

The Eyebrowed Thrush is a medium-sized monotypic thrush (Clement & Hathway 2000). It breeds in central and eastern Siberia, east to Kamchatka, south to northern Mongolia, Amurland, and Sakhalin, and winters in the northeastern Indian Subcontinent east to Taiwan, south to Greater Sundas and the Philippines (Collar 2020). In winter, it occurs from 2,300 m asl down to foothills, in open forests, groves, gardens, and open country (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). In the Indian subcontinent, the species winters mainly from Bhutan to Arunachal Pradesh, more commonly in the hills of northeast India in Assam and Meghalaya, south to Lushai Hills, Narcondam Island and South Andaman Island, north-eastern and south-eastern Bangladesh and has scattered winter records in the Himalaya from central Nepal eastwards. It also straggles to southern parts of the Indian Peninsula, Sri Lanka, and Maldives. According to eBird (2024), the species has consistently shown a tendency of vagrancy in recent times in parts of India, where it was not known to have occurred previously. It was recorded in West Bengal, where it was detected in Kolkata during November 2018, December 2018, and April 2023; in South 24 Parganas during April 2009 and September 2018; and in Sundarbans during October 2023 and November 2023 (eBird 2024). In Orissa, the species was recorded at Baleswar in January 2016, at Bhitarkanika in April 2018, and at Cuttack in February 2024 (eBird 2024). In the last ten years, the species has also occurred sporadically in parts of central and western India. The species was recorded in Gujarat at the Shoolpaneshwar Wildlife Sanctuary in March 2012 and in Junagadh in February 2013. It was recorded at Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh, in November 2023. In Maharashtra, the bird was recorded in Nagpur in April 2017, in Mumbai between January and March 2021, and in Pune in February 2016 and January 2024 (eBird 2024).

In the Himalaya, the species is distributed from central Nepal eastwards (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Collar 2020). In Nepal, the first mention of this species was by Biswas (1962), who referred to a single skin in the 'Hodgson Collection'. Redman et al. (1984) reported two birds, the only records to date from the Kathmandu valley, other than the specimen mentioned by Biswas (1962). However, there are recent eBird records of the species from the Kathmandu valley (Coker 2016; Bhusal 2021; Shrestha 2021; Tiwari 2021; Bhandari 2024; Shrestha 2024).

There are no known records of the species in the Himalaya westwards of central Nepal (Clement & Hathway 2000; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Collar 2020; eBird 2024). This species is also not mentioned in the Uttarakhand bird checklist (Mohan & Sondhi 2017). The present observation is the first record of this species from the state of Uttarakhand and the Western Himalaya.

MS thanks Jim's Jungle Retreat, Mohit Aggarwal, and Jungle Lore Birding Lodge of Pangot for their kind support.

References

- Bhandari, J. N., 2024. Website URL: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S159099510> [Accessed on 17 February 2024.]
- Bhusal, K., 2021. Website URL: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S93694994> [Accessed on 17 February 2024.]
- Biswas, B., 1962. The birds of Nepal. Part 5. *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society*. 58 (3): 653–677.
- Coker, M., 2016. Website URL: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S27092552> [Accessed on 17 February 2024.]
- Collar, N., 2020. Eyebrowed Thrush (*Turdus obscurus*), version 1.0. In *Birds of the World* (J. del Hoyo, A. Elliott, J. Sargatal, D. A. Christie, and E. de Juana, Editors). Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY, USA. <https://doi.org/10.2173/bow.eyethr.01>
- Clement, P., & Hathway, R., 2000. *Thrushes*. Christopher Helm: London.
- eBird, 2024. Eyebrowed Thrush: Map. Website URL: <https://ebird.org/map/eyethr> [Accessed on 17 February 2024.]
- Mohan, D., & Sondhi, S., 2017. *An updated checklist and bibliography of the birds of Uttarakhand*. Published by Uttarakhand Forest Department: Dehradun.
- Rasmussen, P. C., & Anderton, J. C., 2012. *Birds of South Asia: the Ripley guide*. 2nd ed. Washington, D.C. and Barcelona: Smithsonian Institution and Lynx Edicions. 2 vols. Pp. 1–378; 1–683.
- Redman, N. J., Lambert, F., Grimmett, R., 1984. Some observations of scarce birds in Nepal. *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society*. 81 (1): 49–53.
- Shrestha, G., 2024. Website URL: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S158763879> [Accessed on 17 February 2024.]
- Shrestha, Y., 2021. Website URL: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S93680782> [Accessed on 17 February 2024.]
- Tiwari, S., 2021. Website URL: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S93678875> [Accessed on 17 February 2024.]
- **Manoj Sharma, Prashant Kumar & Mahesh Rajput**
 Manoj Sharma, Village Shankarpur, Ramnagar, District Nainital, 244715, Uttarakhand, India. Email: treesswift@gmail.com [MS] [Corresponding author]
 Prashant Kumar, Dangwal Colony, Chilkiya, Ramnagar, Nainital District, 244715, Uttarakhand, India. Email: birdlifeindia@gmail.com [PK]
 Mahesh Rajput, Village & Post Office Malah, Bharatpur, 321001, Rajasthan, India. Email: natureguide1@asianadventures.in [MR]

Rufous-vented Grass Babbler *Laticilla burnesii* in Dudhwa Tiger Reserve, Uttar Pradesh, India: A curious midpoint of two populations across its range

Rufous-vented Grass Babbler *Laticilla burnesii* is a Near Threatened species primarily found in the grasslands of Pakistan and adjoining parts of north-western India, with another isolated population in eastern Nepal (Madge 2020; BirdLife International 2024). The species belongs to the family *Pellorneidae* and is the only one of two species of its genus, with the other being Swamp Grass Babbler *L. cinerascens*, which is found in the Brahmaputra River systems. The Rufous-vented Grass Babbler has two subspecies—the nominate subspecies from Pakistan and north-western India and the *nipalensis* subspecies recorded only from the Koshi Tappu Wildlife Sanctuary in eastern Nepal (Baral et al. 2007).

Rufous-vented Grass Babbler inhabits tall, alluvial, and seasonally inundated grassland patches along rivers that are mostly composed of *Saccharum spontaneum* and *S. munja* or reeds such as *Phragmites karka* and *Typha* (Showler & Davidson 1999; Madge 2020). These grasslands are often interspersed with *Acacia* trees and *Tamarisk* shrubs. In India, all of these habitats fall within the Indus River system, mostly in the state of Punjab, with vestigial populations in adjacent states (eBird 2024). However, the Ganga River system, which lies further east, also has vast stretches of alluvial grasslands (Shukla 2009) and hence has potential for grass babbler populations. The relatively unexplored riverine grasslands of the Sharda and Ghaghra Rivers (tributaries of Ganga) that fall within the jurisdiction of the Dudhwa and Pilibhit Tiger Reserves in Uttar Pradesh are home to many threatened grassland specialist birds, such as Bengal Florican *Houbaropsis bengalensis*, Jerdon's Babbler *Chrysomma altirostre*, and Swamp Francolin *Ortygornis gularis* (Javed & Rahmani 1998; Midha & Mathur 2010; Jha et al. 2018), which further indicate a greater likelihood of a grass babbler population.

As a part of the bird surveys conducted by 'The Habitats Trust' (THT) along the riverine grasslands of the Sharda River, we encountered Rufous-vented Grass Babblers at three locations over two days, recording four individuals altogether.

Observations Sighting 1

On 19 April 2023, KS and PM conducted bird surveys in the Sharda

beat of the Kishanpur Wildlife Sanctuary (KWLS) along the Sharda River accompanied by the Uttar Pradesh Forest Department Staff from Dudhwa Tiger Reserve. At 0828 h, at a location (28.421°N, 80.430°E) approximately 14.5 km west of Palia Town, Lakhimpur Kheri, while attempting to locate a Delicate Prinia *Prinia lepida*, we encountered a large prinia-like bird. It was dull brown overall with a white belly and throat, pale feet, a yellowish lower mandible, and a long, tattered tail. The tail was broader and longer than any other prinias in the region. Heavy streaking over the head, broad streaks on the mantle, and fine streaks on the flanks readily separate the bird from other prinias [87]. The sighting lasted approximately 3–4 minutes, and the bird was silent during this period. All the features eliminated other species, and the identification confirmed as a Rufous-vented Grass Babbler.

The habitat where the bird was sighted was within 10 m of the riverbank in a patch of *S. spontaneum* grassland that stood at a height of c. 1–2 m and was interspersed with shrubs of *Tamarisk indica*. The bird came up to the top of the grass and then moved and hid behind a *Tamarisk* bush. It continued to skulk, although we had a view of the bird through the gaps in the vegetation. Later, the individual moved deeper into the grassland where it could not be followed. No other individual was recorded along this stretch.



Pravar Mourya

87. Rufous-vented Grass Babbler in the Sharda beat of the Kishanpur Wildlife Sanctuary showing clear rufous vent and heavy streaking on the back, nape, and flanks.

Sighting 2

On 08 May 2023, KS and PM were again surveying the riverine stretch in the Sampurna Nagar Range of Dudhwa Buffer, from Dhanara Ghat to a village named Bailaha on the northern bank of the Sharda River. Here, the River shares a border with the Pilibhit Tiger Reserve. The habitat was dominated by *S. spontaneum* with some openings of short grass patches of *Imperata cylindrica* and *Cynodon dactylon* within 20 m from river bank [88]. At 0728 h, we encountered a bird making repetitive short calls, singing from the top of a tall grass and perched horizontally [89]. The bird appeared like a dull Indian Grassbird, *Graminicola bengalensis*, where the streaking on the head was less dark than that of the other species. However, it quickly disappeared into the grass but a few metres ahead on a mosaic patch (28.610°N, 80.311°E) of *S. spontaneum* with some short *Imperata cylindrica* grasses, and the bird reappeared and started singing. The song superficially resembled the song of Swamp Grass Babbler, but obviously, the nearest population was geographically very far. On closer inspection, KS was able to notice a clear rufous vent [90], and subsequently, the song also matched with that of the Rufous-vented Grass Babbler. For the next five minutes, the bird moved in close proximity and continued to sing before disappearing into the grasses. This site was c.24 km northwest of sighting 1.



Kaushik Sarkar

88. The habitat of the Rufous-vented Grass Babbler adjacent to the river is dominated by *S. spontaneum* and *I. cylindrica* grasses in the Sampurna Nagar Range, Dudhwa Buffer Zone.



89. Rufous-vented Grass Babbler perched horizontally on grass in Sampurna Nagar Range, Dudhwa Buffer Zone.



Both: Pravar Mourya

90. Rufous-vented Grass Babbler showing rufous vent.

Sighting 3

On the same day, while being on the same trail but a few kilometres away at 0850 h, PM heard a trilling call, similar to that of a Bluethroat, *Luscinia svecica*, coming from a *S. spontaneum* clump. The bird did not emerge from the clump for 5–10 minutes. It then moved out of that particular clump, landed 5–6 m away and started to sing. While this individual was not visible, its song was loud and clear, and another individual responded with song. The second individual then came extremely close to us, within 1.5 m, in search of the other individual and was visible for a brief duration. The second individual stopped singing, but the first individual emerged and started to sing. Here, the bird was observed very well, and its song was recorded by us, both in audio and video (Figure 1). After c.20 min, both birds disappeared in the grassland.

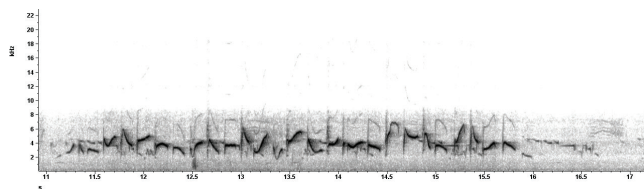


Figure 1. Spectrogram of the song of Rufous-vented Grass Babbler.

Discussion

As the Rufous-vented Grass Babbler was recorded from three locations along the River Sharda, there is potentially more existing in the habitat, confirming a population of the species in the Uttar Pradesh Terai landscape. This new locality is interesting because it lies at an approximate midpoint between the two extant populations of the Indus River system and Nepal's Koshi Tappu Wildlife Sanctuary. However, the taxonomy of *Laticilla* has not been fully investigated, the split is rather recent, and the position of the newly described *nipalensis* as belonging to the Rufous-vented Grass Babbler (contra Swamp Grass Babbler) is also contrary to the original proposal by Baral et al. (2007). This would also contradict the current distribution knowledge that the nominate subspecies of the Rufous-vented Grass Babbler is restricted to the Indus River system, while Sharda lies in the Ganga River system, where *nipalensis* occurs. Hence, a discussion on the identification of this new population is warranted.

There are multiple morphological diagnostic features on which we believe that this new population is more likely to be nominate Rufous-vented Grass Babbler. All the birds we saw here were warm brown with darker and heavy streaks (dark brown in colour) on the crown, nape, neck, back, and flanks [87, 89, 91]. All birds had a rufous wash on their necks [91]. These features completely match the nominate population of the Indus River system. Rufous-vented Grass Babbler in eastern Nepal are rather dull brown and drab, and they do not have heavy streaking on the crown, nape, neck or flanks. They also lack the rufous wash on the neck (Baral et al. 2007)¹. Moreover, the rufous on the vent of our birds were richer [89] and more extensive, like in the Indus population, than those in Nepal. Hence, the overall plumage features, including the namesake rufous vent, suggest that Uttar Pradesh birds are more likely to be the nominate subspecies of the Rufous-vented Grass Babbler.



91. Heavy streaking extends from crown, all the way to the back of the Rufous-vented Grass Babbler (Sighting 3) with a visible rufous wash on the nape.

¹ Through *Indian BIRDS*, we obtained the photographs of the type series from Hem Sagar Baral for comparison.

The Uttar Pradesh population of the Rufous-vented Grass Babbler is c.530 km away from the easternmost distribution of the nominate subspecies and c.675km from the Nepal population (eBird 2024). Although the understanding of the terai landscape and its contiguity suggests that the Uttar Pradesh population may represent a westwards expansion of the Nepal population, the current findings do not provide any evidence for the same. It would be interesting to genetically investigate this new population in relation to adjoining populations towards the east and the west.

It might also be necessary to explore suitable habitats around the site of discovery to understand the true extent of this population. As the current observation is along the Sharda River (Fig. 2), the species might also occur further south and eastwards in the Sharda-Ghaghra basin and northwards in Nepal close to Shukhlaphanta National Park. Both the Sharda and Ghaghra Rivers support relatively large stretches of *S. spontaneum* grasslands across their length, the same habitat where all the current observations were made (Midha & Mathur 2010). Some of these stretches also gain protection as they fall under the jurisdiction of the Dudhwa and Pilibhit Tiger Reserves (Fig. 3). Hence, the presence of the Rufous-vented Grass Babbler further downstream of the Sharda River and its tributaries is possible. As the Rufous-vented Grass Babbler is a habitat specialist and a Near Threatened species (BirdLife International 2024), it becomes important that the riverine habitats receive attention both in terms of exploration and conservation.

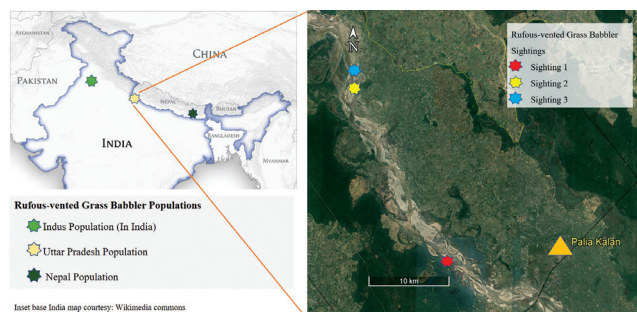


Fig. 2. Locations of the Rufous-vented Grass Babbler sightings with respect to the town of Palia Kalan, Lakhimpur Kheri (Headquarters: Dudhwa Tiger Reserve), with reference to other populations of the Rufous-vented Grass Babbler.

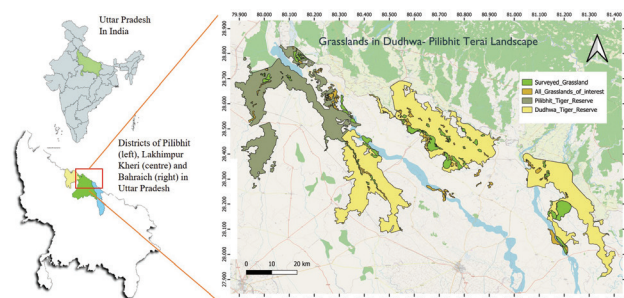


Fig. 3. Distribution of grassland habitat across the Dudhwa and Pilibhit Tiger Reserve landscapes where the Uttar Pradesh population of the Rufous-vented Grass Babbler exists.

As the surveys continue in subsequent years, more such rarities are likely to emerge from this landscape, which may clarify other prevailing gaps in the distribution and taxonomy of birds in the terai. Understanding the processes that govern the persistence of these riverine grasslands and their obligate species will help ensure that their habitats can be conserved. The conservation of these riverine grasslands by working along with

the forest department, communities that use the landscape and knowledge from more research are the current needs for species such as Rufous-vented Grass Babblers to thrive.

We would like to thank the Uttar Pradesh Forest Department for providing us with all necessary permits and support during the surveys. We would also like to thank Hem Sagar Baral and another anonymous referee apart from the editors from the *Indian BIRDS* for their crucial input, which helped us greatly to improve the manuscript.

References

- Baral, H. S., Basnet, S., Chaudhary, B., Chaudhary, H., Giri, T., & Som, G. C., 2007. A new subspecies of Rufous-vented Prinia *Prinia burnesii* (Aves: Cisticolidae) from Nepal. *Danphe* 16 (4): 1–10.
- BirdLife International, 2024. Species factsheet: *Laticilla burnesii*. Downloaded from <https://datazone.birdlife.org/species/factsheet/rufous-vented-grass-babbler-laticilla-burnesii> [Accessed on 26 June 2024.]
- eBird, 2024. eBird: An online database of bird distribution and abundance [web application]. eBird, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, New York. Available: <http://www.ebird.org>. [Accessed on 26 June 2024.]
- Javed, S., & Rahmani, A. R., 1998. Conservation of the avifauna of Dudwa National Park, India. *Forktail* 14: 55–64.
- Jha, R. R., Thakuri, J. J., Rahmani, A. R., Dhakal, M., Khongsai, N., Pradhan, N. M. B., & Donald, P. F., 2018. Distribution, movements, and survival of the critically endangered Bengal Florican *Houbaropsis bengalensis* in India and Nepal. *Journal of Ornithology* 159: 851–866.
- Madge, S., 2020. Rufous-vented Grass Babbler (*Laticilla burnesii*), version 1.0. In *Birds of the World* (J. del Hoyo, A. Elliott, J. Sargatal, D. A. Christie, and E. de Juana, Editors). Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY, USA.
- Midha, N., & Mathur, P. K., 2010. Conservation implications of the channel changes in Sharda River on endangered swamp deer population and floodplain ecosystem in Kishanpur Wildlife Sanctuary, Uttar Pradesh, India. *Current Science* 665–672.
- Showler, D. A., & Davidson, P., 1999. Observations of Jerdon's Babbler *Chrysomma altirostre* and Rufous-vented Prinia *Prinia burnesii* in Punjab and North-west Frontier Provinces, Pakistan. *Forktail* 15: 67–76.
- Shukla, R. P., 2009. Patterns of plant species diversity across Terai landscape in north-eastern Uttar Pradesh, India. *Tropical Ecology* 50 (1): 111.
- **Kaushik Sarkar, Pravarmourya & Anup Prakash Bokkasa**
Kaushik Sarkar, The Habitats Trust, A9, Second Floor, B-Wing, Sector 3, Noida 201301, Uttar Pradesh, India Email: kaushik.s@thehabitatstrust.org [KS] [Corresponding author]
Pravarmourya, Independent Researcher: 36, Satyam Colony, near Kushwaha ka bagicha, Pipliyapala, Indore 452001, Madhya Pradesh, India. Email: pravarmourya@gmail.com [PM]
Anup Prakash Bokkasa, The Habitats Trust, HCL Technologies, A9, Second Floor, B-Wing, Sector 3, Noida 201301, Uttar Pradesh, India Email: anup.b@thehabitatstrust.org [APB]

Brown-breasted Flycatcher *Muscicapa muttui* from Punjab, India

The Brown-breasted Flycatcher *Muscicapa muttui* occurs in north-eastern India, central and southern China, north-western Thailand and northern Vietnam and probably also in northern and eastern Myanmar (Clement 2020). It is a summer visitor to the hills of north-eastern India south of the River Brahmaputra and winters primarily in south-western India in the Western Ghats south from Goa and in Sri Lanka (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). The migration routes and movements of the species are poorly-known and not fully understood (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).

On 29 October 2023, at 1135 h, AM & VK were birding in the forested areas in the vicinity of Nara Dam (31.544°N, 76.028°E; 377 m asl) in Hoshiarpur District, Punjab. The area falls in the lower Sivalik hills and comprises primarily tropical dry deciduous forest with some areas of dry deciduous scrub forest (TERI 2015). AM revealed a small passerine bird moving in the lower reaches of the forest canopy at a height of c. 5 m. On observation through binoculars, AM recognised it as a Brown-breasted Flycatcher based on its large, pale eye-ring, long bill with pale yellowish lower mandible and pale fleshy legs. The bird was also

observed feeding on an unidentified insect. AM obtained some photographs for record purposes as the species was unlikely to be encountered in the region as per its known range [92–93].

There are no known published records of the species from Punjab, India (Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Arlott 2015), and no records appear on eBird for the region (eBird 2023). There are also no known records of the species online on social media forums, such as Facebook, for the region. The nearest record of the species to our Nara Dam record is another autumn record dated 24 October 2016 from Sultanpur National Park in Haryana, which is c.350 km south-east from our record (Sharma 2016; Vyas 2019). Other nearest records from our record are from the Jessore Sloth Bear Sanctuary in Gujarat, from the Prayagraj area in Uttar Pradesh (eBird 2023), as well as a single record from Satna, Madhya Pradesh (Pathak 2015), and some records from central Nepal, all of which are in the radius of c.900 km south or south-east of the current sighting. Our record, therefore, appears to be the first record of the species documented from Punjab, India. Documentation of any future records during passage migration will help in better understanding the range and movements of the species in northern India.

We would like to thank the reviewers for their valuable suggestions on our note and helpful comments on the past records of the species.



92. Brown-breasted Flycatcher at Nara Dam.



93. Brown-breasted Flycatcher feeding on an insect.

Both: Avadhesh Malik

References

- Arlott, N., 2015. *Birds of India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka*. 2015 ed. William Collins, London, UK. 1–214.