

Sighting of Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* from the Nubra Valley, Ladakh, Jammu and Kashmir, and a review of previous records from the Indian Subcontinent

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The Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* is a small passerine bird that was formerly classed as a member of the thrush family Turdidae, but is now more generally considered to belong to the Muscicapidae, Old World flycatchers and chats. It is the most widespread member of the wheatear genus *Oenanthe* in Europe and Asia. Both sexes have a white rump and tail, with a black inverted T-pattern at the end of the tail. The plumage of the summer male has grey upperparts, buff throat and black wings and face mask. In autumn it resembles the female apart from the black wings. The female is pale brown above and buff below with darker brown wings. The male has a whistling, crackly song. Its call is a typical chat *chack*.

It is a migratory insectivorous species breeding in open stony country in Europe and Asia. It typically nests in rock crevices and rabbit burrows. All birds of the species winter in Africa and it is considered a passage migrant through Pakistan, and a vagrant elsewhere in the Indian subcontinent.

This article describes the sighting of a Northern Wheatear pair from Nubra Valley (34°36'N, 77°42'E), Ladakh, Jammu and Kashmir.

I was on holiday with my family in Ladakh after my 10th std exams. It was basically a sight-seeing trip. On 14 May 2013 we visited the Nubra valley to see the Double-humped camel *Camelus bactrianus*, which is a speciality of the area. The Nubra valley is a cold desert with diverse landscapes. On our way to the sand dunes for a camel ride I saw a female wheatear near a stream, sitting on a thorny shrub. However, I was not able to take any photographs at that time as the vehicle was moving. On reaching the destination I went in search of the wheatear. As soon as I crossed the stream near the parking lot, I saw the same female sitting on a rock beside the shrub. It chased a male Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros* that was sitting on a nearby rock and then came back to the original rock. Not knowing which species of wheatear it was I made some images from a distance. Satisfied with the record shots I decided to close the gap and started crawling on the ground and reached quite close to the bird. The female did not fly off and was quite tolerant towards me. It allowed me to take some images [161-163] with my pro zoomer camera. Suddenly, a male came from behind the female and on seeing me flew off quickly. On sensing the alertness of

Table 1. Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* reports from the Indian Subcontinent, listed chronologically

Locality	State/Province & Country	Details	References	Remarks
Mhow, Indore	Madhya Pradesh, India	'I got a specimen near Mhow, in the cold weather'. Pre 1863.	Jerdon (1863), Hume (1881), Oates (1890), Ripley (1982), Ali & Ripley (1998), Kazmierczak (2000) - mapped, Grimmett <i>et al.</i> (2011) - mapped, Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) - mapped	Specimen ascribed to this species, but discounted conclusively as <i>O. isabellina</i> by Hume (1881): 'Under these circumstances I have not the least doubt that, be the sources what they may from which he compiled his curt and by-no-means satisfactory description, the bird he intended to represent under his 491 was really <i>isabellinus</i> '. This latter conclusion was repeated by Oates (1890) but overlooked by most subsequent authors.
Sukkur	Sind, Pakistan	Specimen in the collection of the American Museum of Natural History, collected by F. Day, undated [?1870s]	ORNIS	Not listed or mapped by Roberts (1992) or Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) and therefore treated here as unconfirmed until the identification and other details have been checked.
Gilgit	Kashmir	Specimens: 2 ♂♂ in the collection of The Natural History Museum, Tring, UK. Sight records: '...about half a dozen others observed' in March 1878; also '...in small numbers from the 20th of March to the 22 nd April' 1878 or 1879	Biddulph (1881), Hume (1881), Scully (1881), Oates (1890), Baker (1924), Ripley (1982), Roberts (1992), Ali & Ripley (1998), Kazmierczak (2000) - mapped, Grimmett <i>et al.</i> (2011) - mapped, Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) - mapped	Identification of specimens confirmed by Roberts (1992).
Drosh	Chitral, Pakistan	Specimens: 2 in the collection of the Bombay Natural History Society. Sight records: 'Not common. First seen 2 nd April [1903]. One pair nested on the Lower Drosh farm about 4,200 feet [= 1280 m].' No further details provided.	Perreau (1910), Baker (1924), Ripley (1982), Abdulali (1988), Roberts (1992), Ali & Ripley (1998), Kazmierczak & van Perlo (2000) - mapped, Grimmett <i>et al.</i> (2011) - mapped, Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) - mapped	Identification of specimens confirmed by Abdulali (1988). The breeding record was not mentioned by Baker (1934) or Ripley (1982). However, Ali & Ripley (1998) included it without expressing any doubt, whereas Roberts (1992) and Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) both referred to possible breeding.
Wardwan Valley	Kashmir	Specimen: September 1907	Ward (1908), Baker (1924), Ripley (1982), Ali & Ripley (1998)	Authenticity doubted as specimen not traced and excluded from some subsequent publications (e.g. Grimmett <i>et al.</i> 2011, Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).

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Quetta	Balochistan, Pakistan	Specimens in the collection of The Natural History Museum: 'An adult male was obtained at Quetta on 17.iii. [1913 or 1914] and an adult female on 18.x. [1913 or 1914]. Not otherwise observed.'	Meinertzhagen (1920), Baker (1924), Christison & Ticehurst (1942), Roberts (1992)	As with all Meinertzhagen's specimens the true origin of these may be suspect (see Rasmussen & Anderton, 2012: 30). Christison & Ticehurst (1942) stated that it was 'reported to pass through Quetta between 17 th March and 18 th October, but this is clearly a misinterpretation of Meinertzhagen's text.
Jhelum District	Pakistan	Sight record: a wheatear noted as 'perhaps <i>S. oenanthe</i> ' seen on 31 August 1914.	Whistler (1914)	No description provided and clearly not considered as definite anyway.
Chagai	Balochistan, Pakistan	Specimen: ' <i>Oenanthe leucomela</i> ... The Siberian, pale race of Common Wheatear'	Christison (1941), Ripley (1982), Ali & Ripley (1998)	Refers to Pied Wheatear <i>O. pleschanka</i> rather than <i>O. oenanthe</i> .
Nushki	Balochistan, Pakistan	Specimen: 14 November [1938-1941]	Christison & Ticehurst (1942), Roberts (1992), Kazmierczak (2000) - mapped, Grimmett <i>et al.</i> (2011) - mapped, Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) - mapped	The current whereabouts of the specimen is not known and therefore the identification cannot be confirmed. However, Christison collected six other species of wheatears in the area and was probably well versed in the intricacies of their identification.
Seenu Atoll	Maldives	Sight record: 1-3 October 1970	Strickland & Jenner (1978), Ash & Shafeeg (1995), Kazmierczak (2000) - mapped, Grimmett <i>et al.</i> (2011) - mapped, Rasmussen & Anderton (2012)	No description provided and therefore not independently verifiable.
Meghauli	Nepal	Sight record: ♂ on 1 April 1983	Byers & Adams (1983), Inskipp & Inskipp (1991), Grimmett <i>et al.</i> (2011) - mapped, Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) - mapped	Detailed description provided. Considered an acceptable record.
Kyangiin	Nepal	Sight record: 18 April 1984	Inskipp & Inskipp (1985), Inskipp & Inskipp (1991)	Inskipp & Inskipp (1985) incorrectly ascribed the record to this species but Inskipp & Inskipp (1991) corrected the error.
Ladakh	Kashmir	Sight records: ♂ on 19 June 1986 at Rangdum Gumpa-Yuldo; ♂ on 22 June 1986 at Parkachik-Panikar; possible record of ♀ on 12 June at Tikse-Shey	Goodwin (1986)	No descriptions provided and therefore not independently verifiable. However, the observer would have been very familiar with the species in Europe.
Bridge Lake	NWFP, Pakistan	Sight record: ♂ on 25 April 1990	Kylänpää (2000)	No description provided and therefore not independently verifiable. However, it is likely that the observer would have been very familiar with the species in Europe.
Kota	Rajasthan, India	Sight records: frequently seen in small numbers	Vyas (1992), Kazmierczak (2000) - mapped, Grimmett <i>et al.</i> (2011) - mapped, Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) - mapped	Suspected to refer to <i>O. isabellina</i> , which is missing from the species list.
Muzzafarabad	Kashmir	Sight records: common winter visitor 2000-2001; summer visitor 2007-2008	Awan <i>et al.</i> (2004), Awan <i>et al.</i> (2010)	Unlikely to be common or occur either in winter or in summer. Other expected congeners are missing from the species lists.
Shivpuri	Madhya Pradesh, India	?	Chandra & Singh (2004)	No details of the record(s) provided, which would be necessary for general acceptance.
Thar Desert	Rajasthan, India	Sight record: 2 recorded 2000-2003	Sivaperuman <i>et al.</i> (2005), Tak <i>et al.</i> (2009)	No details of the record provided, which would be necessary for general acceptance.
Nagwada, Little Rann of Kachchh	Gujarat, India	Sight record: photographed, October 2008	Vyas (2009) & copies of 2 original photographs	The original photographs appear to show a Desert Wheatear <i>O. deserti</i> .
Tal Chhapar	Rajasthan, India	Sight record: photographed, ♂ on 10 October 1990	Devasar (2009)	Photo ascribed to this species, but later changed to Isabelline Wheatear <i>O. isabellina</i> .
Tunganath	Uttarakhand, India	Sight record: photographed, ♂ on 1 May 2013	Mondal (2013)	Photographed but not described.
Nubra Valley, Ladakh	Kashmir	Sight record: photographed, pair on 14 May 2013	Damle	Photographed and described.
Madayippara	Kerala	Sight record: photographed, ♀/imm. on 16-17 October 2013	Chowra (2013)	Photographed but not described by P. C. Rajeevan, and seen also by K. Chowra and J. Thomas on the following day.
Ghasa, Mavli Tehsil, Udaipur	Rajasthan, India	Sight record: photographed, ♀ on 1 December 2013	Sangha (2013), Shekhawat (2013)	Photographed but not described.

Text in orange colour= confirmed record.

the male, the female flew with him and the pair perched on top of a tall shrub. Unsure of the species I did not pay much attention to them and carried on with my birding. On my way back, I spent some time at the airport searching for the ID of this species on the internet as I did not have a field guide at that time. I searched in the wheatears section on www.orientalbirdimages.org where I saw images very similar to the bird I had seen. The blue-grey upperparts and black mask matched the images of the male

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*. The female was olive-brown in colour and lacked the rufous ear-coverts that most wheatears have, making it a good fit for a female Northern Wheatear. I made some phone calls and asked some birding experts what were the chances of seeing this bird. However, no one was sure about its distribution as there had been very few Indian records. At home I uploaded the image on the Indian Birds facebook group (<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=57>



161. Northern Wheatear pair



162. Male Northern Wheatear



163. Female Northern Wheatear

Photos: S. Damle

0102816346478&set=gm.10151402178952411&type=1&theater) and experts there confirmed the identification.

All records of this species from the Indian subcontinent are summarised in Table 1, with those regarded as acceptable in bold typeface.

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