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– Sandip Das, Binanda Hatibaruah, Joydev Pathak,  
Deba Prashad Paul & Sourov Boaruah

Sandip Das, Palpara, Manoharpur East, P.O & P.S Dankuni, Hooghly 712311, West Bengal, India.

E-mail: sandipwildlife@gmail.com. [Corresponding author]

Binanda Hatibaruah, Natun Rangagora Gaon, P.O. Rangagora, Tinsukia 786125, Assam, India.

E-mail: binanda144@gmail.com

Joydev Pathak, #1, N. N. Mukherjee 2nd Lane, Uttarpara, Hooghly 712258, West Bengal, India.

E-mail: dr.joydevpathak@gmail.com

Deba Prashad Paul, Meerujin Housing, Narendrapur, Kolkata 700103, West Bengal, India.

E-mail: dp.paul04@gmail.com

Sourov Boaruah, 1No Moran, P.O. Boruah Nagor, Dist. Charaido 786125, Assam, India.

E-mail: sourovjoytiboaruah@gmail.com

### Red-billed Starling *Spodiopsar sericeus* in Manipur: An addition to South Asian avifauna

The office of the Divisional Forest Officer (Thoubal Forest Division, Government of Manipur) organised a two-day nature training for civil societies on 12–13 February 2020 at three wetlands in Thoubal District, namely, Waithou pat (24.67°N, 93.97°E), Eekop pat, and Khoidum pat under the aegis of Nature Learning Centre, National Mission on Himalayan Studies (henceforth, NMHS). During that camp, RKJ & PE led the team to Waithou pat on 13 February 2020. While watching birds at 0830 h, RKJ photographed [230] a starling amongst six Asian Pied Starlings *Gracupica contra*. He called PE for help in identification, and the bird was tentatively identified as a Chestnut-tailed Starling *Sturnia malabarica*. When all the teams gathered at the Divisional Forest Office Thoubal, after the birding trip, we had a closer look at the picture and realized that the bird did not match any of the Sturnidae recorded till date from the Indian Subcontinent. We sent the picture by WhatsApp to Raju Kasambe, of the Bombay Natural History Society, who identified it as a Red-billed Starling *Spodiopsar sericeus*. We also posted the picture on Facebook Public Group, 'Ask IDS of Indian Birds'; members agreed with Kasambe. Though the wetland was searched on the next two days, the starling could not be found. However, the bird was again photographed on 16 February [231, 232]. Further field visits on subsequent days were unfruitful. Identification is straightforward from the photographs. No other species of starling has a combination of creamy white head with a diffused dark neck collar, red bill, and grey body. The black-tipped red bill and grey mantle (vs brown) indicate this to be a male (Robson 2015).



230. Red-billed Starling at Waithou pat, Thoubal, Manipur.



231. Red-billed Starling with Asian Pied Starling at Waithou pat, Thoubal, Manipur.



232. Red-billed Starling at Waithou pat, Thoubal, Manipur.

The Red-billed Starling is a resident of south-eastern China and a non-breeding visitor to northern Vietnam, and Taiwan, and with increasing winter records in Korea and Japan (Craig *et al.* 2020). This is also an addition to the avifauna of South Asia (Praveen *et al.* 2019).

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– R. K. Jyotin, Khoyumthem Brajeshkumar, Premjit Elangbam,  
Harmenn Huidrom & Dhanabir Oinam

R. K. Jyotin, Soibam Leikai, Imphal East 795001, Manipur, India.

E-mail: rajkumarjyotin2251@gmail.com

Khoyumthem Brajeshkumar, Soibam Leikai, Imphal East 795001, Manipur, India.

E-mail: khoyumthem1k@gmail.com

Premjit Elangbam, Toubul, Bishnupur District 795126 Manipur, India.

E-mail: premjitdano@gmail.com [Corresponding author]

Harmenn Huidrom, Yaiskul Hiruhanba Leikai, Imphal 795001, Manipur, India.

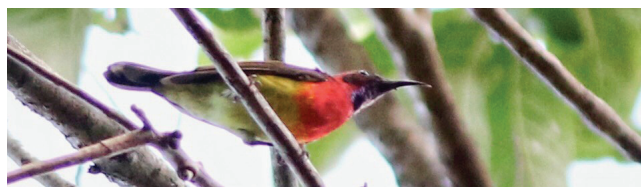
East E-mail: harshhuidrom@gmail.com

Dhanabir Oinam, Moirang, Bishnupur 795126, Manipur, India.

E-mail: drdhanabir123@gmail.com

### 'Scarlet-breasted' Gould's Sunbird *Aethopyga gouldiae dabryii* from India

During a recent birdwatching trip to Mizoram, we were observing a mixed flock of sunbirds and yuhinas at a site (22.68°N, 93.05°E) in Phawngpui National Park, at c. 1,600 m asl. The flock was high in the canopy in which we observed a single sunbird showing a purple throat, red breast, yellow belly, and a short tail. We took some photographs [233] and later identified the bird as a non-breeding male 'Scarlet-breasted' Gould's Sunbird *Aethopyga gouldiae dabryii* based on descriptions and illustrations of the nominate and *isolata* ssp., both of which do not show a broad red breast-band. We think the individual might have been a non-breeding adult, given the missing tail streamers.



233. 'Scarlet-breasted' Gould's Sunbird.

This race of Gould's Sunbird is considered a vagrant to north-eastern India (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012) on the basis of two old specimens of male birds: one (YPM VZ YPM ORN #020087),

collected by S. D. Ripley in Nagaland on 03 December 1950 (Yale Peabody Museum 2017), and the other (UMMZ birds #178643) collected by Walter Koelz in Karong, Manipur, on 23 November 1950 (University of Michigan Museum of Zoology 2019).

A search of images posted on [www.orientalbirdimages.org](http://www.orientalbirdimages.org) and specimens collected on [portal.vertnet.org](http://portal.vertnet.org) indicate that while *dabryii* has been recorded in China and Thailand, *isolata* has been recorded in Myanmar, and Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland, and Mizoram in India. Therefore, it seems that during its winter/seasonal movements, the distribution of *dabryii* may be limited to an area where it meets *isolata*: south of the Brahmaputra in India on the west, and Myanmar to the east.

We could not trace any photographs of this race from India, and hence ours appears to be a first record after nearly 70 years from India.

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- **Rofikul Islam, Samir Ovalekar & Subhadeep Ghosh**  
Rofikul Islam, Kaziranga, Golaghat, Assam 785609, India. E-mail: [rofikaziranga@gmail.com](mailto:rofikaziranga@gmail.com)  
Samir Ovalekar, 3, Jayvant, 36 Mahant Road, Vile Parle (East), Mumbai 400057, Maharashtra, India. E-mail: [samir7399@yahoo.com](mailto:samir7399@yahoo.com)  
Subhadeep Ghosh, B-107 Legend Apartments, Vakola, Santacruz (E), Mumbai 400055, Maharashtra, India. E-mail: [subhadeep\\_g@yahoo.com](mailto:subhadeep_g@yahoo.com)

## Asian Desert Warbler *Sylvia nana* in Lava, West Bengal

On 25 October 2019, I visited Lava (27.01°N, 88.63°E; Kalimpong District, West Bengal) to photograph a few specific species of birds. Souvik Debnath, Rishov Pal, and I were busy on the Lava Ladam Road, photographing birds in a narrow creek, when I saw a movement on the ground and spotted a small bird. It was not at all shy and I took a single photograph [234]. It had a yellow iris and orbital ring, and a rufous rump and tail. At that time, we were not sure about the species and thought it was either a Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti* or a Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*. Suddenly the bird landed right in front of us and I was able to take more pictures [235]. Later, with the help of Sandeep Chakroborty, Kanad Baidya, and Biswapriya Rahut we figured out that it was an Asian Desert Warbler *S. nana*. Identification is easy as there are no similar species with such a distinct white eye-ring, yellow iris, and rufous tail.



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234. Asian Desert Warbler in Lava, West Bengal.



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235. Asian Desert Warbler showing clearly the yellow iris.

The Asian Desert Warbler is a bird of the arid landscape, breeding through the northern and eastern regions of the Caspian Sea coasts, north-eastern Iran, much of Mongolia, and north-western China. Its non-breeding range extends from north-eastern Africa, mostly along the Red Sea coast, Arabia, and farther eastwards till north-western India (Aymí et al. 2019). It is a winter visitor to north-western India, mainly Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Haryana and, sparingly, in Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra (Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; eBird 2019): all records north-westwards of a line connecting Mumbai (Maharashtra), Indore (Madhya Pradesh), and Pithoragarh (Uttarakhand). The bird has not occurred further southwards or eastwards from this line, and, hence, is an addition to the avifauna of West Bengal and the eastern most record for the Indian Subcontinent.

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– **Soumen Roy Chowdhury**

2/84/B, Regent Colony, Kolkata 700040, West Bengal, India.

E-mail: [rchowdhurysoumen@gmail.com](mailto:rchowdhurysoumen@gmail.com)

## Common Merganser *Mergus merganser* specimen shot at Isarda Dam, Tonk District, Rajasthan, and its status in peninsular India

The Common Merganser *Mergus merganser* is a fish-eating diver and pursues prey with great agility. It is long-bodied and streamlined, with a long, narrow, hooked red bill that has tooth-like lamellae along its cutting edges, enabling a better grip of its main prey, fish (Mullarney et al. 1999). It obtains its food by diving from the water's surface, swimming with its head underwater until it detects prey, which it pursues underwater (Kear 2005). It is a partial migrant, with birds moving away from areas where rivers and major lakes freeze in the winter, but resident where waters remain open. Northern breeding populations are fully migratory (Snow & Perrins 1998) although breeders in temperate regions are sedentary or only travel short distances (del Hoyo et