nearest known records to its west, in the Pakistan plains, are between the Jhang- and Shahpur districts, where Whistler (1920) 'personally saw 50 individuals' in January and February 1920, and from Pirowal Forest, now part of the Pirowal Wildlife Park in Khanewal District (Roberts 1992); these locations are 250 km westwards and 290 km south-westwards respectively. Finding the bird in the plains of Punjab was certainly not expected, but it is worth noting that Harike Wildlife Sanctuary does attract various Himalayan species to winter to such low elevations (200 m asl); we have recorded several Slaty-blue Flycatchers *Ficedula tricolor*, Lemon-rumped Warblers *Phylloscopus chloronotus*, and one Grey Bushchat *Saxicola ferreus* during our visit from 07 to 10 February 2019.

Given its known breeding and wintering areas, and judging from the records accepted in this paper, Eversmann's Redstart could be considered a rare migrant to extreme northern India: Scarce but regular in winter and on passage in Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, and potentially, also in Uttarakhand. The confirmed records discussed here suggest that it may winter in very small numbers, with all, but one, recent record being within the period from mid-November to mid-February. It is relevant that some records from Pakistan do appear to have autumn and spring passage peaks outside this period, suggesting that birds elsewhere may be overlooked. This is likely, in part, due to identification confusion with similar species, and also because of the relative lack of birding in the remoter areas of Jammu & Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh where it may be more regular.

Roberts (1992) noted that an occasional bird straggles down to the plains, while Whistler (1920) remarked that a spell of

cold weather brought this species to his notice. Jones (1948) presumed that the records from Shimla District were probably storm-driven. The extreme western disturbance storms that were witnessed in January and February 2019 in north-western India may have forced the Dineke bird to such a low elevation far south of its more regular range.

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