

# Status of the Buff-throated Warbler *Phylloscopus subaffinis* in India and notes on evidence of breeding

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Singal, R., Singal, D., & Dalvi, S., 2019. Status of the Buff-throated Warbler *Phylloscopus subaffinis* in India and notes on evidence of breeding. *Indian BIRDS* 15 (5): 148–151.

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Manuscript received on 04 November 2019.

The Buff-throated Warbler *Phylloscopus subaffinis* is a small, nondescript leaf warbler. It lacks wing bars, crown stripe, or white tertials. Its supercilium and underparts are a dull yellowish-buff, while the upperparts and crown are greyish-brown with a green tinge to them. The bill has a distinct dark tip to the lower mandible. It appears similar to the Tickell's Leaf Warbler *P. affinis*, but is duller overall, with a shorter, less prominent supercilium, dusky ear coverts, and a relatively indistinct eye-stripe. In fact, they were so similar to each other that in the past they were sometimes treated as conspecific (Williamson 1967; Watson et al. 1986; Howard & Moore 1991; Sibley & Monroe 1990), but sometimes as separate species (Ticehurst 1938; Vaurie 1959; Cheng 1987; Alström & Olsson 1992).

The Buff-throated Warbler's known breeding range extends from central China to the northern parts Yunnan, and also includes areas in South-eastern China, and North Vietnam. It is known to winter further southwards in southern Yunnan, other parts of southern China, northern Myanmar, northern Thailand, northern Laos, and northern Vietnam.

Until recently, the Buff-throated Warbler was known in the Indian Subcontinent from two specimens, one each from the Lushai Hills in Mizoram (1951), and the Khasi Hills in Meghalaya (1953). However, between 05 April 2015 and 07 July 2019 it was recorded on 16 occasions from five localities in five states of India, namely, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram. Most of the sightings were confined to Mandala, West Kameng District in Arunachal Pradesh (Fig. 1).

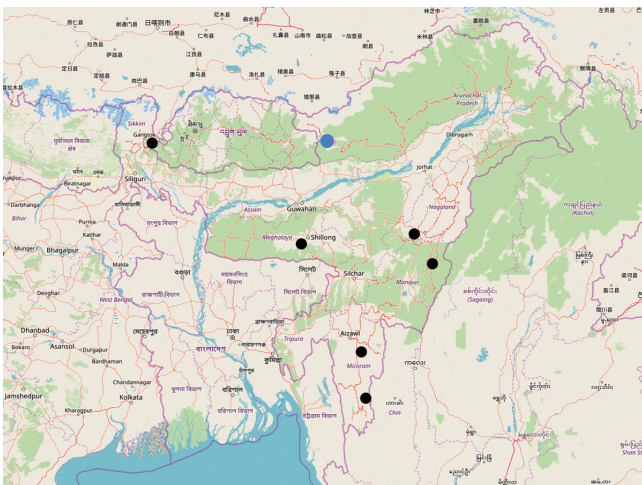


Fig. 1. Locations with Buff-throated Warbler across north-eastern India (Mandala=blue dot)

Mike Prince and SD initially recorded it on 03 April 2018 in Mandala. Later it was observed by Omkar Dharwardkar on 14 May 2018, which SD later identified from photographs (Dharwardkar, *pers. comm.*, April 2018). After these initial sightings, SD confirmed three other sightings from pictures taken in the field. Two from Mandala on 05 April 2015 (Sawant 2015) [204] and 25 March 2017 (Pathak 2017), and one from Kohima, Nagaland on 10 December 2017 (Das et al. 2017). Also, in 2018, a bird was photographed in Ukhrul, Mizoram (Nathan 2018). In 2019, this species was reported from Dzuluk, East Sikkim, Sikkim (Suvarna et al. 2019) with documentation including extensive notes and audio recordings. Between 28 March 2019 and 07 July 2019, multiple observers reported this species from Mandala, West Kameng. Two birds were seen in the Phawngpui National Park in Mizoram on 16 October 2019 (Ghosh 2019).



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204. Buff-throated Warbler.

## Breeding observations

On 25 April 2019 RS was making a sound recording of a Brown Bush Warbler *Locustella luteoventris* when he noticed a small, plain-looking, bird moving through the vegetation and making its way towards a low bush. At the time, he did not discern its features clearly but did record the call of the bird as it moved. The short two-noted call was unmistakably that of a Buff-throated Warbler.

The next morning (26 April 2019), DS and RS heard the same calls at another site, and caught fleeting views of a pair of Buff-throated Warblers as the birds moved down the slope into an inaccessible spot. They returned to the site where an individual was seen the previous evening, and found two birds actively foraging in the low vegetation and grasses. Both birds were calling regularly and were seen carrying grass material. Once the material was collected, the birds would take a long route to a spot that was slightly higher up, and disappear near the base of a tree trunk, only to re-appear without the material. This spot was on the lee of the trunk, facing southwards. At one point, one of the birds climbed up a low clump of vegetation and delivered a quick burst of song.

Over the next few hours, as well as the following morning (27 April 2019), the birds were observed to be around the same spot and seen carrying nest material [205]. RS attempted once to try and see if he could spot the nest, but the nest appeared to have been well concealed and he retreated for fear of accidentally trampling it or causing any other disturbance.



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205. Buff-throated Warbler with nesting material.

While birding in the same area on 10 and 11 May 2019, SD noticed at least five different pairs with established territories. However, he didn't notice any active nest or fledglings on both days. All territories were marked (Fig. 2), and were c.220–320 m apart from each other. Other species that were noticed in the same habitat were White-bellied Redstart *Luscinia phaenicuroides*, White-collared Blackbird *Turdus albocinctus*, and Brown Bush Warbler *Locustella luteoventris*.

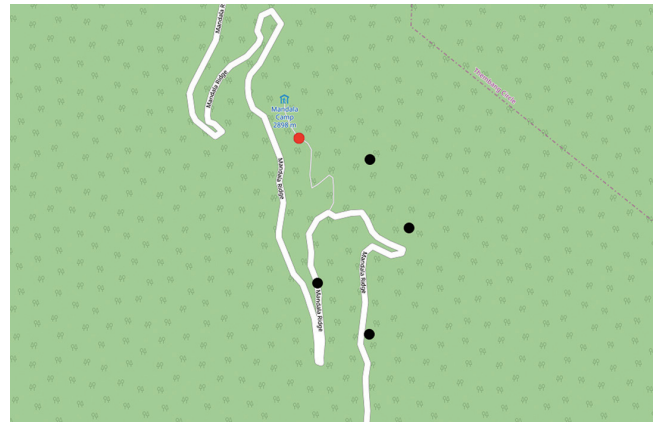


Fig. 2. Locations of different pairs around Mandala. (Red dot=location of probable nest.)

### Recent records

Table 1 gives the details of the observations of the Buff-throated Warbler known to the authors and/or available in the public domain.

### Discussion

In the past few years, there appear to have been a few records of the Buff-throated Warbler in both, breeding, and non-breeding



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206. Habitat of the Buff-throated Warbler.

**Table 1. Records of the Buff-throated Warbler from India**

S. No.	Place	District and State	Date	Number	Remarks	Sources
1	Hmuntha	Serchhip, Mizoram	08 April 1951	1	Specimen. An immature female, collected by Rup Chand Thakur. Now in the collections of University of Michigan Museum of Zoology (UMMZ #185996) <sup>1</sup>	Rasmussen & Anderton (2012)
2	Mawphlang	East Khasi Hills, Meghalaya	03 January 1953	1	Specimen, a female, collected by Walter N. Koelz. Now in the collections of the University of Michigan Museum of Zoology (UMMZ #187549) <sup>2</sup>	Rasmussen (1996)
3	Mandala	West Kameng, Arunachal Pradesh	05 April 2015	1	NA	Sawant (2015)*
4	Mandala	West Kameng, Arunachal Pradesh	25 March 2017	1	NA	Pathak (2017)*
5	Khonoma	Kohima, Nagaland	10 December 2017	3	"Tail was shorter compared to Aberrant bush warblers. In the sandakfu range we have seen Aberrant many times but here the behaviour was also different. It was moving in those small plants openly. Aberrants are generally very shy but it was not. There were 3 birds flock moving together. The weather condition was very poor so couldn't get good images."	Das et al. (2017)*
6	Mandala	West Kameng, Arunachal Pradesh	03 April 2018	1	NA	Prince & Martin (2018)*
7	Mandala	West Kameng, Arunachal Pradesh	14 May 2018	1	NA	Omkar Dharwardkar, pers. comm. (2018)
8	Ukhrul	Ukhrul, Manipur	28 December 2018	1	NA	Nathan (2018)*
9	Mandala	West Kameng, Arunachal Pradesh	15, 16 April 2019	2	Small warbler with no wing-bar and light yellow underparts that kept flitting over low vegetation of a wide open area. Saw from a higher area for 5–7 min. No calls heard	Praveen et al. (2019a,b)*
10	Mandala	West Kameng, Arunachal Pradesh	20 April 2019	2	Seen on two different occasions. Tickell's like bird with dark bill, flitting on the grassy expanses	Praveen et al. (2019c)
11	Mandala	West Kameng, Arunachal Pradesh	25, 26, 27 April 2019	4	One pair in grassland across the road. Another pair at same site as previous evening (near the birding lodge). Looks like a very dull and weakly-marked Tickell's Leaf Warbler, with very weak contrasts on yellowish face, pale yellow underparts, and light brown upperparts. Hung around in the undergrowth and only once seen perching at a height >1.5 m.	Singal (2019); Singal & Singal (2019a,b)*
12	Dzuluk	East Sikkim, Sikkim	30 April 2019	1	On first sight the plumage looked dull. The supercilium and underparts had just a hint of yellow. In the field we went with Tickell's Leaf, ruling out sulphur-bellied as the supercilium was concolorous with throat and the cheeks, though sullied, had more yellow than grey. The bill though was dark except for the tomlia and base of lower mandible which was pale. The call too didn't fit either of the known calls of the above two. It was only later, while going through documentation, we realised this was the Buff-throated Leaf Warbler. We believe that the call confirms this	Suvarna et al. (2019)**
13	Mandala	West Kameng, Arunachal Pradesh	04 May 2019	2	Looks like dull Tickell's, but is not. Also lacks its ear coverts	Sawant (2019)
14	Mandala	West Kameng, Arunachal Pradesh	17 May 2019	2	NA	Meppayur (2019)*
15	Mandala	West Kameng, Arunachal Pradesh	26 May 2019	1	NA	Main & Prabhulkar (2019)*
16	Mandala	West Kameng, Arunachal Pradesh	07 July 2019	1	NA	Talukdar (2019)*
17	Phawngpui National Park	Saiha, Mizoram	16 October 2019	2	NA	Ghosh (2019)*

Note: \*=Photograph; \*\*=audio recording.

<sup>1</sup> <http://portal.vertnet.org/search?q=UMMZ+birds+187549>; <sup>2</sup> <http://portal.vertnet.org/search?q=UMMZ+birds+185996>

seasons. The species is known to breed between 1800–3600 m asl in open scrub habitat [206] on hillsides. Such habitat is present across north-eastern India, and the species was recorded singing in at least two such locations at the purported breeding time of the year. There are other species of *Phylloscopus* warblers like Tickell's Leaf Warbler, Large-billed Leaf Warbler *P. magnirostris*, Lemon-rumped Warbler *P. chloronotus*, and Ashy-throated Warbler *P. maculipennis*, which breed in the same stretch of the Himalayas and show elevational movement during winter, or winter in the South Assam Hills.

The observations of a pair carrying nesting material to a location low on the ground presents strong evidence of attempted breeding at the site. Unfortunately, it is as yet unknown if the pair bred successfully, though the birds were sighted at the location up until July 2019.

Looking at the wintering range of the Buff-throated Warbler in Myanmar this species may be following the same pattern in north-eastern India as well. No wintering individuals have been found in the lowland plains but the bird has been observed in the non-breeding season from at least two subtropical hill sites (Kohima, Ukhrul, ~1400 m asl) in the past two years, suggesting there may be a larger undocumented population wintering in the area. The species may be more widespread in north-eastern India than previously thought. Birders are urged to keep a look out for this species in suitable habitats to understand more about its range in the Indian Subcontinent, and also monitor the existing, known sites to further establish its status.

## Acknowledgements

RS would like to thank Praveen J for his guidance in preparing and improving this note. SD would like to thank Per Alström for discussion about identification Buff-throated Warbler, and Rich Andrews for photographs of the bird.

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