Correspondence

The Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus* in Punchakkari, southern Kerala: A definitive record for the Indian Subcontinent

The Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus* is a strongly migratory Old World leaf warbler that breeds in the Eurasian Palearctic. Post-breeding, it undertakes an over-land migration, between August and October; all populations winter in Africa. There are three subspecies - the nominate breeds in much of Europe; *acredula* breeds in Fenno-Scandinavia, Russia east to Siberia; and *yakutensis* which breeds in the Russian Far East(Shirihai & Svensson 2018; Clement 2020).

We report two individuals of Willow Warblers, in November 2020, from the Punchakkari wetlands (8.44°N, 76.98°E), adjoining Vellayani Lake, which lies south-westwards of Thiruvananthapuram city, Kerala, southern India. The area is a large swamp that, historically, was under multi-crop rice cultivation till about 25 years ago. Barring small pockets of paddy fields, most of the land is being converted for growing vegetables. A major portion remains fallow, some areas being damp and waterlogged, with floating vegetation. There is a bund that separates this swamp from Vellayani Lake, the only natural freshwater lake in the district.

14 November: While on a regular birding trip to Punchakkari, on a bright and sunny morning, NG spotted a *Phylloscopus*-sized bird perched on a wire mesh atop a vegetable garden, foraging for insects at 0931 h. He immediately took some photographs **[9, 10]** before an aggressive Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus* chased it off. Though he initially suspected it to have been a Blyth's Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum*, which were calling everywhere, NG realised the bird in the photos looked different, with an overall greenish-grey plumage and yellow wash. He sent the pictures to Govind Girija who confirmed it was not a Blyth's Reed Warbler, and advised him to post them in the local birdwatchers Whatsapp group. The lack of wing-bars, and slender structure led to suggestions of Common Chiffchaff *P. collybita*, a state rarity. The bird identification app, *Merlin,* also suggested a 'Chiffchaff' from these photographs, and PJ took up the discussion with the *eBird Kerala Media Editors* group. The lack of dark feet and legs quickly eliminated the Common Chiffchaff, and when higher resolution photographs were scrutinised, it quickly became clear that Willow Warbler was the top suggestion in *Merlin*, scoring higher than Common Chiffchaff, and Sulphur-bellied Warbler *P. griseolus*. The pinkish legs, paler base to lower mandible, yellowish tinge on face, breast, and belly, lack of wing bars, overall shape with longer tail, all suggested the Willow Warbler as a strong contender, and a revisit to the site was planned by the group members.

On the same day, at 1653 h, in rather overcast conditions, PD independently photographed the same warbler **[11]** at the same location, not realizing its identity. The bird was spotted foraging on the wires of the vegetable garden and the two photos were taken as it fed on insects. The entire observation lasted less than a minute, as the warbler quickly moved through the vegetable garden and flew westward. On 17 November, JK informed PD about an unusual warbler that was photographed during the weekend. PD shared his photograph and JK retrospectively identified the bird.


9.


10.

Both: Nirmal George

9, 10. Willow Warbler foraging on the wires of the vegetable garden. Note flesh coloured legs, pale base to lower mandible, long wings and tail, and yellowish on face and vent. 0931 h, 14 November 2020.

Prasanth Das

11. Willow Warbler showing its primaries—note emarginations on P3, P4, and P5, with no emargination on P6—a strong ID feature of this species. 1653 h, 14 November 2020.

15 November: PJ was at the spot from 0615 h onwards and spotted a small warbler at 0715 h flying into a lone acacia tree (*c*.10 m tall) that stood behind the vegetable garden, *c*.30 m from the spot where NG had seen it. It was seen foraging on the tree for *c*.20 sec, pumping its long tail, before House Crows *Corvus splendens* chased it off. At 0930 h, when it was clear and sunny, PJ, JJ & JK, saw the warbler foraging in the middle canopy of the tree. The distinct yellowish wash on its face, lack of wing-bars and streamlined body structure indicated this to be the same bird as reported on the previous day (Praveen 2020). They watched the bird for *c*. 45 min and its tail pumping behaviour was observed several times. The same tree had *c*.10 Blue-tailed Bee-eaters *Merops philippinus* that were quite passive towards the warbler. At 1015 h, CGA and Rajesh M. S., joined in. The bird was actively foraging insects in the acacia tree at a height of 08–10 m. It came atop a bare twig two to three times, and at 1058 h, the bird finally emerged into the open, right in front of us, *c*.3–4 m away **[12, 13]**. The colours of its bare parts were also visible at such close quarters, while its posture, elongated body shape, distinct facial patterns and, comparatively long tail were noted. The bird continued to make tail movements as it foraged. It did not call during the entire observation period.

Both: C G Arun

12, 13. Willow Warbler on an acacia. Note the strong wash of yellow on the supercilium, pale base on lower mandible transitioning sharply to dark tip, pale under the eyes, and dusky cheek stripe. 1058 h, 15 November 2020.

The photographs were analysed after returning from the field, and they indicated a strong possibility of this being a Willow Warbler. None of the photographs showed any wing-bar, while the better photographs did reveal a dark upper mandible and the yellowish-orange base of the lower mandible, with a dark tip. The iris was dark, and the feet, reddish brown. A pale yellow supercilium extended to the rear of the head above over a dark eye-stripe. The ear-coverts immediately below the eyes were smudged with pale feathering, below which they were a distinctive dark olive. A yellowish wash extended on the underparts, with whitish flanks, with pale creamy-yellow on the vent. Its upperparts, from the head, nape, and back were greenish brown, with the wings and tail being dark brown. The primaries were long, projecting more than 75% of the tertial length.

These photographs were posted on the *eBird India editors* social media group on the same day, but there was no unanimity on the ID - options discussed included Tickell's Leaf Warbler *P. affinis* and a worn Green Warbler *P. nitidus*.

18 November: At 0751 h, PD photographed a small warbler that passed through the vegetable garden, foraging along the wires in identical fashion, and quickly flew westwards. JK, who reached at 0830 h, examined the photographs in the field and concluded they were not of the same bird without realizing that this was also another Willow Warbler **[14]**.

Prasanth Das

14. Willow Warbler, presumably another individual, at the vegetable garden. Note, shorter tail, and yellow on supercilium stopping just above the eye, more extensive yellow on the lower mandible compared to the previous individual. 757 h, 18 November 2020.

Lack of wing bars, yellow on face and supercilium, flesh-coloured legs, and an extensive pale bill base with sharp transition to a dark tip are, in combination, good field marks for a Willow Warbler—these features are visible on both individuals **[12, 13, 14]**. Most photos of the first individual showed a long-winged bird with a primary projection that is nearly equal to the longest tertials—a strong indicator of a Willow Warbler **[15, 16]**. The extent of the yellow suffusion on its face could be indicative of the bird being a first winter bird (Shirihai & Svensson 2018; van Duivendijk 2011). The tail pumping behaviour, and the tendency to take open perches as well as tree foliage, is also congruent with the habits of a Willow Warbler. The second bird is more typical and well proportioned, with less yellow in supercilium, rather plain ear-coverts and underparts.

15. Willow Warbler showing long primary projection, nearly as long as exposed tertials. 15 November 2020.

Both: S Jayakrishnan

16. Strong bill of this Willow Warbler. 15 November 2020.

Yellow on the face is present in very few leaf warblers. Several possibilities including all atypical cases were considered - including Green Warbler, Greenish Warbler *P. trochiloides*, Tickell's Leaf Warbler, Sulphur-bellied Warbler, Wood Warbler *P. sibilatrix*, and Arctic Warbler *P. borealis*. The key feature that is not shared by most leaf warblers is the pattern of emarginations on the primaries. We have one photo **[11]** that showed clearly the emarginations on 3rd, 4th, and 5th primaries, but none on the 6th—something that eliminates all the above species. While lack of vocalization greatly deprived us of an additional line of evidence, it appears that the Willow Warblers are generally silent during migration (Oscar Campbell, in a message dated 20 November 2020).

While there is some reticence in accepting the first bird as a Willow Warbler, the long primary projection and emarginations leave open no other option. Considering the observation together with a much more certain second bird, just two days later, increases the certainty of the first individual as well to be a Willow Warbler. In all our correspondences everyone concurred with the ID of the first bird as a Willow Warbler except Peter Clement, who felt unsure of the bird's identity since it showed Willow-like and Tickell's-like features. He suggested DNA examination before it can be treated as the first for the country (Peter Clement, in e-mail dated 20 November 2020), but did not give an opinion on the second bird which was seen later.

It is impossible to assign age or subspecific status with confidence to either of the individuals. It is possible that these birds were from the population that breeds in the eastern Palearctic and possibly *yakutensis*—as its migration route is closest to southern India. However, the eastern *yakutensis* is mostly grey-brown and white and adults are never this yellow (though juveniles can have some yellow), and typically have brown-grey streaking on the throat, which is not present at all on this bird (Lars Svensson, in e-mail dated 17 November 2020).

The Willow Warbler had multiple entries and exits into the checklist of birds of the Indian Subcontinent. Ali & Ripley (1987) listed it for the subcontinent based on two specimens—one specimen at the BNHS (#6112), from Gujarat, collected on 29 March 1946 by Sálim Ali, and another in the collections of Richard Meinertzhagen from the Naga Hills in January 1952. However, Abdulali & Unnithan (1986) demonstrated that the Gujarat specimen was misidentified (or mislabeled) as a Greenish Warbler *P. trochiloides viridanus* and hence should be removed from the subcontinental avifauna. Both Grimmett et al. (2011) and Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) did not list it for India as they both expressed reservations in accepting the sole record of Meinertzhagen as the first for the Subcontinent—aware of the collector's habits of stealing and re-labeling specimens. Though Zacharias et al. (1997) published an aural record of Willow Warbler from Periyar Tiger Reserve, Kerala, it is not clear whether the authors saw a leaf warbler making that call. The same is listed as unconfirmed by Kazmierczak (2000), excluded from the main list by Sashikumar et al. (2011), and ignored by Grimmett et al. (1998, 2011), and Rasmussen & Anderton (2005, 2012). Zacharias & Price (2014) surfaced two old museum specimens purportedly taken from Indian subcontinent - one from Pakistan and another from Nepal. However, Praveen & Inskipp (2018) established that the Pakistan specimen was in fact taken from Iran and the 'Nepal' specimen lacked sufficient details of location, collector's name, and date, to be treated as the first for the subcontinent. They recommended Willow Warbler be treated as hypothetical for the Indian Subcontinent.

Though it is not included in the South Asia checklist (Praveen et al. 2020), a spring report, presumably photographed, exists from Camp Marmal, Balkh, Afghanistan (Kaestner 2014) with a detailed description that could potentially be a first definitive record for South Asia. Four years ago a bird was reported from Malaysia (Bakewell 2016) during autumn migration and is the closest record on the eastern side. The species regularly passes through Iran and the southern areas of Central Asia, as well as South-west Asia (Blair et al. 2020), and hence, a vagrant individual from this flyway reaching southern India is not totally unexpected. It is remarkable that for a bird breeding all the way till the eastern end of the Palearctic, there are so few records in East, Southeast and South Asia. What is strange is that we had two different individuals within a matter of days indicating a possibly

more widespread eruption this autumn to southern India and more individuals could turn up[1]. However, it is unclear whether the warblers would have survived, or attempt an ocean crossing as there has not been any previously reported instance of such a migratory route.

While these birds would turn out to be the first definitive records of Willow Warbler for the Indian Subcontinent, these records are not that surprising. A widespread breeder in the eastern Palearctic eventually will turn up in the Indian Subcontinent, and the first winter bird illustrates how easily it can be overlooked as a slightly atypical individual of regularly occurring species like Tickell's Leaf Warbler or Green Warbler. Birders may focus on leaf warblers found in non-wooded habitats and make efforts to document them with photographs to establish a strong ID.

A large number of people have been involved in helping us identify this atypical leaf warbler, either directly providing identification keys, or helping us (or our images) reach experts who could advise. We are grateful to all of them- Abhinand Chandran, Andy Stoddart, Ankit Vikrant, Ashwin Viswanathan, Biju P. B., Chris Bowden, Chris Kehoe, Dave Bakewell, Francis Buner, Govind Girija, James Eaton, Lars Svensson, Mike Prince, Nick Lethaby, Oscar Campbell, Pam Rasmussen, Per Alström, Peter Clement, Prasad Ganpule, Rajah Jayapal, Satyan Meppayur, Shashank Dalvi, Staffan Bensch, Tim Inskipp, and Tim Walker. Our thanks to an anonymous referee for greatly improving the manuscript and confirming our ID. We would like to thank members of the *Trivandrum Birding Team* who kept a constant watch at the spot during the week.

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1 Editor's note: After this note was submitted, a Willow Warbler with similar features was reported from Changam wetlands, Alappuzha District, Kerala, *c.* 200 km northwards of this site (https://ebird.org/india/view/checklist/S76838617).

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The Desert Finch *Rhodospiza obsoleta* in Sirsa, Haryana, India

On 22 November 2020, we photographed a Desert Finch *Rhodospiza obsoleta* **[17, 18]** in the western part of Haryana, at Village Nathusari Chopta (29.37°*N*, 75.12°*E) near Sirsa* **[19]**. The presence of pink and white feathers on the otherwise sandy brown plumage helped us identity it as a Desert Finch. The bird we saw was a female, because of the absence of a black frontal mask that is present in a male. We recorded only a single bird, which constantly feeding on the ground. The bird was in a small flock of Laughing Doves *Spilopelia senegalensis* and Pied Bushchats *Saxicola caprata* and soon flew away after 8–10 minutes of observation.

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