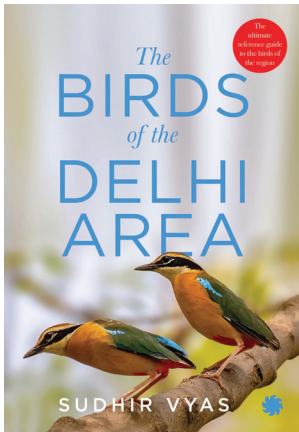


Book review



The Birds of the Delhi Area
Sudhir Vyas.
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Pp. 1–320.

Delhi has the distinction of being the second most bird-rich national capital in the world, second only to Nairobi, Kenya. With a multitude of habitats, ranging from the sandbanks of the Yamuna River to the rugged hills of the Aravallis the metropolis is truly a birder's paradise. Fortunately, as the nation's capital for more than a century, Delhi has continually had a stream of bird enthusiasts and ornithologists who have helped document the avifauna of the region through the years, and one such birder is Sudhir Vyas.

Sudhir's latest book, *The Birds of the Delhi Area*, is a comprehensive guide that documents the region's avian life until 2023. Building upon his previously published, *The birds of the Delhi area: An annotated checklist* (Vyas 2019), this book incorporates the latest records and provides detailed insights into the status of each species found in the region. The book amalgamates historical works, including Major General Hutson's *The Birds About Delhi* (Hutson 1954) and Usha Ganguli's *A Guide to the Birds of the Delhi Area* (Ganguli 1975), with more recent works such as the *Bird Atlas of Delhi and Haryana* (Harvey et al. 2006) and *Birds about Delhi* (Devasar & Suvarna 2018). However, it is essential to note that this is not just a compilation of literature. Sudhir Vyas's dedication shines through as he meticulously curated this checklist through years of his own field observations and interactions with fellow birders. He has painstakingly maintained a record of every species sighted in the region, ensuring the integrity of his annotated checklist. This level of detail is not achieved overnight but is the result of years of diligent record-keeping and follow-ups with birders to verify sightings. I have had firsthand experience contacting Vyas to discuss the status of certain species or report rare sightings, witnessing his unwavering commitment to ensure accurate documentation.

The book is divided into several sections, including an introduction to the Delhi area, a detailed annotated checklist, a section for historical and expunged records, and a short section on the birding hotspots in the area. The annotated checklist forms the crux of the book, offering an account for every species recorded in the region. Each account provides detailed insights into the status of the species, including its residency status, migratory patterns, and relative abundance. For rarities

and vagrants, this section also includes details of when and where each species was reported. However, it is important to note that this is not a typical field guide. If you are seeking a book that provides intricate bird identification tips, this is not the book for you. Instead, this book serves as an indispensable resource for two distinct groups of bird enthusiasts. First, local Delhi birders who are keen to gain more insight into the avian population of the region, augmented with detailed historical records. Second, birders who are visiting Delhi and those who are looking for a comprehensive checklist, along with invaluable tips on where to spot these winged wonders. Complementing the checklist are captivating images, predominantly captured by Amit Sharma. The author's careful curation ensures that most images have been clicked in the Delhi area, which adds a nice touch to the book.

Great care has been taken to maintain the integrity of the checklist by including only confirmed records that were personally verified by him, taking multiple opinions into account through direct interactions. Any records of rare birds that are questionable or lack substantial evidence have been segregated into an expunged records section. For instance, the 1968 record of a White-bellied Heron *Ardea insignis*, a critically endangered species teetering on the brink of extinction, with only a few hundred individuals remaining, and at present restricted to the fast-flowing Himalayan rivers in Bhutan and northeastern India, has been added to this list.

What I found particularly interesting were the historical records. As someone who has been birding in the Delhi area for more than a decade, this section provides a window into what birding in the region was like a century ago. The historical records offer glimpses of a bygone era, including sightings such as a flock of more than 300 Pin-tailed Sandgrouse *Pterocles alchata* in 1875, the critically endangered Great Indian Bustard *Ardeotis nigriceps* in the 1920s, and the rare appearance of the now locally extirpated Siberian Crane *Leucogeranus leucogeranus* in 1875. The Critically Endangered Siberian Crane was a regular winter visitor to Keoladeo Ghana National Park in Bharatpur, Rajasthan, and was last reported in India in the winter of 2001-02 from that location. The western/central population of the species is on the brink of extirpation with only one individual, named 'Omid' (meaning 'hope' in Persian), known to be regularly wintering in Iran until 2023. The eastern population, though threatened with rapid habitat loss, is relatively stable and breeds almost exclusively in the east-central Siberia and winters in south-eastern China. The mere thought of encountering some of these avian treasures in today's Delhi seems almost incredulous! The checklist also offers a fascinating insight into the region's transient avian visitors that have since disappeared from its skies – from the endangered Greater Adjutant *Leptoptilos dubius* last recorded in the 1980s to the once abundant White-rumped Vultures *Gyps bengalensis* that were extirpated in the early 2000s. Additionally, a plethora of vagrants listed in the checklist serve as reminders for birders to keep their eyes peeled and ears open, as you never know which rare birds can turn up!

Despite its comprehensive coverage, reference books of this nature face the challenge of remaining current in the face of the evolving birding landscape. The recent surge in birders and photographers has accelerated the pace of new bird sightings and additions to the Delhi area checklist. Therefore, it would be beneficial to release updated editions with revisions periodically,

perhaps every 3–5 years, to ensure that this resource remains pertinent and up-to-date. Additionally, while the book features some stunning images, readers may desire a broader selection, especially for birds that are considered rarities not only in Delhi but also across India, such as Horned Grebe *Podiceps auritus*, Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*, and Sharp-tailed Sandpiper *Calidris acuminata*. Furthermore, while the book touches on birding hotspots, enriching this section with more comprehensive details could further increase its use as an indispensable resource for many birders.

In conclusion, *The Birds of the Delhi Area* stands as more than just a reference book—it is a testament to the rich avian heritage of Delhi. With its wealth of historical insights, detailed species accounts, and captivating images, this book serves as an essential reference for both seasoned local birders and curious visitors alike. As Delhi's avian landscape continues to evolve, may this book inspire new generations of bird enthusiasts to explore,

cherish, protect, and document the diverse birdlife that graces the skies of the capital city.

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Letter to the Editors

A visit to the Museum of Comparative Zoology and a Brandt's Mountain Finch *Leucosticte brandti* specimen from Ladakh

On a personal visit to Boston in the United States, I was curious to visit the Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ) at Harvard University, as it houses several skins from India. On 12 and 13 April 2023, I visited the museum with the intent of understanding their scientific collections but also planned to examine certain specimens at the request of Praveen J. I was warmly received by Kate Eldridge, the Curatorial Assistant and Jeremiah Trimble, the Collections Manager, and I had an excellent opportunity to see their collections firsthand. I wish to share the details of the clarifications I sought in this collection as well the results of my investigation. Amongst this, the details of Brandt's Mountain Finch *Leucosticte brandti* would be most interesting for ornithologists of the western Himalaya.

This ornithology collection began with the founding of the MCZ by Louis Agassiz in 1859. Starting with the department's first accession of a small group of birds purchased by Agassiz at the Boston Market in 1846, the collection has grown into one of the largest and most important ornithological collections in the world, currently housing nearly 400,000 scientific specimens with representatives of nearly every genus of birds and over 85% of the species of birds. The MCZ is the largest university-based ornithological collection in the world and the fifth largest overall. The collection distribution covers the globe but has a good representation from North America, the Neotropics, and, of course, Asia.

Praveen had supplied me with the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF) links of all three specimens I needed to check, and indeed, two of the specimens had incorrect details, as he suspected. The first was an Oriental Magpie Robin *Copsychus saularis* specimen (#89132) of *musicus* subspecies that was labelled with a collection locality as Nilgiris [=Neelgherie], Tamil Nadu, India. The subspecies identity must be incorrect, as *musicus* occurs only in Southeast Asia, and

the subspecies in Nilgiris should be *ceylonicus*. The difference between the subspecies is only in the plumage of the female (Collar et al. 2020), a fact that was less useful here, as this particular specimen is unsexed. The second was a Blue-winged Pitta *Pitta moluccensis* (#33812) that had 'India' listed as the country. Evidently, the tag clearly indicated that the specimen was taken from Krasom [=Kosoom] in peninsular Thailand, a part of the Malay Peninsula (see Deignan 1961:502), and not from India. In both cases, I recommended that the museum database be corrected and that the specimens be retagged.

The third specimen (#166798) was a male Brandt's Mountain Finch of *haematopygia* subspecies recorded by F. A. Peter on 12 January 1934 from Khalatse [=Khalatse], Ladakh [72–73], the default subspecies expected in most of Ladakh. Charles Vaurie analysed the subspecific variation of this species by procuring a collection of 118 specimens from several museums, including the MCZ (Vaurie 1949:24). He commented that "... Stresemann may have been in error in considering his four comparative specimens from Ladakh to have been *haematopygia*. Stresemann's specimens had narrow rosy edges on the lesser upper wing coverts, and since they were collected on January 15 may have been winter visitors of *pamirensis*. I have examined a specimen taken by the same collector at the same locality (Khalatse) on January 12, 1934. This specimen is similar in its general coloration to specimens in fresh winter plumage of *haematopygia* from Ladakh and Rupshu (fresh specimens of *pamirensis* not seen), but has the narrow rosy edges on the lesser upper wing coverts of *pamirensis*, whereas these markings are lacking altogether in 49 specimens of *haematopygia*, in both fresh and worn plumage, from Ladakh and Rupshu." Here, several things may be noted. First, the date mentioned by Vaurie is exactly the same as that in #166798, and the locality tag 'Khalatse' also matches. A deeper examination revealed that this specimen also seems to have narrow rosy edges on the lesser upper wing coverts [73]. Hence, this is most likely the same specimen that Vaurie examined as an *L. b. pamirensis* from Ladakh. This discovery assumes significance, as the subspecies to date has been reported only from Gilgit, as a winter visitor, and not yet from the Indian side of the Line of Control. While Stresemann's specimens may also relate to this subspecies, neither Vaurie nor anybody else seems to have reassessed them. In fact, I do not