

Correspondence

A Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra* from Dharapuram, Tamil Nadu: An addition to the birds of India

On 12 December 2021, we were birding in grassland (10.71°N, 77.49°E), about 6 km from the Uppar Reservoir, Dharapuram (Tiruppur District, Tamil Nadu). Due to the plentiful monsoon this year, the area was fully covered with needle grass *Senna auriculata*, and *Aerva lanata*. While searching for raptors, we spotted on a fence, c.100 m away from us, a pipit (*Anthus* sp.), chasing a sparrow-sized bird. When we approached to check out the latter, it flew away into the bushes. Since our views were from a distance, we thought it could have been an Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina*. After that we just kept a distance from the spot to allow the bird to return to the fence, as it seemed shy. We returned after ten minutes and saw the bird perched on the fence, and we were able to take some photographs [21–23]. When we check the ID, it resembled a Siberian Stonechat *Saxicola maurus*. But the thick, broad supercilium indicated that this might not be a stonechat. Another option was Stoliczka's Bushchat *S. macrorhynchus*. But its longer tail, and its distribution did not match Stoliczka's. The striking and broad supercilium [21], and long the primary projection [23] were clearly visible in the images showing the wing, and the heavily streaked brown back pointed towards a Whinchat *S. rubetra*. The same photos were sent to P. Jeganathan, and Ashwin Viswanathan, who confirmed the ID as a Whinchat. The bird behaved like a Bushchat. We saw the bird only in the morning till about 1400 h. It perched mainly on *S. auriculata* and *A. lanata* plants, apart from the fence. After our report, many other birders also visited the area on subsequent days, and the bird was visible on almost all days until 19 December 2021 (eBird 2021).



21. A striking, broad supercilium is clearly visible on the Whinchat.



22. The supercilium, in front on the eye appears buff.



23. The primary projection of the Whinchat is clearly visible.

The first report of Whinchat for South Asia was a well-photographed individual in February 2015 from Sri Lanka (Steiof et al. 2017). There was one other claim from National Chambal Sanctuary, Rajasthan (Saleem 2019), but its identity remains unconfirmed due to lack of sufficient photographs. Other possibilities, like a hybrid between Siberian Stonechat and Grey Bushchat *S. ferreus* has also been suggested. Hence, ours is the first confirmed record of a Whinchat from India.

Despite the bird being photographed for several days by a number of birders, there were important plumage features that were not well captured in the images and videos. The Whinchat is supposed to show white patches at the sides of the tail-base and none of the photographs or videos captured that feature properly. From what can be seen of the closed tail [23], it appeared quite long, and had fairly broad brown fringes to otherwise darker centers, and there is no sign of any paler or whiter bases to any of the feathers. Overall pattern of the plumage is the rather warm orange tone with slightly darker fringes to the throat and breast, which is good for a Whinchat, and seems too heavy for a Stoliczka's Bushchat. In our video recording, the bird clearly showed dark centers to the upper tail coverts and the relatively short and all dark tip half of the tail. The video also showed its behavioural pattern of occasionally dipping (or slight flicking) of the tail (<https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/404726021>) all excellent features supporting the ID as a Whinchat. Though the supercilium looked too white in some pictures for a Whinchat at this time of the year, some of the photos showed that the front part of the supercilium over the eyes was more buffish than the rest, like it should be for a Whinchat [22]. This particularly well-marked face pattern [21], with pale centers and a bold or darker edge is normally shown by first winter Whinchats.

Our bird had heavily worn plumage, evident from the pale creamy-buff edges to the upperparts, giving it a heavily streaked appearance [24]. This created some fine-scale plumage features in this bird that were a bit unusual in Whinchats. Whinchats should generally be more buff-brown or slightly warmer brown with broad dark centers, like the Sri Lankan bird in mid-February that was moulting into its summer plumage. Ageing is not always easy in non-breeding Whinchats, especially of birds in worn plumage, but the plumage of this bird indicated that moult had already begun. This affects, mainly, the wing coverts, but also includes the central tail feathers. The primary coverts seem to be either missing, on the bird's right flank, or are uniform with the flight feathers [25]; but they show a few white outer edges on its left flank [21]. It is still puzzling why this bird, as well as the one in Sri Lanka in 2015, did not show any signs of white (or pale buff) base patches on either side of the tail. Both these birds did

not spread their tails, which is also unusual for Whinchats, which frequently spread their tail either when taking off, or landing, and we wonder whether is due to the moult?



24. The pale edges showing on the upperparts indicate worn plumage.



25. Some primary coverts seem to be missing on the right side.

Both: R. Magesh

Whinchats breed in the Europe, eastwards till about western Siberia, and spend their non-breeding months in Africa. We should be expecting some birds, probably juveniles, from the eastern part of its range to straggle annually to the Indian Subcontinent.

We are grateful for all the identification details provided by an anonymous referee.

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Indian Yellow Tit *Machlolophus aplanotus* in West Bengal

While birding on 05 January 2019, at Kankrajhore, Amlasole (22.71°N, 86.58°E) (Belpahari block under Banspahari Gram Panchayat, Jhargram district, West Bengal), at 0800 h, AKD

spotted a small bird foraging, and hanging from a tree amidst dense forests. The tree was about 30 m from us; it was ten meters tall, and was flowering. The bird was yellow and black in colour and of the size of a House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*. The bird caught our eye because it looked and behaved differently from other familiar birds of the area. It was chirping continuously and feeding on insects. The bird was present for around 40 s and before it flew away, I managed to click some photographs [26]. My brief views suggested a species of tit (Paridae). After checking field guides (Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), I concluded that it was an Indian Yellow Tit *Machlolophus aplanotus*. Despite the images being of substandard quality, the ID was later confirmed in Wildlife of West Bengal Facebook page. This appears to be the first report for West Bengal though it has been reported from adjoining Odisha (eBird 2021).



26. Indian Yellow Tit from West Bengal, January 2019.

Avik Kumar Datta

On 02 February 2019, we went to the same location and were able to capture sharper images [27, 28]. These images eliminated a potential Black-lored Yellow Tit *M. xanthogenys* of the Himalayas that is known to occur in northern Bengal as there is no range overlap. The Himalayan bird shows a much thicker eye stripe.

We are indebted to Kanad Baidya for identification, and Praveen J for help with writing this note.



27.

Biswanup Mandal & Prasun Kanti Mahata