

Correspondence

Schrenck's Bittern *Ixobrychus eurhythmus* from Sinharaja Forest Reserve, Sri Lanka: An addition to South Asian avifauna

In the very early morning of New Year's Eve, 31 December 2017, four of us (MS, LG, KV & TV) arrived from Sweden in Sri Lanka at Colombo International Airport, full of anticipation, ahead of 11 days of intense birdwatching, guided by DR of Bird and Wildlife Team.

After completing the customs procedures we immediately proceeded by car towards Sinharaja Forest Reserve, aiming for the first batch of target species of wet lowland forest. A long busy day was well spent along the road, and later in the day, in the forest reserve, before we had a well-deserved swim in the scenic pool followed by a delicious evening meal at Rainforest Edge Lodge (6.42°N, 80.42°E). The next day, sleeping in was fortunately not an option and so there was no champagne on New Year's Eve before crashing to bed for a few hours of rest; we were up again at 0430 h, and back on the road about 0500 h.

We slowly headed south-eastwards through the darkness from Waddagala, along a narrow road by the forest edge when, at 0531 h DR suddenly called out a bird and the car stopped abruptly. Just where the road was crossing a damp area or a small creek, a small chestnut-brown bittern, with a dark cap, was slowly moving across from right to left. It suddenly froze when caught by the pale headlights of the car. The visitors amongst us had all seen a Yellow Bittern *Ixobrychus sinensis* before, and had the Black- *I. flavicollis* and Cinnamon *I. cinnamomeus* Bitterns high on the wish list—but the bird didn't seem to fit any of those. DR, being extremely familiar with all possible species in the area, was as puzzled as the rest of us and immediately realized this bird was something special.

TV had his camera ready and got a few quick and blurry documentary shots through the window before he silently getting out and, protected by the headlights, sneaked around the back of the car and approached the bird along the side of the car. He managed to get good support against the car, and clicked some better photos just lit by the headlights to avoid scaring off the bird by using a flash [97].



Torbjörn Vik

97. Schrenck's Bittern on a damp forest path, dazed by the headlights of our vehicle, Sinharaja Forest Reserve, Sri Lanka.



98. Schrenck's Bittern with uniform reddish brown back and cold grey underparts.



Both: Torbjörn Vik

99. When alarmed, the Schrenck's Bittern showed the dark centered wing covert with pale edges.

The bird was all warm chestnut, or reddish-brown on the back with no spots or markings on the upperparts apart from the darker cap. It had a uniform, slightly colder grey tone on the throat, breast, and wing coverts, and a warm whitish-buff belly and vent [98]. There was a dark gular stripe extending to the breast that became visible only when the bird got slightly wary and stretched the throat when raising the head. Faint longitudinal barring was seen on the breast and the bird was still retaining at least one bleached and worn, slightly darker centered wing covert with broad pale edges on the left shoulder interpreted as indicating incomplete molt from juvenile/immature plumage [99].

As none of us had brought appropriate literature covering this bird, photos were transferred to Deepal Warakagoda of Ceylon Bird Club, over mobile Internet, for his opinion. Deepal confirmed the species after a few days by after checking del Hoyo & Collar (2014): it was a male, second calendar year Schrenck's Bittern *I. eurhythmus*, a first record for Sri Lanka (Henry 1998; Warakagoda et al. 2012), and South Asia (Ali & Ripley 1987; Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Praveen et al. 2020). The champagne saved from New Year's Eve really came in handy!

We verified the identification using online references while in the field and, later, with standard references (Brazil 2009). The species can be readily separated from Black Bittern and Cinnamon Bittern by the large buff wing patch, and from Little Bittern *I. minutus* by the extent of dark-brown on the head and sides of neck and the difference in colour of the wing patch (pale creamy vs. buff). This species breeds in the eastern Palaearctic:

in south-eastern Siberia, eastern China, Korea, and Japan, and winters mainly from the Malay Peninsula to the Greater Sundas, Sulawesi, and Philippines (Martínez-Vilalta et al. 2020). The only reference to this species in regional books is in the *Ripley Guide* (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012) where it is mentioned as possible in the northeastern parts of South Asia.

Schrenck's Bittern is a passage migrant through Hong Kong, the Malay Peninsula, and Thailand while it is a vagrant in Myanmar. There are only two exceptional cases of its vagrancy to Germany (in mid 1890s) and Italy (1912) though only the latter has been accepted as a genuine vagrant (Martínez-Vilalta et al. 2020). The presence of this bird in Sri Lanka during mid-winter, outside its migration period, is truly exceptional as the bird might have spent its entire winter in the reserve.

We thank Deepal Warakagoda for helping with the identification of this bird from our photographs and providing us information about its status in Sri Lanka and South Asia.

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A colour aberrant White-throated Fantail *Rhipidura albicollis* in Jalpaiguri town, West Bengal

On 09 June 2020, 1743 h, while passing through the lanes of the Mashkalaibari area (26.52°N, 88.73°E), a well-wooded suburban region in Jalpaiguri town, West Bengal, I saw a small white bird that came and perched on a short mango *Mangifera indica*, and later on a neem *Melia azedarach* tree that was c.2 m high, in a small plot covered with some trees, creepers, ferns, etc. From its Japanese hand fan-shaped tail, slightly lowered wings, its characteristic behaviour, and unique call, I identified it as a White-throated Fantail *Rhipidura albicollis*; one which had abnormal

colours. On that day I had no camera with me, so I returned the next day to search for the bird and was able to photograph it between 1730 and 1820 h [100]. Residents told me that they were noticing the bird since a few days. On the next day, I saw a bird that had the normal plumage of the species, chasing the colour aberrant one. Though I used to pass by this area every day till 13 June, I did not spot this individual again.



100. Caption.

From the picture it is clear that the bird is completely white in plumage except some black near one eye. Feet and bill are pink. The colour of eyes appear to be dark. Based on the eye colour and the lack of total white colouration, I concluded that this is a case of leucism.

A neighbour informed me about a colour aberrant White-throated Fantail that he observed in the middle of April 2020, in his backyard, near Ananda Chandra College campus, one kilometer from my sighting. He did not keep notes of his observation, except that the bird was often seen around 1100 h. Though I visited that area on 19 and 20 April, I did not see the bird. Based on his video, it appears to be the same individual due to the presence of the black near the eye.

This appears to be the first instance of leucism in this species, from India, as I could not find any such cases in any of the online sites nor is it included in Mahabal et al. (2016) who reviewed this topic for India.

My gratitude to Abhisek Mahata for providing me his camera to take these photographs.

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Conflict between nesting Shikras *Accipiter badius* and Sri Lanka Grey Hornbills *Ocyrceros gingalensis*

On three occasions in May 2020, I observed a pair of nesting Shikras *Accipiter badius* attack Sri Lanka Grey Hornbills *Ocyrceros gingalensis* in mid-air. The incidents happened on 15th, 20th, and 22nd of the month, and were observed from my elevated balcony overlooking a wooded area in the outskirts of Matara (Southern Province), Sri Lanka. In the first and the last incidents, the Shikra dived at the hornbill from above but the hornbill made evasive maneuvers and escaped. On the 20th, however, the attack resulted in physical contact. The Accipiter lightly struck the