

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



72. Brandt's Mountain Finch from Khalatse, Ladakh.



Both: Subramanian Sankar

73. Brandt's Mountain Finch shows narrow rosy edges to lesser coverts.

know where those four Stresemann specimens are now; probably they are in the Berlin Museum, whose catalogue I do not have access to, and there are no online catalogues available.

Apart from this discovery, I was also curious to see the specimen of Naga Wren Babbler *Spelaeornis chocolatinus* as I was involved in the discovery of the new population of *Spelaeornis* from south-eastern Arunachal Pradesh. They had a male specimen collected by S. D. Ripley from Mt. Japfo in Nagaland.

I wish to thank Jeremiah for having me on short notice and obliging with the specimens and Kate for conducting me around the museum on a tour of an astounding avian collection.

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## Leg colour in male breeding plumaged Watercock *Gallicrex cinerea*

After the publication of the Gujarat field guide (Ganpule et al. 2022), the Bird Conservation Society, Gujarat, started work on making a Gujarati field guide. In relation to this work, translations of species descriptions are being carried out. While working on the description of Watercock *Gallicrex cinerea*, I made a surprising discovery. The reference text describes the leg colour in the breeding male Watercock as bright red (see Table 1).

However, on cross-checking with photographs of breeding plumaged male Watercock in 'eBird' (eBird 2024) and on social media [74, 75], the leg colour in breeding male Watercock appears greenish-yellow, yellow or greyish-yellow.

There are no photographs showing a bright red or red leg colour in breeding plumaged Watercocks. Only Puan et al. (2020) reported that the legs and feet of a male are briefly red at the height of breeding but are usually greenish yellow. Such a brief change in bare skin parts during courtship has been reported in



74. Male Watercock with greenish legs.

Vijendra Desai