

## Correspondence

### Birds across the Line of Control: Sole records for the 'India Checklist'

When Praveen et al. (2016) published their checklist of the birds of India (hereinafter 'India Checklist') they used the country's national boundaries, as defined by the Government of India, as the basis for inclusion of species. However, there are three areas within these national borders that are presently occupied by foreign powers, thereby negating the privileges of any Indian citizen from visiting them. These are (a) Mirpur, Punch (western regions) and Muzaffarabad districts of the Union Territory (hereinafter UT) of Jammu and Kashmir, and (b) Gilgit, Gilgit Wazarat, Chilhas and Tribal Territory (sic) of the UT of Ladakh: both these areas lying beyond the Line of Control (hereinafter LoC); and (c) Aksai Chin, part of the District of Ladakh that lies beyond the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the UT of Ladakh (Ministry of Home Affairs 2019).

In this note, we identify seven species that were included in the 'India Checklist' based solely on their presence in these three areas: six of these have been reported exclusively from areas around Gilgit, and the seventh from Aksai Chin.

**Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*:** As reviewed in Praveen et al. (2014), the species was included in the 'India Checklist' based on two birds collected in 1897 at Chilhas (35.42°N, 74.08°E), Gilgit, Kashmir (McMahon 1899). These specimens could not be traced even though, apparently, many specimens listed by McMahon were examined either by Major Alfred William Alcock or Frank Finn at the Indian Museum; and hence included on its strength. We have not been able to definitely conclude that Trevenen's (1923) record from Maharashtra was a wild vagrant.

**Red-footed Falcon *Falco vespertinus*:** On 19 October 1880, Maj. John Biddulph collected a juvenile male at c.1,500 m in Gilgit (35.91°N, 74.31°E) and identified it as this species (Biddulph 1882). Though there was a subsequent confusion as to its identity, molecular analysis (Prŷs-Jones et al. 2017) proved beyond doubt the veracity of his specimen (NHMUK #1897.12.10.1733); this is the first species to be admitted to the 'India Checklist' after a molecular analysis.

**White-cheeked Tit *Aegithalos leucogenys*:** Maj. John Biddulph collected a number of specimens at Darel (35.67°N, 73.62°E), Gilgit, in May 1880 (Biddulph 1881, 1882), of which two (an adult and a juvenile), marked as July 1880, from Darel, were catalogued in the Natural History Museum, London (Gadow 1883). Scully (1881) found it to be a permanent resident in the Gilgit District, but found very locally, in the main valley above Gilgit from Bargo and Singal in the elevation range of c.1,670–2,200 m asl (5,000–7,000 feet). One of the specimens that Scully collected on 28 May 1879 are in the collection of the American Museum of Natural History (Birds SKIN-682861). William Abbott collected three birds (2 male and a female) on 16 February 1892 near Haramosh (35.83°N 74.88°E), Gilgit and the skins are in the National Museum of Natural History, Washington D.C.

(USNM Birds 126752–54). T. J. Roberts encountered it in the main valley at Gilgit at 1,450 m asl in mid-December; while he does not mention the exact year, we presume it to have been in the second half of the twentieth century, when he lived in Pakistan (Roberts 1992). There is no twenty-first century record of this species from all these areas as most of these sites may be out of bounds due to security reasons (Anon. 2020).

While the presence of White-cheeked Tits within Indian territorial limits, but outside the LoC, is beyond doubt, its claimed occurrence within the LoC has not been accepted widely. Baker (1922) included 'Garhwal, Simla Hills into Kashmir' in its distribution but that does not appear to be based on any evidence. Neither Ali & Ripley (2001), nor Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) include these regions in its distribution; the latter cite Baker's statements as unconfirmed. A record from Kangan, in the Sind Valley, Kashmir, from 31 March 1926 (Meinertzhagen 1927; Ali & Ripley 2001) was discounted as fraudulent, and is neither accepted by Grimmett et al. (2011) nor Rasmussen & Anderton (2012). There was a more recent claim of this species from Chail Wildlife Sanctuary (hereinafter WLS) (30.97°N, 77.18°E; c.2,150 m), Himachal Pradesh, where Dymond (2003) saw two individuals on 20 October 2002 amongst a large flock of tits, mainly comprising Black-throated Tits *A. concinnus* along with a few Black-lored- *Machlolophus xanthogenys*, Green-backed- *Parus monticolus*, and Yellow-browed- *Sylviparus modestus* Tits. Though the sighting lasted only for a minute, the observer could watch the birds very closely. One of the birds was c.10 m from the observer and he was able to obtain a good view, while another individual showed briefly (Nick Dymond, *in litt.*, e-mail dated 28 May 2020). His field descriptions of the birds (warm earthy brown, a fairly narrow black mask through whitish eye, clear white cheeks below the black mask, a black triangular bib extending right up to the base of lower mandible, and off-white underparts) fit a White-cheeked Tit adult's plumage. The only potential confusion species could be a juvenile Black-throated Tit that has some of these features, with the main difference being the black bib, which is reduced to darker diffuse streaking in case of juvenile Black-throated Tits. Dymond's record has been accepted in the maps of Grimmett et al. (2011) but not in Rasmussen & Anderton (2012). Dymond corroborated his sighting by citing another unpublished record from Deodi (30.45°N, 79.79°E, 3,100–3,300 m asl) in Nanda Devi National Park, Garhwal, Uttarakhand, on 11–12 October 1982, wherein the authors reported 17 White-cheeked Tits, without any further details (Halberg & Peterson 1984). However, it must be noted that the checklist in this report did not include the White-throated Tit *A. niveogularis*, which is far more likely to occur at that altitude (>3,000 m; Harrap 2020a), while the maximum known winter altitude of White-cheeked Tit is much lower (c.2,100 m; Harrap 2020b); hence the possibility of a transcription error cannot be completely excluded. Neither Grimmett et al. (2011) or Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) accepted Halberg & Peterson's record, but it was included in the state checklist (Mohan & Sondhi 2017). In a report submitted to the Himachal Pradesh forestry (sic) department, Elsen (2015) mentioned this species as one of the birds that was not encountered during his study in the Great Himalayan National Park (hereinafter GHNP) despite it being reported previously by Gaston et al. (1993). However, Elsen (2015) included this species on the basis of a checklist

in a pamphlet on the birds of GHNP, published by the forest department, and compiled by K. Ramesh of the Wildlife Institute of India. Elsen (2015) assumed the pamphlet was based on the work done by Gaston et al. (1993), and hence this error (Paul R. Elsen, *in litt.*, e-mail to Puja Sharma, dated 29 May 2020). We are not able to trace the original reference for GHNP; however, GHNP altitudes would also fall outside the winter range for the species.

Apart from Dymond's record, there is no fresh evidence to re-examine to evaluate other claims. Further, Dymond's detailed description of his observation at Chail WLS, though they could be of this species, does not tally well with several known facts about this bird. In Pakistan, it is considered largely allopatric with, and better adapted to much drier and more xeric mountainous regions than Black-throated Tits, avoiding coniferous forests and preferring rather open scattered scrub forest (Roberts 1992). Though they breed up to 3,600 m, their wintering elevation (c.350–2,100 m) is much lower (Roberts 1992; Harrap 2020b). Habitats in Chail WLS are moister than in its known range in Pakistan and the site of interest is just above the maximum known winter altitude of this species. The fact that the two Chail birds were found alongside a large flock of Black-throated Tits doesn't match its currently known flocking propensities where it is known to avoid Black-throated Tit habitats (Roberts 1992). While it can be argued that a vagrant or a group of vagrants may be found in atypical circumstances, vagrancy in itself has not been documented for this species. It is known to be largely sedentary with some short-distance, seasonal altitudinal movement or post breeding dispersals (Roberts 1992; Harrap 2020b).

Some of the questions posed in Dymond (2003), while discussing the sighting, still remain unanswered. Till date, no resident or breeding population has been reported by anyone else, from the Himalayas, away from its known range in Gilgit-Baltistan. No records of vagrants travelling large distances exist outside its known breeding, and limited wintering range. In the last five years, these Western Himalayan habitats have been well-visited by local and visiting bird-watchers and hence are much better sampled than in the past (see eBird 2020). Hence, we have decided to treat this record as tentative until new supporting evidence emerges.

**Azure Tit *Cyanistes cyanus*:** Two birds of the *tianschanicus* race collected by Frank Ludlow, on 20 October 1930, near Misgar (36.79°N, 74.76°E), in the Hunza Valley (Ludlow & Kinnear 1933) are the sole record of this species. These specimens have not been traced. Birds of the *flavipectus* race ('Yellow-breasted Tit') were collected in July 1902 from the Chitral region of Pakistan (Fulton 1904), outside our limits.

**Sillem's Rosefinch *Carpodacus sillemi*:** As documented in Roselaar (1992), the sole specimens of this species, now in the collection of the Zoological Museum of Amsterdam (ZMA#43449–50), were collected by J. A. Sillem during the Netherlands Karakoram Expedition, at Camp 58 (35.43°N, 78.22°E) in the Aksai Chin area, on 7–8 September 1929. After 80 years, it was recently rediscovered in Qinghai, China, more than 1,500 km from the site of the first collection (Kazmierczak & Muzika 2012).

**Desert Finch *Rhodospiza obsoleta*:** This species is not listed for India (Praveen et al. 2020) though it has been reported from Pakistan and included in the Indian Subcontinent checklist (Praveen et al. 2017). However, we propose to include this species in the 'India Checklist' based on Imran Shah's photograph of an adult male, of a pair observed at Borit Lake (36.43°N, 74.86°E; 2,646 m asl), Gojal, Gilgit, on 01 November 2018 (Shah 2018). This record is not very surprising, as the species has occurred in the adjoining Chitral region of Pakistan (Perreau 1910).

**Crimson-winged Finch *Rhodopechys sanguineus*:** This species is not listed for India (Praveen et al. 2020) though it has been reported from Pakistan and included in the Indian Subcontinent list (Praveen et al. 2017). However, we propose to include it in the 'India Checklist' based on the photographs taken by Imran Shah, from the extreme north-western region of Gilgit. He photographed males from Shandur National Park (36.10°N, 72.59°E) on 09 and 21 June 2016 (Shah 2016a,b), and a female on 25 April 2019 in Barsat (36.16°N, 72.69°E), Cupis-Yasin (Shah 2019). These records are not unexpected as the species has been collected from the adjoining Chitral region of Pakistan (Fulton 1904), and as the dates of recent sightings from Gilgit fall in its breeding season (Clement et al. 2020), these birds may well be breeding in this area.

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## First confirmed record of Hooded Crane *Grus monacha* for south Asia from a tragically hunted individual in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

The Hooded Crane *Grus monacha* is a small crane recognised by its overall dark grey body and white head and upper neck, marked by a black face and small red crown-patch. It breeds in south-central- and south-eastern Siberia in Russia, and northern China, and mainly winters in Japan with some birds moving down to South Korea, and central- and eastern China (Archibald et al. 2020). The Hooded Crane is assessed as Vulnerable under the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (BirdLife International 2016), with an estimated global population of c.12,000 birds extant today largely attributed to habitat loss in winter quarters. The status of the Hooded Crane in South Asia remains disputed as regional field-guides (Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012) have preferred to treat it as hypothetical, though, Ali & Ripley (1987) included the species based on an uncorroborated historical specimen from north-eastern India. It is also not listed in the recent checklist of South Asian birds (Praveen et al. 2020b).

On 12 April 2020, a hunter named Mashar Khan shot an adult bird on the River Swat at Thanna (34.66°N, 72.06°E), near the University Bridge, Malakand, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. As per the hunter's account, the solitary bird was foraging along a riverside meadow, a typical habitat for cranes in this region (Mashar Khan, *verbally*, 19 June 2020). This valley is irrigated by Swat River and is known to be a potential stopover for migratory birds on passage, specifically the Common Crane *G. grus* and Demoiselle Crane *G. virgo*, which are known to pass through the Kurram Agency under which Malakand District falls (Ahmad & Khurshid 1991). Apparently, the local hunters are familiar with these two migratory species as they hunt them regularly, and immediately recognized that it was different. AK came to know about this episode when the hunter went live, streaming [36] on a Facebook group called 'Swat River Hunting Group'. The hunter ostensibly attempted to skin and stuff the specimen, but failed in doing so as the carcass started rotting. However, it is believed that the specimen is still with him [37] though in a slightly dilapidated condition (Mashar Khan, *verbally*, 19 June 2020). This illegal hunt was reported to the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Wildlife Department and the hunter was apparently fined. Images reproduced here are with explicit permission from the respective photographers.

Identification of this crane is straightforward. The bird showed the characteristic white on its neck and head, with the lower part of the neck being grey. Though no measurements were taken, the apparent size of the bird is also clear from the image [36]. The red on its forehead, and black in the loreal region are also visible. No other crane in adult or juvenile plumage is known to show these characters.

The first reference to a Hooded Crane from South Asia was by Hume (1888), who saw a flock of cranes flying northwards between Booree Bazar and Bishenpur [=Bishnoopoor] (24.62°N, 93.75°E) in Manipur, India, on 13 March 1881 (?), 'with uniform dark hue (darker than Common Crane) showing whole head and upper parts of the neck pure white'. He did not attribute these birds with certainty to this species but conjectured that these were *monacha* type and probably an un-described species. Colonel Cassels shot six birds on 31 December 1897 and one