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- To establish and maintain links/liason with other associations or organized bodies in India or abroad whose objectives are in keeping with the objectives of the Trust (i.e. to support amateur birdwatchers with cash / kind for projects in ornithology).

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FRONT COVER: Grey-headed Albatross from Olaithoduvi, Sri Lanka

PHOTOGRAPHER: Lahiru Walpita

BACK COVER: Orange Bullfinch female from Lahaul, Himachal Pradesh

PHOTOGRAPHER: C. Abhinav

Flight identification of juvenile *Accipiters* in India with the addition of the Levant Sparrowhawk *Accipiter brevipes* to South Asian avifauna

Nishad Eshaal, T. K. Sanuraj & N. Yadu Prasad

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Abstract: The Levant Sparrowhawk *Accipiter brevipes*, a migratory accipiter that breeds from south-eastern Europe to west-central Asia and migrates in large flocks along the Eurasian-East African flyway, was unexpectedly sighted in Thrissur, Kerala, India. This marks the first well-documented record for South Asia and has led to the analysis of key flight identification features of juvenile *Accipiters* found in India. We developed a cheat-sheet and annotated diagnostic images to assist in juvenile *Accipiter* identification.

A misidentified Shikra *Accipiter badius* observation that got reidentified as a juvenile Levant Sparrowhawk *A. brevipes*, a new species for South Asia, led us to study the plumages of juveniles of various other *Accipiters*. In this article, we discuss that observation and its identification and analyze the key flight identification features of *Accipiters* found in India. We hope the cheat-sheet we developed and the annotated images will help raptor enthusiasts pick some of the rarer *Accipiters* that may visit India.

The Levant Sparrowhawk is a highly migratory, medium-sized, slim-looking accipiter that breeds in south-eastern Europe, including Greece, Bulgaria, Ukraine, and Russia, extending to west-central Asia, encompassing Iran, Iraq, western Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan (Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2005; Orta & Marks 2020a; Yang et al. 2021). During migration, they travel in large flocks along the Eurasian-East African flyway, reaching its wintering grounds primarily within the eastern Sahelian zone of Africa—areas such as Sudan, South Sudan, and northern Kenya (Yang et al. 2021). While there have been claims regarding the presence of the Levant Sparrowhawk in Afghanistan (Praveen 2018), it has not been well documented or widely accepted (Praveen et al. 2024), and our photographs establish its occurrence in the South Asian region.

Observation

On 13 November 2023, during a birding trip, we visited Puthankadappuram (10.350°N, 75.592°E), a beach in Thrissur, Kerala, southwestern India to capture photographs of a *Riparia* martin that was sighted a day before. After obtaining photographs of the same, we observed a small flock of gulls and terns basking on the seashore. While observing the flock, at 1524 h, STK saw an *Accipiter* in the sky, not too high, and called out others. Suddenly, it descended to the ground, where there were creeping vines *Ipomoea pes-caprae*, *Canavalia rosea*, grasses, and a short *Acacia auriculiformis*. However, it was quickly disturbed and chased off by a Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus*. Subsequently, it picked the thermals, gaining altitude, but still within the reach of our cameras, and both YPN and NE captured good photographs [110–114]. Finally, the individual flew towards

the east and vanished into the sky. The entire observation was for about a minute. The initial impression was that it was a juvenile Shikra, and we recorded as such in the eBird checklist. However, on 28 December 2023, NE started doubting this identification while cross-checking gull photographs taken during the trip. The pictures were uploaded to the Merlin app, and surprisingly, the Levant Sparrowhawk was suggested as the first identification, and the Chinese Sparrowhawk *A. soloensis* as the second suggestion!

NE then shared the photographs and discussed his suspicions with STK, YPN, Praveen J., Sashikumar C., and Abhinand Chandran. They also expressed doubts regarding its identification and later the images were sent to Nirav Bhatt, Oscar Campbell, and Dick Forsman. All of them were unanimous in their identification as a juvenile Levant Sparrowhawk. They additionally noted the streaks on the underbody (Shikra juveniles always have pale or yellow iris), complete lack of moult (delayed post-juvenile moult in migrants), chevrons extended to undertail coverts, a darker, bolder, more marked trailing edge on the underwing, and four-fingered primaries as confirmatory features for a juvenile Levant Sparrowhawk (Table 1).



110. Levant Sparrowhawk; Showing dark bill with prominent yellow cere, dark iris, dark median mesial stripe, boldly streaked breast changing to chevrons and crossbars towards the flanks and axillaries, chevrons extended to undertail coverts, underwing coverts densely spotted and primaries and secondaries distinctly barred, darker and more marked trailing edge on the underwing, four-fingered primaries, four bands on tail.



Nishad Eshaal

111. Levant Sparrowhawk; Showing streaked head, dark bill with prominent yellow cere, dark iris, dark median mesial stripe, boldly streaked breast changing to chevrons and crossbars towards the flanks and axillaries, chevrons extended to undertail coverts, darker and more marked trailing edge on the underwing, four-fingered primaries, and four bands on tail.



112. Levant Sparrowhawk; Showing thin white supercilium, dark bill with prominent yellow cere, dark iris, four-fingered primaries, and four bands on tail.



Both: Yadu Prasad

113.] Levant Sparrowhawk; Showing boldly streaked breast changing to chevrons and crossbars towards the flanks and axillaries, chevrons extended to undertail coverts, underwing coverts densely spotted and primaries and secondaries distinctly barred, darker and more marked trailing edge on the underwing, and four bands on tail.



Nishad Eshaal

114. Levant Sparrowhawk; Showing dark brown upperparts with four tail bands.

Notes on flight identification of juvenile Accipiters

In India, distinguishing the juvenile Levant Sparrowhawk can be challenging due to its potential resemblance to resident juvenile species such as Shikra, Besra *A. virgatus*, and Crested Goshawk *A. trivirgatus* as well as juveniles of migratory raptors such as Eurasian Sparrowhawk *A. nisus*, Chinese Sparrowhawk, and Japanese Sparrowhawk *A. gularis*. Identification should be based on a combination of plumage and structure characters, including wing formula, plumage details of the breast and upperparts, head pattern, and iris colour. For example, in the case of the closely resembling Shikra, relying solely on iris colour is insufficient, as mis-coloured irises can occur (Forsman 2016). Furthermore, reports of hybrids between Shikra and Levant Sparrowhawk have also been reported, though further evidence is desirable (Yosef et al. 2001; Forsman 2016).

The key identification features and detailed notes on the flight identification of juvenile accipiters found in India are discussed below. We have excluded the Central Nicobar endemic Nicobar Sparrowhawk *Accipiter butleri* from this analysis due to lack of information on juvenile plumages. Field features were collected from standard references (Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2005; Naoroji 2006; DeCandido et al. 2014; Forsman 2016, Clark & Marks 2020a, b; Kemp & Kirwan 2020; Meyburg et al. 2020; Orta & Kirwan 2020, Orta & Marks 2020a, b; Mlodinow 2023) and illustrated with annotated photographs. The cheat-sheet (Table 1) also addresses the identification of juveniles between other Accipiters, and not just against Levant Sparrowhawk.

Shikra

The juvenile Shikra [115, 116] displays a pale, evenly streaked head with pale nape, thin whitish supercilium, and greyish irises that turn yellow during the first autumn. The mesial stripe is noticeably thick. Its underbody is buff with rufous-brown streaking on the breast, transitioning to broader and sparser spots and bars towards the flanks, and plain undertail coverts (sometimes lightly spotted). The underwing coverts are spotted, reddish streaks on the leading edge of the underwing, accompanied by five-fingered primaries (features shared with Besra, Chinese Sparrowhawk, and Japanese Sparrowhawk). The tail is rounded, featuring four to five bands of different widths, sometimes irregular.



Samish Dhongle

115. Shikra; Showing yellow iris, a thick mesial stripe, rufous-brown streaking on the breast, reddish streaks on the leading edge, five-fingered primaries, and five bands on the tail. October 2020, Maharashtra India.



Ahmad Najam Saquib

116. Shikra; Showing pale head with a yellow iris, a thick mesial stripe, rufous-brown streaking on the breast, broader and sparser spots and bars on the flanks, plain undertail coverts, spotted underwing coverts, five-fingered primaries, and five bands on tail. November 2023, Jharkhand, India.

Besra

The juvenile Besra [117, 118] shows a brown head with whitish supercilium, mostly yellow irises surrounded by yellow orbital rings, and a subtle green tinge in the cere. It has a whitish nape and a prominent mesial stripe. The underbody displays distinct dark brown streaks on the breast, thick bars on the flanks and thighs, spots on the abdomen and undertail coverts either plain or marked rufous. The upperparts exhibit a lighter tan-brown shade. The silhouette is characterized by rounded wings and a relatively long tail. The underwing shows heavily marked underwing coverts (same as in Japanese Sparrowhawk and Eurasian Sparrowhawk), with regular dark barring from wing-tip to body (usually three most prominent bars, with a duller terminal trailing-edge bar and proximal narrow bars most of the time hidden by greater-coverts) and distinct five-fingered primaries. The tail is predominantly pale, crossed by four to five narrow dark bands that are always much narrower than the pale areas; these bands are slightly broader in juvenile females compared to males.



Kavi Nanda

117. Besra; Showing prominent mesial stripe, dark brown streaks on the breast, thick bars on flanks, spots on the abdomen, rounded wing with heavily marked underwing coverts, five-fingered primaries, and four bands on tail. June 2024, Jammu and Kashmir, India.



Avijit Dutta

118. Besra; Showing brown head with yellow iris, prominent mesial stripe, distinct dark brown streaks on the breast, thick bars on the flanks and thighs, spots on the abdomen, five-fingered primaries, and four bands on tail. February 2018, West Bengal, India.

Crested Goshawk

The juvenile Crested Goshawk [119, 120] displays a brown streaked head with a blackish brown crown and a small crest (not present in any other species, but hard to see in flight) with buff edge. It has a greenish-grey to greenish cere, and its iris is either brown or leaning towards a paler yellow and a yellow orbital ring. A pronounced, variably thick black mesial stripe is present. The underparts may exhibit sparse or heavy markings, with streaks on the upper breast, teardrop-shaped marks on the belly (can be variable) and barred or spotted undertail coverts. In flight, it appears stockier, heavier and chunkier than the aforementioned species, with rounded wings and a short tail. It has six outer primaries (similar to Eurasian Sparrowhawk and Eurasian Goshawk), lacking extensive black markings on the primary tips. Underwing coverts are often the cleanest and palest of all the Accipiters found in India. The whole "thigh-feathers" are heavily barred or show dark crescents. The short tail is characterized by three or four bands.



Vivek Sudhakaran

119. Crested Goshawk; Showing brown head, pale yellow iris, streaks on upper breast, teardrop-shaped marks on the belly, clean and pale underwing coverts, six-fingered primaries, barred thigh feathers, and short tail with four bands. February 2020, Kerala, India.



Prateik Kulkarni

120. Crested Goshawk; Showing brown streaky head, pale yellow iris, thick mesial stripe, clean and pale underwing coverts, six-fingered primaries, teardrop-shaped marks on the belly, and barred thigh feathers. April 2024, Maharashtra, India.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk

The juvenile Eurasian Sparrowhawk [121, 122] has a strongly streaked head with dark ear-coverts patch and a prominent whitish supercilium. It has pale yellow to yellow iris surrounded by a yellow orbital ring. It has a yellow cere with a green tinge and exhibits fine streaking or a very faint mesial stripe. The colour below varies from white to brown, and breast markings range from fine barring to broader spots or even streaks, with the upper breast typically displaying irregular patterns like spots or arrowheads. The lower breast, belly, and flanks exhibit finely and regularly barred patterns (broken in Japanese Sparrowhawk). In flight, it shows a silhouette with long wings, longer outer primaries, a long tail, and a small head. The underwing is characterized by heavily marked underwing coverts and six-fingered primaries that lack any black fingertips. Its long, slender tail is squared towards the tip, sometimes notched (shorter tail in Japanese Sparrowhawk), and generally displays four and very rarely five, medium to thick dark bands.



Rounak Patra

121. Eurasian Sparrowhawk; Showing streaked head with whitish supercilium, dark ear coverts patch, yellow iris, fine streaking on throat, irregular upper breast patterns, finely barred lower breast, belly, and flanks, heavily marked underwing coverts, six-fingered primaries lacking prominent black tips, and four bands on tail. January 2020, Uttarakhand, India.



Raphy Kalleunkara

122. Eurasian Sparrowhawk; Showing yellow iris, fine streaking on throat, irregular upper breast patterns, finely barred lower breast and belly, heavily marked underwing coverts, six-fingered primaries lacking prominent black tips, and four bands on tail. December 2016, Kerala, India.

Chinese Sparrowhawk

The juvenile Chinese Sparrowhawk [123, 124] exhibits a slate-coloured crown with whitish supercilium, yellow to lemon-yellow iris surrounded by a dark grey orbital ring (darker than Shikra). It has a prominent orange-yellow cere, and the mesial stripe may vary in prominence. Its underparts display prominent rusty-brown streaks on the breast transitioning into arrowhead shapes, accompanied by bars on the abdomen, flanks, and thighs, along with white undertail coverts. The upper part is brownish-grey, and the underwing exhibits very few to moderate markings on the underwing-coverts. During the flight, it shows black on the primaries (not present in any other species), with a distinctive five-fingered formula (P8 being the longest), and the tail is greyer-brown with narrow dusky four to six incomplete bands (usually four visible).



Wich Yanan Limpunungpathanaki

123. Chinese Sparrowhawk; Showing yellow iris, prominent rusty-brown streaks on the breast, bars on abdomen and flanks, five-fingered primaries with black on tips, and four narrow bands on the tail. September 2018, Chumphon, Thailand.



Tom Liao

124. Chinese Sparrowhawk; Showing yellow iris, prominent rusty-brown streaks on the breast, bars on flanks and thighs, five-fingered primaries with black on tips, and four bands on the tail. October 2022, Pingtung County, Taiwan.

Japanese Sparrowhawk

The juvenile Japanese Sparrowhawk [125, 126] exhibits a darker brown head with brown cheeks, a white supercilium, pale yellow to yellow iris surrounded by a yellow orbital ring, and yellow to greenish cere. The mesial stripe is usually thin, occasionally slightly thicker, and has a whitish nape. The underparts are heavily marked with broad brown or rusty brown streaks on the breast, bars on flanks, and narrower dark brown bars on the wing linings. The belly, marked with spots or thin broken bars, and the thinly barred thighs create a noticeable contrast in a whiter appearance. The undertail coverts are either plain creamy-white or adorned with flecks of rufous. The wings are broader and more rounded, displaying distinct five-fingered primaries (P7/P8 are the longest) and lacking black on the primary tips (unlike Chinese Sparrowhawk). The tail is short, sometimes appearing square or notched in flight, with four to five medium-width dark bands.



Yeray Seminario

125. Japanese Sparrowhawk; Showing yellow iris, a thin mesial stripe, brown streaks on the breast, bars on the flanks, narrow dark brown bars on wing-lining, heavily marked underwing, distinct five-fingered primaries which lack black tip, and a short, notched tail. October 2023, Chumphon, Thailand.



Mei Yan

126. Japanese Sparrowhawk; Showing darker brown head and cheeks, white supercilium, yellow iris, brown streaks on the breast, bars on the flanks, narrow dark brown bars on wing-lining, heavily marked underwing, distinct five-fingered primaries which lack black tip, and a short, notched tail. September 2019, Liaoning, China.

Eurasian Goshawk

The juvenile Eurasian Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis* [127, 128] shows a brown head with whitish to buff streaking on the crown and cheeks. It often displays a subtle yet occasionally prominent pale supercilium. The underpart exhibits variation from white to deep buff, it has dark brown streaks on the breast and sides that gradually become finer and sparser towards the abdomen and undertail coverts. The underwing coverts showcase a palette of buff to white with dark brown spots and streaks. The underside of the remiges is with pale grey and crisp dark barring, featuring six-fingered primaries. A markedly S-curved trailing edge to the wing is evident (unique feature). The tail is brown on top with a prominent pale brown tip and three to five dark bands often bordered conspicuously with pale edges at the front and back.



Ritwick Bhattacharyya

127. Eurasian Goshawk; Showing dark brown streaking on the chest and sides that gradually becomes sparser and finer towards the belly, dark brown spots and streaks on underwing coverts, six-fingered primaries, and three dark bands on tail. December 2023, West Bengal, India.

Table 1. A cheats-sheet to identify juvenile Accipiters in India from below while in flight

Species	Fingers	Tail (from below)	Tail Bands	Mesial Stripe	Iris	Cere	Head	Orbital Ring	Breast	Flanks	Abdomen	Underwing	Undertail coverts
LESP	4	Greyish with dark brown bands	4	Prominent	Dark yellow-grey	Yellow	Dark brown, streaked	Yellow	Bold streaks	Chevrons and cross-banded	Arrowheads	Densely spotted coverts, darker and more marked trailing edge	Mostly chevrons or broken bars
SHIK	5	Rounded, bands of different widths, or sometimes irregular	4-5	Prominent	Greyish to yellow	Yellow with a green tinge	Pale brown, streaked	Grey	Buff with rufous-brown streaks	Broader, sparse spotted and barred	Streaks	Spotted coverts, reddish streaks on the leading edge	Plain, sometimes lightly spotted.
BESR	5	Greyish with narrow dark bands	4-5	Prominent	Yellow	Yellow with a green tinge	Brown	Yellow	Dark brown streaks	Thickly barred	Spots	Round wing, heavily marked coverts, regular dark barring from wing-tip to body	Plain or marked rufous
CHSP	5	Greyer-brown with narrow dusky bands	4-6	Usually indistinct	Yellow to lemon yellow	Orange-yellow	Slaty crown	Dark grey	Rusty-brown streaks	Barred	Bars	Few to moderate markings on the coverts with prominent black primary tip	Plain whitish
JASP	5	Short, with squared or notched tip	4-5	Usually indistinct	Yellow	Yellow to greenish	Dark brown	Yellow	Brown or rusty brown streaks	Barred	Thin broken bars or spots	Heavily marked coverts with dark brown spots	Plain creamy-white or flecked rufous
CRGO	6	Short, evenly banded	3-4	Prominent	Brown to pale yellow	Greenish to greenish-grey	Brown, blackish-streaked	Yellow	Streaks (variable)	Teardrop or barred (variable)	Teardrops (variable)	Round wing, clean and pale coverts	Barred or spotted
EUSP	6	Long and slender with squared or notched tip	4-5	Indistinct	Yellow	Yellow with a green tinge	Dark brown, strongly streaked, dark ear-covert patch	Yellow	Spotted arrowheads on upper breast. Finely and regularly barred lower breast	Finely and regularly barred	Finely and regularly barred	Heavily marked coverts	Largely plain
EUGO	6	Brown with pale brown tip	3-5	Indistinct	Pale yellow to yellow	Pale yellow to yellow	Brown, whitish to buff streaking on the crown and cheeks	Grey	White to deep buff, dark brown streaks	Streaked dark brown	Finer and sparser streaks	Buff to white coverts with dark brown spots/streaks, S-curved trailing edge	Fine sparse streaks

LESP: Levant Sparrowhawk, SHIK: Shikra, BESR: Besra, CHSP: Chinese Sparrowhawk, JASP: Japanese Sparrowhawk, CRGO: Crested Goshawk, EUSP: Eurasian Sparrowhawk, EUGO: Eurasian Goshawk



Avadhesh Malik

128. Eurasian Goshawk; Showing brown head, dark brown streaking on the chest and sides that gradually becomes sparser and finer towards the belly, dark brown spots on underwing coverts, six-fingered primaries, and five dark bands on tail. January 2022, Ladakh, India.

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In Memoriam

MAHARAJA KUMAR SHIVBHADRA SINHJI GOHIL

(23 DECEMBER 1933 – 31 MAY 2024)

With the compliments of

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Mumbai 400013, India.

Moult and seasonal occurrence of birds ringed on the New Delhi Ridge in 1971–1974

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Abstract: From July 1971 to May 1974 intermittent mist-netting was carried out on the New Delhi Ridge, in an area of dry woodland and scrub. Although the main targets of trapping were babblers (*Argya* spp. and *Chrysomma sinense*) many other species were captured incidentally. The vast majority of the 1,783 birds caught were weighed, measured and examined for moult. Wing formulae were recorded for hard-to-identify species of genera *Phylloscopus*, *Acrocephalus*, and *Iduna*. Prebasic moult among migrant species and winter visitors occurred regularly only in Blyth's Reed Warbler. Most residents showed prebasic moult during August–October, with the slower-moulted babblers and bulbuls *Pycnonotus* sp. starting earlier than the faster-moulted prinias *Prinia* sp. The results provide insights into the seasonal occurrence of migrants and winter visitors, as well as the periodic absences of some resident species, perhaps because the habitat becomes relatively inhospitable during March–May. The information is presented to provide a baseline for future trapping studies.

Introduction

During July 1971 to May 1974, I was engaged full-time in collecting data for my D. Phil research on *Argya* spp. and Yellow-eyed Babbler *Chrysomma sinense* on the New Delhi Ridge (28.618°N, 77.186°E). This work included trapping my study species for banding. However, as this was done with mist-nets, I trapped many other species incidentally. Captured babblers were subject to an intensive examination for morphometrics, moult, mass, presence of brood-patch, external parasites, etc. Other species were treated in the same way, as far as time allowed, but did not always receive the same attention devoted to the babblers. Some results of these incidental captures were published previously (Gaston 1981) but this paper has never been referred to by authors on Delhi birds. In view of the apparent obscurity of this publication, I have attempted here to provide a more extensive account of the data obtained by mist-netting on the Delhi Ridge in the 1970s to allow the data to be used by current and future workers interested in assessing changes in breeding seasons, moult schedules, morphometrics, and body mass. Only passing attention is paid to Yellow-eyed Babbler and *Argya* spp. here because those were the subject of my thesis and their biology in my study area has been extensively described already (Gaston 1977, 1978a, b, c). All Appendices mentioned in the manuscript and the full data set is made available to interested researchers via the Zenodo Data Repository (<https://zenodo.org/records/13227987>).



Fig. 1. Position of the study area in Delhi. All of the mist-netting was performed within this boundary.

Methods

Details of the study site on the forested parts of the New Delhi Ridge are given in (Gaston 1978a, 1981, 2024 see Fig. 1). Mist-nets were deployed on 68 days in 1971, 70 in 1972, 39 in 1973 and 18 in 1974. Most mist-netting was performed in the early morning, often from first light, but nets were sometimes deployed in the evening, and, in winter, occasional sets were used in the afternoon. Mist netting sessions lasted from one to four hours. Little or no habitat modification was performed to accommodate nets, most being positioned in natural gaps in the vegetation, although the clearance of small areas of *Zizyphus* bushes was carried out occasionally, as the recurved spines of these plants sometimes resulted in very severe tangling of nets. The lowest panels were generally set so that small birds captured in them would hang well clear of the ground, as attacks by monitor lizards and snakes on trapped birds could otherwise occur. Trapping involving leaving nets set overnight was attempted initially but was discontinued because it resulted in the capture of fruit bats (*Cynopterus*) which were very hard to disentangle without damaging the nets.

Birds captured were ringed with Bombay Natural History Society rings; weighed in a cloth bag on a 50 g or 100 g Pesola spring balance to the nearest 0.1 g; wing (flattened), tail, tarsus and culmen measured with wing-ruler or calipers, as appropriate, to the nearest 0.1 mm; and the plumage examined for signs of moult. Primary moult was scored from 0 (an old feather) to 10 (a fully developed new feather) with primaries numbered in ascending order (outermost = 10), secondaries in descending order and rectrices from inmost outwards. For hard-to-identify warblers (*Phylloscopus*, *Acrocephalus*, *Iduna*) wing formula was recorded for the primary feathers by measuring the distance between the tip of the longest primary and the tips of the other primaries on the closed wing (Svensson 1992). The extent of emargination on the primaries was also noted. For some difficult species the colour of soft parts was recorded. Not all birds received the full set of measurements and descriptions, depending on the number captured, and the prevailing weather. All birds were released within 30 minutes of capture. The only mortality consisted of two birds seized by monitor lizards and one killed in the net by a Shikra *Accipiter badius*.

Seasonal distribution of occurrence was compared using numbers trapped per day of mist-netting (birds/day). I have also used eBird records for the period 2018–2022 for the region surrounding my study area (details in Gaston 2024) to compare the incidence of some species in the trapped sample to the likelihood of the species being included on recent eBird lists.

Results

Capture frequencies

Altogether, 1,783 birds of 69 identified species were trapped during 1971–1974 (Appendix 1) over a total of 195 days when mist nets were deployed, a mean of 9.1 birds/day. Trapping was most intensive in August–November and in February. The most frequently captured species was the Common Babbler *A. caudata* (351 trapped), but this was the most frequent target species: nets were set where Common Babblers were expected to feed or fly and, in some cases, birds were deliberately driven towards the nets. Jungle Babblers *A. striatus* (165) and Yellow-eyed Babblers (184) were also targeted. Among non-target species, the most commonly caught were Indian Robin *Saxicoloides fulicata* (218), Red-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer* (176), Lesser Whitethroat *Curruca curruca* (107), Yellow-throated Sparrow *Gymnoris xanthocollis* (61), and Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius* (48). The remaining 638 birds comprised 61 species. Thirty-three species were caught ten or more times. Species richness was greatest in August–November and markedly lower in December–February (Fig. 3). The relatively close logarithmic fit (Fig. 2, $R^2 = 0.83$) suggests that in months of peak trapping the majority of susceptible species were being sampled.

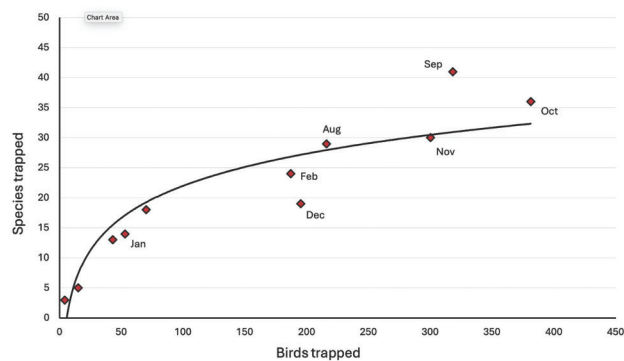


Fig. 2. Numbers of species captured in relation to the total number of birds captured.

Recaptures in more than one year

Two out of 31 Black Redstarts *Phoenicurus ochruros* and three out of 107 Lesser Whitethroats were trapped in successive winters (Table 1), suggesting that these species have a tendency to return to the same wintering areas in successive winters.

Table 1. Repeat captures of winter visitors in successive winters

Species	Ring number	Date of first capture	Date of recapture
Black Redstart	A13254	09 October 1971	28 October 1972
Black Redstart	A90751	23 November 1971	18 December 1972
Lesser Whitethroat	A135279	23 October 1971	19 December 1972
Lesser Whitethroat	A121613	22 February 1972	04 December 1972
Lesser Whitethroat	A90735	23 November 1971	19 December 1972

Seasonality

The use of capture data to analyze migration timing is affected by the relatively small sample sizes, compared with observational data. Consequently, for the most part, I only analyzed the most frequently captured migrants and winter visitors: those trapped on ten or more occasions.

Prinia warblers – Three species of *Prinia* were trapped. Although all are resident in the Delhi region, Rufus-fronted *P. buchanani* was trapped only in July–December (15; only 1 in December), while Ashy *P. socialis* (28) was not trapped in March–May and Grey-breasted *P. hodgsoni* (31) was mainly caught in October–January. The most striking deviation from year-round presence was exhibited by Rufous-fronted *Prinia* and coincides with the withdrawal of White-eared Bulbul, which was not trapped after November. Both these species are characteristic of dry thorn scrub, but both breeds locally.

Phylloscopus leaf warblers – All these are passage migrants or winter visitors. The earliest passage migrant trapped was Western Crowned *P. occipitalis* (14), which was caught in July–September, followed by Greenish *P. trochiloides* (14) and Large-billed *P. magnirostris* (1), caught only in September, and Sulphur-bellied *P. griseolus* (5), caught in September–November and in March. The fact that Greenish Warbler was not trapped in spring, supports the conclusion of Harvey et al. (2006) that spring occurrence in Delhi has increased lately. Among the putative winter visitors, Plain *P. neglectus* (3) was trapped only in October and November, and Hume's *P. humei* (3) in November and December whereas the Common Chiffchaff *P. collybita* (21), the most frequently trapped, was caught in all months from October–February, although only two were caught in October. In the trapping sample, Common Chiffchaffs were caught less frequently after January than the eBird records for South Delhi as a whole would suggest (Fig. 3). This suggests that, like some of the prinias, Chiffchaffs became less common in the trapping area as spring advanced.

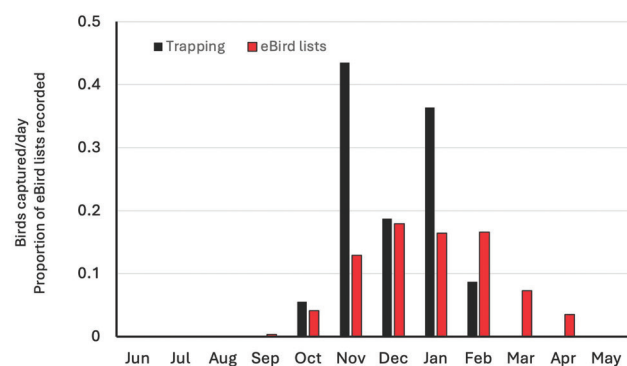


Fig. 3. Rates of capture (birds/day) for Common Chiffchaffs compared to the proportion of eBird lists on which the species was reported during 2018–2022.

Other small insectivores – Lesser Whitethroat *C. curruca* (107) and Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros* (31) were both trapped in all months from September to February. Blyth's Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum* (37) was caught in August–October and a single individual was caught in April (Fig. 7). The frequency of trapping for Blyth's Reed Warbler in spring was much lower than in fall and much lower in relation to the frequency of observations on eBird (Fig. 4).

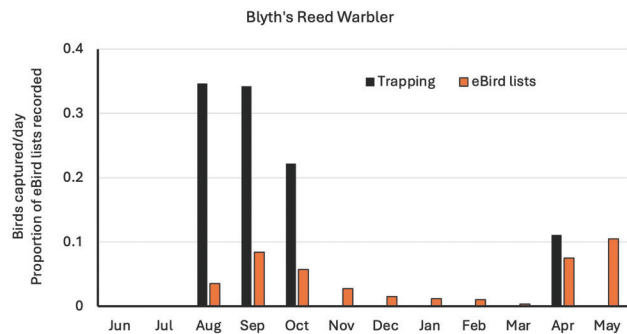


Fig. 4. Rates of capture (birds/day) of Blyth's Reed Warbler compared to the proportion of eBird lists on which the species was reported during 2018–2022.

Pycnonotus bulbuls – Three species of *Pycnonotus* were trapped, with Red-vented *P. cafer* (176) and Red-whiskered *P. jocosus* (17) caught throughout the year, but the second-commonest, White-eared *P. leucotis* (33) was trapped only during July–December (Fig. 5). The absence of White-eared Bulbul after midwinter is puzzling and suggests that the species may withdraw from the Ridge in spring, perhaps because preferred fruits are no longer available.

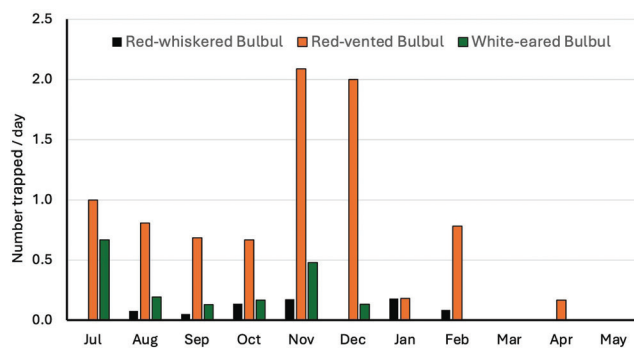


Fig. 5. Seasonal distribution of trap frequencies for bulbuls *Pycnonotus* spp.

Seed eaters – Yellow-throated Sparrow (61) was trapped mainly in July and August, Indian Silverbill *Euodice malabarica* (26) in July–November and House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* (15) in August–November. The absence of seed-eaters among birds trapped in winter was striking (Fig. 6) and suggests that their presence in autumn is associated with abundant seed availability after the rains.

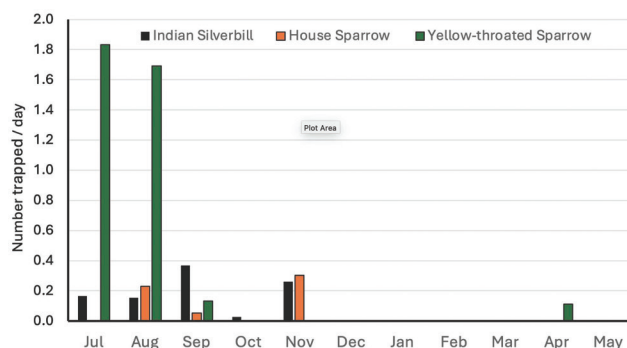


Fig. 6. Seasonal distribution of trap frequencies for seedeaters.

Others – Common Hoopoe *Upupa epops* (11) was trapped only in July–September, Eurasian Wryneck *Jynx torquilla* (10) during September–April and Purple Sunbird *Cinnyris asiaticus* (10) from August–February (Fig. 10). As sample sizes were small, these distributions may not accurately reflect seasonal occurrence, but the concentration of hoopoes and sunbirds, which occur in Delhi throughout the year, in the wet season suggests that they visited the area mainly in response to the flush of insects brought on by the monsoon.

Moult

The only migrant or wintering species found moulting were Wryneck (only 1, with irregular moult, suggesting this was not a normal event), Lesser Whitethroat (1 in February), Eastern Orphean Warbler *Curruca crassirostris* (1 in body moult, 1 with body and wing moult, both November), and Blyth's Reed Warblers to moult while on passage in North India has been described elsewhere (Gaston 1976). Among the 20 resident species for which 10 or more birds were trapped, the majority exhibited flight feather moult during July–November with only very few species showing any moult outside of that period (Fig. 7).

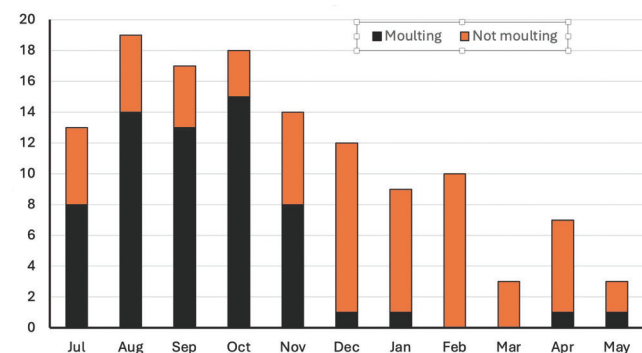


Fig. 7. Monthly distribution of the numbers of species moulting/not moulting for the 20 resident species where at least ten individuals were captured.

Pycnonotus and *Argya* species exhibited prolonged moult periods, with the majority of birds trapped from August–October having at least one primary feather partially grown (July–November in the case of *P. cafer*). Moult appears to happen faster and later in Common Tailorbird (October only) and the *Prinia* species (October and November only). The difference in moult timing between babblers and bulbuls on one hand and tailorbirds and prinias on the other may occur because the former commence moulting before nesting, partially or completely arresting during chick-rearing (Gaston 1981), whereas the smaller birds do not commence moult after the completion of the breeding cycle.

Mass and morphology

Mean mass and measurements are given for all species captured in Appendix 2. Practically all measurements and masses recorded fell within the range given in (Ali & Ripley 1969, 1970, 1971, 1972, 1973a, b) and Williamson (1964, 1967). A notable exception is the Common Chiffchaff, where wing length given by Williamson (1967) based on 106 specimens of *P. c. tristis* in the British Museum (Natural History) was 60.4 ± 3.0 mm (SD)

compared to 57.4 ± 2.7 mm ($N = 21$) in my sample ($t = 4.25$, $P < 0.0001$). This strongly hints that the two *P. c. tristis* populations being sampled were different, either in sex composition or area of origin. Further examination of the source of chiffchaffs wintering in Delhi might be rewarding.

Discussion

Because the main intention of the netting was to capture *Argya* species and Yellow-eyed Babblers, the mixture of other species caught incidentally was probably determined, in part, by how much their habitat preference reflected that of the target species, as well as by how high in the vegetation they traveled and foraged and other aspects of their vulnerability to mist nets. As is often the case with mist-netting in wooded areas, strictly canopy species are under-represented in the capture sample. This applied especially to Small Minivet *Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*, recorded in every week during my studies (Gaston 2024) but never captured. Likewise, birds of rocky, barren areas were under sampled (e.g. Brown Rock Chat *Oenanthe fusca*). One factor that could affect within-year comparisons is the degree to which trap-susceptibility may have been affected by moult status. For example, although Common Woodshrikes *Tephrodornis pondicerianus* were present in the study area year-round (Gaston 1978a), they were (except for one bird caught in February), only trapped during July–October. Ten of the 13 birds caught in July–October were moulting and it is possible that moult may have made them more susceptible to capture. However, with this caveat, other biases probably remained more or less constant throughout the year, so that capture frequencies in different months should give an idea of seasonal occurrence.


To a large extent, the captures of winter visitors and passage migrants reflected the seasonal distribution given by (Gaston 1978d), Harvey et al. (2006) and Vyas (2019). However, there are a few instances where the recapture data gave a different picture. As detailed above, the seasonal distribution of capture records for Rufous-fronted Prinia, Common Chiffchaff, White-eared Bulbul, Yellow-throated Sparrow, and Common Hoopoe deviated a lot from their seasonality based on my own sighting records (Gaston 1978d), on generalizations made by previous authors, and from the distribution of eBird records for South Delhi as a whole. This probably indicates that their density on The Ridge changed seasonally, relative to other parts of Delhi. Overall, my results suggest that my study area hosted more species in the monsoon and post-monsoon periods than during the drier month from December onwards. The area has a small secondary peak of insect production in spring, when several species, especially *Argya* species, have a short breeding season (Gaston et al. 1979). However, most migrants and winter visitors (apart from Black Redstart and Lesser Whitethroat) seem to desert the area after November and conditions for breeding only occur in and after the rains for the majority of residents and summer visitors.

If it was possible to repeat the trapping carried out in 1970s much might be learnt about changes in the local avifauna. However, as mentioned by Gaston (2024), the extent of tall *Prosopis* canopy in the study area has increased since the 1970s and the extent of scrub and open ground correspondingly reduced. This would pose problems for potential mist net sites, and a better comparison might be provided by a nearby area with suitably short vegetation.

Acknowledgements

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Correspondence

The Grey-headed Albatross *Thalassarche chrysostoma* from Sri Lanka

The Grey-headed Albatross *Thalassarche chrysostoma* is a Southern Ocean albatross belonging to the 'Mollymawk' group. It is known to breed on remote Southern Ocean islands and through recoveries and satellite tagged birds it has been identified to disperse circumpolar throughout the Southern Ocean extending mainly within 65°S and 35°S. The northern most of its range is in the zone of Humboldt Current, where birds have been noted to reach north up to 15°S; however, there are no confirmed records of it from the northern hemisphere (Carboneras et al. 2020; Harrison et al. 2021).

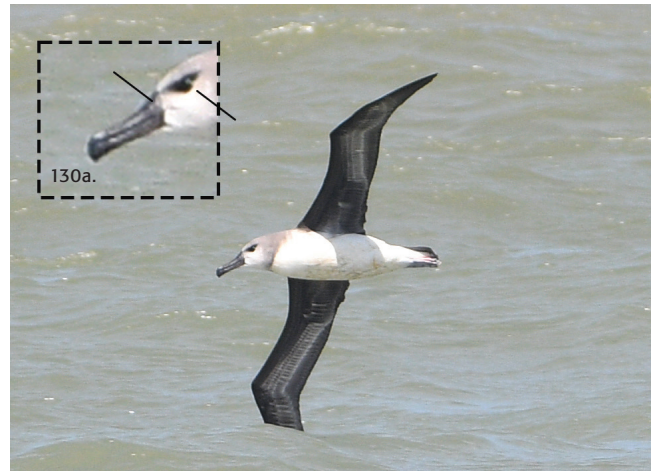
On 22 July 2024 at 0540 h, LW was starting a sea-watch from Olaithoduvaï fishing village (9.020°N, 74.833°E), when suddenly he noted a large bird approaching from the south-east, flying parallel to the beach. The bird was c.200 m off the beach and was flying in low arcs with stiff wing beats in-between. At the time, the light conditions were poor, but, LW managed to get some photographs of the bird after observing it through the binoculars, and was stunned with excitement as he realized that this is a juvenile albatross!

The photos were quickly shared with MK for further identification, and with a quick literature review it was preliminary identified as a juvenile Grey-headed Albatross. The exciting news was passed back to LW and he kept watching the coast anticipating the bird might return. The effort was not futile, at around 1030 h, he saw the bird flying from the same direction, flying parallel to the beach. Somehow it had flown back undetected and had returned the same way. LW was able to photograph the bird again [129–131], with better light and at a closer range of c.50m from the beach. The bird circled in-front of the observation point a few times, before turning back and flying past. It then moved gradually towards south, towards the open sea, not to be seen again.



All: Lahiru Waipita

129. Grey-headed Albatross at Mannar, Sri Lanka.



130. Grey-headed Albatross showing characteristic bill shape, membranous naricorn¹ and the pale crescent behind eye (130a)



131. Grey-headed Albatross showing pale upper edge of the culminicorn¹, Mannar, Sri Lanka

The bird had a pale grey head with a faint tinge of brown [129–130]. The grey was palest by the chin, darkening towards lower throat ending with a narrow dark lower throat margin, in the form of a collar, separating the whitish upper breast. The ear coverts, neck sides and crown were more or less uniform brownish-grey with very inconspicuous, fine, pale mottling. Rest of the upperparts except the white rump, were dark brown, darkening almost to black towards the wing tips. Hind-neck was slightly paler and warmer brown. Underwings were dark, with a blackish leading edge and the rest was ashy with a diffused pale panel formed along the mid-wing with the whitish fringes of the underwing coverts. Rest of the underparts was mostly white, tinged buff (possibly discoloured or stained) towards belly and vent. Undertail was dark with white undertail. Feet were pinkish. The bill was all dark, with a pale culminicorn [131]. Eyes were dark, surrounded by a black eye patch. The unmoulted primaries and overall uniform wings suggest this bird to be a first cycle bird fledged after the last austral summer (Haass 2014; Carboneras et al. 2020). The combination of dark underwing and grey head with the dark bill narrow down the identification to either Grey-headed Albatross or Black-browed albatross *T. melanophris* (Harrison et al. 2021). We did not consider the 'grey head' as a diagnostic feature for Grey-headed Albatross since some similar aged Black-browed Albatross's also show grey on head in varying

¹ Birds of order Procellariiformes which includes albatrosses, petrels, shearwaters, and storm petrels have compound bills consisting of several joined plates. The naricorn is one such segment which covers the nostril in the form of a sheath. Culminicorn is the plate that covers the majority of the culmen from the forehead up to the maxillary unguis; the hooked tip of the upper mandible.

amounts, generally causing confusion, and potentially leading to misidentifications (Haass 2014; Callaghan 2018; Thomas 2023; Hollstein 2024; Rojas 2024). These two species are a highly confusing Mollymawk species pair at this age showing much overlap in plumage characteristics (Haass 2014), therefore we looked in to fine plumage and other characteristics of this bird to confirm its identification. Bill structure was of greater use in identification rather than overall bill colour since both species show overlaps in bill color variations, therefore not diagnostic (Haass 2014, 20; Carboneras et al. 2020). The bill shows a narrower culminicorn resulting in a pinched structure to the bill, and the naricorn appears to extending membranous up to the feathered face from the nostril [131]. This bill structure is shown by Grey-headed Albatross, rather than Black-browed, which shows a more elevated and uniformly formed culminicorn lacking the membranous naricorn (Haass 2014). In addition, there seems to be no pale halo in-between the maxillary unguis and the culminicorn, and also some photographs clearly show the upper edge of the culminicorn to be pale [131], a diagnostic feature of first cycle Grey-headed Albatross, when present (Haass 2014). Additionally, photographs show an inconspicuous pale crescent behind the eye [131], another characteristic of the Grey-headed Albatross (Haass 2014). Structurally, the bird also appears stout with a thicker neck than a typical Black-browed again favoring Grey-headed (Haass 2014; Harrison et al. 2021).

The occurrence of this species at this latitude is quite remarkable and shows to how much of an extent vagrancy could take place. This is probably the first report of this species in the Northern Hemisphere. Interestingly, the only other albatross reported from the Indian Subcontinent, a beached Light-mantled Albatross *Phoebastria palpebrata*, was recovered in September 2022 from Anthoniyapuram beach, Rameswaram Island, Tamil Nadu, India, approximately 38 nautical miles (70 km) from this location, over the other side of the Palk Strait (Byju & Raveendran 2022).

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Identification of the *Phylloscopus burkii* complex in India and notes on the occurrence of Bianchi's Warbler *Phylloscopus valentini* in Namdapha National Park, Arunachal Pradesh

The *Phylloscopus burkii* complex of 'Golden-spectacled' warblers from the mountains of Southern and Southeastern Asia is a group of at least six sympatric sister species – Grey-crowned Warbler *P. tephrocephalus*, Martens's Warbler *P. omeiensis*, Alström's Warbler *P. soror*, Bianchi's Warbler *P. valentini*, Green-crowned Warbler *P. burkii*, and Whistler's Warbler *P. whistleri*. The group consists of sibling species with complex evolutionary histories resulting in elevational segregation of distinct forms at different altitudes throughout the mountains of Asia. Extreme similarities in plumage, habitat preference, and behaviour make field identification of members of this complex challenging (Opaev & Kolesnikova 2019) and presents a classic case of cryptic speciation because members of the complex differ more in vocalizations and DNA sequences than plumage (Alström & Olsson 1999). Of the six warblers in the complex, three have been well-documented in India (Grey-crowned, Green-crowned, and Whistler's), while there have been no confirmed records of Alström's, Martens's, or Bianchi's Warblers (Praveen & Jayapal 2024). I present evidence for the occurrence of a fourth member of the complex in India, Bianchi's Warbler, with additional notes on identifying Alström's and Martens's Warblers, which may also occur in parts of Northeast India.

Bianchi's Warbler *P. valentini* is a polytypic species with two currently recognized subspecies: *P. v. valentini* in central and southern China, parts of northern Myanmar and Southeast Asia; *P. v. latouchei* in southern and south-eastern China, Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia (Alström 2020a). It is the largest member of this complex and breeds on the highest mountain slopes among all members of the complex (Martens et al. 2003; Alström 2020a).

Based on past evidence, the presence of Bianchi's Warbler in eastern Arunachal Pradesh, India has been uncertain due to its co-occurrence with a number of its congeners such as the nominate and *nemoralis* subspecies of Whistler's Warbler, Grey-crowned Warbler, and Green-crowned Warbler (Praveen 2022)¹. Throughout a large part of their breeding ranges, species from this complex are arranged in a vertical sequence in the individual mountain ranges, encountering one another at contact zones that are often sharply defined (Martens et al. 2003). However, overlap in wintering grounds makes identification challenging.

During my master's dissertation fieldwork from 01 December 2023 to 15 March 2024 at Namdapha National Park in eastern Arunachal Pradesh, I recorded 19 observations of at least three individuals that I believed were Bianchi's Warblers. Although the contact calls of Bianchi's Warbler help differentiate the species from most other warblers in this complex, the challenge, on the field, was to separate Bianchi's Warbler from the extremely similar *nemoralis* subspecies of the Whistler's Warbler whose contact calls are not safely separable from the calls of Bianchi's Warbler from current knowledge (Rheindt 2006). A close observation of multiple individuals making the particular contact calls revealed that while some had extensive greyish median crown stripes with grey tones bleeding well below the black lateral crown stripes on

¹ Two past submissions to *Indian BIRDS* with claims of Bianchi's Warbler from Namdapha region were rejected due to insufficient details - Editors

either side, other individuals were found to have more greenish-tinted median crown stripes with little to no grey extending below the black lateral crown stripes. I suspected that the former were Bianchi's Warblers while the latter were Whistler's Warblers.

One such individual with extensive grey below lateral crown stripes, extending to ear coverts, was photographed [132] and its call was recorded (Fig. 1) at a location (27.531°N, 96.423°E) between Haldibari and Hornbill camps on 10 January 2024 at 1105 h (Urs 2024). I repeatedly encountered this particular individual wintering in the area for a month between December 2023 and January 2024 before it was photographed and recorded on 10 January 2024. A second individual was present in the area, but images could not be obtained. Both birds constantly made the distinct 'cheew' contact call, with the highest frequency of the primary call peaking at 4kHz and an average note duration of 0.11 sec. From the considerable grey wash below crown stripes, both individuals were most likely to be Bianchi's Warblers. Many other individuals making the characteristic contact calls were encountered on the trail running from Deban (27.504°N, 96.391°E) to Haldibari camp (27.524°N, 96.399°E). Though I had extended views of many of the birds showing greyish tones below lateral crown stripes, photographs and recordings of these individuals could not be obtained. I also encountered multiple Whistler's Warblers whose calls were similar to that of Bianchi's, but the extent of grey below the lateral crown stripes was very limited or absent [133]. From field observations of the two species, I found no behavioural differences between Bianchi's and Whistler's Warblers—both preferred areas with dense undergrowth and foraged in the lower to middle storeys in dense, broadleaved forest.



Ali: Romith Urs

132. Bianchi's Warbler *P. valentini* from Namdapha National Park, Arunachal Pradesh on 10 January 2024 (see vocalization of the same bird in Fig. 1) showing grey wash below the crown stripe.

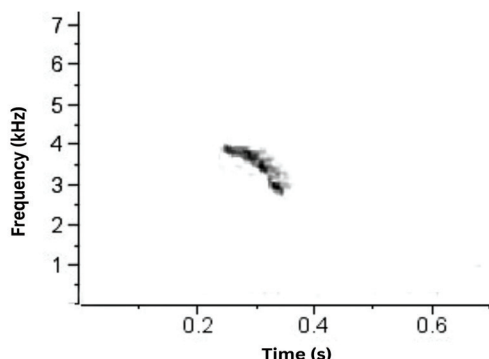


Fig. 1. Call spectrogram of the Bianchi's Warbler *P. valentini* in [1] from Namdapha National Park, Arunachal Pradesh on 10 January 2024.



133. Whistler's Warbler *P. w. nemoralis* from Namdapha National Park, Arunachal Pradesh on 28 January 2024 showing little to no grey below lateral crown stripes.

A review of Whistler's Warblers was conducted using images from the Macaulay Library from regions where there is no expected overlap with Bianchi's Warbler to see if there were any noticeable plumage variations. I reviewed a total of 511 observations with images and found that the Whistler's Warblers in parts of central and western Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Bhutan, Nepal, and Uttarakhand, where Bianchi's Warbler is most certainly absent, had no noticeable amount of grey extending below lateral crown stripes and greyish median crown stripes (e.g., Das 2023; Hacker 2023). In contrast, nearly all the 49 observations of Bianchi's Warblers from the Yunnan region and Thailand had noticeable grey tones bleeding below lateral crown stripes, many with grey extending far below the rear of the crown along the ear coverts (e.g., Jearwattanakanok 2020; Li 2020). The crown pattern of the bird I photographed on 10 January 2024 matched that of a typical Bianchi's Warbler and is far too grey for a Whistler's Warbler [134].



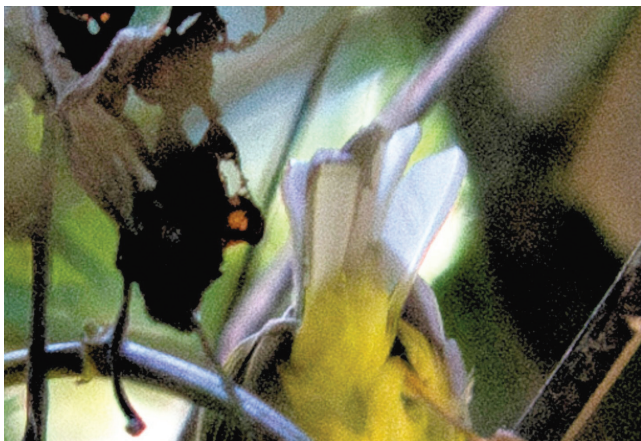
134. Comparison between the crown pattern of Bianchi's Warbler (left) and *nemoralis* Whistler's Warbler from Namdapha National Park, Arunachal Pradesh.

On current knowledge, a diagnostic feature that separates Bianchi's and both *nemoralis* and *whistleri* Whistler's Warbler is the tail pattern (Alström & Olsson 1999), although obtaining views and images of the spread tail can prove challenging on the field. While Bianchi's lacks any white on the fourth outer rectrices (R4) of its tail feathers, Whistler's shows white on R4. To help distinguish between the species in the future, I have included a table with notable differences below.

Table 1. Differences between the subspecies of Whistler's Warbler and Bianchi's Warbler.

	Whistler's Warbler - <i>nemoralis</i>	Whistler's Warbler - nominate	Bianchi's Warbler
Median crown stripe	Greyish-green	Greyish-green	Grey
Colour below lateral crown stripes	Greenish, can have a slight grey wash in some individuals	Greenish	Extensive grey wash, often no contrast between median crown stripe
Amount of white on the tail	White on R6, R5 and R4	White on R6, R5 and R4	White on R6 & R5. Absent on R4

Images of the spread tail for this particular individual could not be obtained, but partially spread photographs of the undertail were examined on an individual seen on 10 January 2024 [135]. From the image, the presence or absence of white on R4 cannot be safely determined, although a review of a sequence of images indicates that the tip of the feather immediately below R5 appears fully dark. However, the extent of white on R6 and R5, along with the presence of a wing-bar and the call, can be used to eliminate other extralimital warblers such as Alström's Warbler and Martens's Warbler. A majority of Alström's Warblers lack a well-defined wing-bar and do not have as much white on the tail (Alström & Olsson 1999, Alström 2020b). Martens's Warbler has a more contrasting head pattern with greyer median crown stripe and darker lateral crown stripes reaching further towards the bill (Alström 2020c). While some of these features are difficult to determine from field observations and photographs, vocalizations (Fig. 1, 2) help reliably separate Bianchi's from Alström's and Martens's Warblers. It is important to note that features such as calls, shorter gaps between notes, the presence of a wing-bar, habitat, and behavioural differences alone are insufficient to conclusively identify Bianchi's Warbler in the field.



Ronith Urs

135. Undertail of Bianchi's Warbler from Namdapha National Park, Arunachal Pradesh. While the extent of white on R5 and R6 is clear, the feather immediately below R5 appears fully dark.

A comparison of vocalizations of all six members of this complex (Fig. 2) revealed distinct differences in call structure, in addition to previously described differences in song (Alström & Olsson 1999; Martens et al. 2003; Opaev & Kolesnikova 2019). In wintering grounds and during passage, where birds are less likely to sing, calls can serve as a more reliable way to distinguish between species in the complex. Hence, birders seeking out Bianchi's, Alström's, and Martens's Warblers in Northeast India, especially in the eastern parts bordering Myanmar and China, are advised to try to obtain images of the spread undertail, crown pattern, and record vocalizations for a conclusive identification. Based on multiple characteristics documented for my Namdapha

bird, it can be safely identified as a Bianchi's Warbler, an addition to South Asia, while several others I recorded were probably of this species.

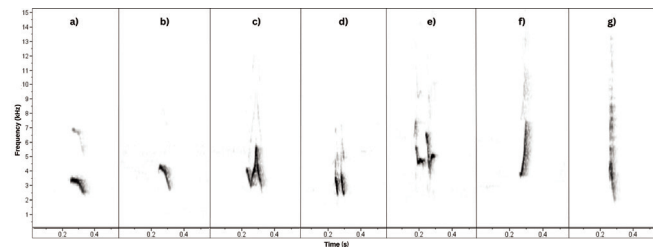


Fig 2. Call spectrograms of the members of the *P. burkii* complex: a) Bianchi's Warbler, Hubei, China (Bo Shunqi); b) Whistler's Warbler ssp. *nemoralis*, Arunachal Pradesh, India (Abidur Rahman); c) Whistler's Warbler ssp. *whistleri*, Uttarakhand, India (Andrew Spencer); d) Grey-crowned Warbler, Sichuan, China (Geoff Carey); e) Alström's Warbler, Hong Kong, China (Geoff Carey) f) Green-crowned Warbler, West Bengal, India (Richard Fleming); g) Martens's Warbler, Yunnan, China (Ray Tsu).

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The Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisea* from the south-western coasts of South Asia in Sri Lanka and India in 2024

The Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisea* is a trans-continental migrant with the longest ever recorded migration amongst birds (Hatch et al. 2020). However, the species is very rare in the Indian Ocean compared to the Atlantic and the Pacific, the last two being meridional, connecting the poles (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Praveen et al. 2014; eBird 2024). However, the year 2024 was rather unusual as three separate sightings of Arctic Terns were recorded from Sri Lanka and Kerala. We report the details of each of these sightings and discuss these finds.

Morawala beach, Sri Lanka

On 28 July 2024, at 0749 h, DMJ and MEJ were sea-watching at Gary's point (7.205°N, 79.818°E), Morawala Beach on the western coast of Sri Lanka when DMJ noticed a small *Sterna* tern feeding and moving south along with Bridled- *Onychoprion anaethetus*, Sooty- *O. fuscatus*, and Great Crested Terns *Thalasseus bergii* [136]. It had a very evident white rump [137]. Structure and flight pattern were noticed to be slightly different from a Common Tern *S. hirundo*. Hence, DMJ suspected the possibility of this being an Arctic tern (vs a Roseate Tern *S. dougallii* where the rump doesn't contrast strongly with upperparts) and took some images and a video clip. While making their way back from Morawala, DMJ looked at those images and identified it as an Arctic Tern based on small round head, short red bill, and narrow dark trailing edge on underwing.

Images were sent to Moditha Hiranya Kodikara Arachchi and Gary Allport who confirmed our identification. Photographs were posted in Facebook triggering other birders in South Asia about the possible presence of Arctic Terns in Arabian Sea.



Dinidu Maleen Jayathilake

136. Arctic Tern following a mixed tern flock with a juvenile Sooty Tern (first bird), Great Crested Tern, and two Bridled Terns.



137. Arctic Tern in adult breeding plumage showing full dark cap, small rounded head, short red bill, white trailing edge to secondaries, and a clean white rump.



Both: Dinidu Maleen Jayathilake

138. Arctic Tern showing narrow dark trailing edge to upper primaries.

Mappila Bay, Kannur, Kerala, India

On 31 July 2024, at around 1540 h, NE was sea-watching at Mappila Bay (11.854°N, 75.376°E), Kannur District, Kerala on a windy day with heavy rains. He observed a group of terns that he had also spotted in the morning when rains had prevented him from taking pictures. The group primarily consisted of Common Terns, Bridled Terns, and crested terns *Thalasseus sp.* apart from five Lesser Noddies *Anous tenuirostris*. Focusing on photographing Common Terns, he suspected the presence of other species, including Roseate Terns and White-cheeked Terns *S. repressa*. Given the Arctic Tern sighting from Sri Lanka, he also considered the possibility of their presence along the Kerala coast. Amidst the Common Terns, he captured images of a tern that appeared a bit smaller from others. The bird was flying from southeast to north, c.50 m offshore and at 15–20 m above sea surface.

The photographs showed a Common-like Tern with grey back, white rump and long white tail streamers with a white front and dark hood [139–141]. However, the bill was decidedly shorter than any Common Tern [139], all the secondaries on the right wing had a white trailing edge (left wing secondaries were moulting), primaries showed translucence, darkish carpal bar, and sharply defined dark tips to primaries were visible in both upper and under side [150, 141]. Considering the time of the year, such a plumage is most likely of a young bird, probably a second-calendar-year. A couple of days later, expert ornithologists in Western Palearctic and Australia, consulted by Praveen J,

examined his photos and confirmed the identification of the suspicious bird as an Arctic Tern.



139. Arctic Tern showing short neck, moulting secondaries, and translucent primaries.



140. Arctic Tern showing the primaries with well-defined black tips on both upper and under side.



141. Arctic Tern showing grey upperparts, white rump, white edge to upper secondaries, and a darkish carpal bar.

Azhikkal Estuary, Kannur, Kerala, India

On 17 July 2024, at 0645 h, AN visited Azhikkal Estuary (11.941°N, 75.294°E), where Valapattanam River empties into the Arabian Sea just north of the Azheekode village in Kannur District, Kerala. The sky was overcast, with dark clouds and occasionally bursts of heavy torrents. Due to the rough sea and strong winds, he was unable to reach the end of the sea wall from where he could get an unobstructed view of the sea. Heavy fog further reduced the visibility. However, in this adverse weather, he could see a few Lesser Crested Terns *T. bengalensis*, Great Crested Terns, two Common Terns and a lone Gull billed Tern *G. nilotica*. The terns were flying from north to south. A large flock of Brahminy Kites *Haliastur indus* wheeled and soared above the waves, occasionally picking scraps of food from the

surf. At about 0800 h, he observed a tern at a distance engaged in plunge-diving. Initial impression was a Common Tern and he managed to capture some flight shots.

On a later date, when he examined the photos, it appeared to be quite different from Common Tern. The bird was in a heavily worn plumage making it look as if in moult. Unlike Common Tern, it had shorter neck [142] and thinner black bill giving a 'neckless' appearance [143]. It lacked the dark wedge on the upper wing [144], a diagnostic feature of Common Tern, while it had a sharply defined trailing edge [9, 10] to the primaries. Bill appeared black in all photographs. Rump was white but it had long tail streamers [144]. One of the photos also showed the characteristic translucent primaries [145].



142. Arctic Tern showing grey back, full black cap, and slightly longer bill than what is typical for this species.



143. Arctic Tern giving the 'neckless' appearance.



144. Arctic Tern showing dark tip primaries, white edge to secondaries, and white rump.



145. Arctic Tern showing grey wings, dark tips of upper primaries and some translucence in the primaries.

The photos were uploaded in a Facebook group dedicated to bird identification where tern experts including Killian Mullarney suggested an Arctic Tern, most likely an adult (vs third-calendar-year) based on the full black cap. Though the bill appears longer than the previous two individuals, it still falls within the known variation of Arctic Tern. Photographs not being sharp evoked some concern on the identification but multiple features on this individual favoured an Arctic Tern over Common Tern. Though this bird was identified later, it is chronologically the first for the season from South Asia.

Discussion

The only well-documented South Asian record of Arctic Tern for a very long time was of an adult male in breeding plumage collected (NHMUK#1949.Whi.1.17133) by B. B. Osmaston from Rangdum [=Rungdum] plains of Suru valley, Ladakh, far inland, on 02 July 1928 (Whistler 1936) [146]. While field identification of Arctic Terns is difficult considering the Common Terns that linger in the Arabian Sea in July, good photographs of most individuals are identifiable to species-level. Field identification of Arctic Terns purely based on translucence in primaries can be tricky in tropical seas due to unusually worn Common Terns that bleach their plumage in tropic sun. Hence, head structure and dark tips to primaries are more useful pointers for an Arctic Tern in India. The lack of prior photographs from anybody in South Asia would indicate that the species may have been genuinely rare and 2024 may have been anomalous, at least considering in the last decade. Alternatively, more Arctic Terns may be lying unidentified in the vast number of Common Tern photographs taken in the past decade by South Asian birders. The plumages of the birds indicate three different individuals, and in fact different from the birds seen from Mumbai (see elsewhere in this issue). In fact, the sixth national record for UAE, also the first on the coasts of Arabian gulf, was of a second-calendar-year Arctic Tern reported this year on 12 August (Campbell 2024), the date matching the general season as ours. There are two other Asian inland records of Arctic Terns in 2024, in eBird, one from central Russia in April (Coe 2024) and another from Mongolia in May (Batkhuu 2024), which support the hypothesis that 2024 may have been anomalous. The number of records in the coasts of Indian Ocean, including the historical record from Ladakh, might also indicate an overland movement of a small population of these birds, perhaps at great heights, and might have been gone unnoticed. These might belong to the northern Asian population of this circumpolar breeder.

Praveen J. (Image used with permission by NHMUK, London)



146. Arctic Tern specimen (NHMUK#1949.Whi.1.17133) from Ladakh preserved at the Natural History Museum, London.

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Occurrence of Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea* in Mumbai

Arctic Terns *Sterna paradisaea* are long distance fliers migrating every year from the Arctic to the Antarctica and back; they cover more than 40,000 kilometers every year following the summer sun. They usually leave their breeding grounds in mid-July and reach Antarctica in November, meandering their way, following wind currents and food availability, sometimes taking several months to reach Antarctica. However, they normally take a more direct route in mid-March back to the Arctic through the Pacific or Atlantic (Alerstam et al. 2019; Hatch et al. 2020).

During the monsoon months of July, August, and September of 2024, we had deluge of pelagic birds in Mumbai coasts including Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus*, Lesser Noddy *A. tenuirostris*, Lesser Frigatebird *Fregata ariel*, Christmas Island Frigatebird *F. andrewsi*, Masked Booby *Sula dactylatra*, Wilson's Storm-Petrel *Oceanites oceanicus*, Swinhoe's Storm-Petrel *Hydrobates monorhis*, Parasitic Jaeger *Stercorarius parasiticus*, Long-tailed Jaeger *S. longicaudus*, Bridled Tern *Onychoprion anaethetus*, Sooty Tern *O. fuscatus*, Saunders's Tern *Sternula saundersi*, and White-cheeked Tern *S. repressa* (<https://ebird.org/region/IN-MH-MC/bird-list?yr=cur>). The stormy weather over the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean possibly contributed to this.

On 06 August 2024, fourteen of us made a trip by ferry to Elephanta Island from Gateway of India, Mumbai. On the way, a frigatebird was seen gliding, a Lesser Crested Tern *Thalasseus bengalensis* flew by swiftly; several Bridled Terns, swarms of Common Terns *S. hirundo*, and a few Gull-billed Terns *Gelochelidon nilotica* were flying, fishing, and perched on buoys and boat anchor cables. On reaching the jetty, a couple of Lesser

Noddies were circumambulating the ferry and six were perched on a railing outside the local jetty office.

At the Elephanta Island jetty (18.972°N, 72.930°E), a single tern was perched on a net covered thermocol buoy; it appeared darker than the other Common Terns that we had seen on the way. AS, RA, and Vandana Rajhansa photographed the bird and on looking at the images MM noticed that the beak was too slight for it to be a Common Tern and it appeared hunched and therefore requested the other birdwatchers to take more photographs. Luckily it flew to another buoy and perched besides a Bridled Tern. We could observe it for more than twenty minutes.

In the flight photographs, the overall pale underwing had a narrow dark trailing edge with neat and dark tips to the primary feathers; the secondaries were worn, evenly light pearl-grey, translucent with white tips, without any dark grey markings (contra Common Tern) [147–148]. All ten primaries were worn and appeared to be of the same generation. The black bill was shorter than that of a Common Tern. The forked tail had long tail streamers. The bird was overall grey with a neat black cap, short legs, a white rump and tail with grey underparts. There was a hint of red in the legs and feet. In the perched photographs, the shorter neck and hunched appearance is quite apparent [149–150]. Based on all these features, it was identified as an Arctic Tern.



147. Arctic Tern flying towards a perched Bridled Tern, showing dark tips to primary feathers with a pointed tip to P10 (10th primary) and darker median coverts. 06 August.



148. Arctic Tern with full black cap, grey body and dark tips to primaries from below. 06 August.



149. Arctic Tern giving a hunched appearance with short neck and bill. 06 August.

All: Ananthakrishna S.



150. Arctic Tern with short legs and bill. 06 August.

Ananthakrishna S.

On the next day, PT photographed the same bird on the curved roof of the Elephanta Island jetty office [151–152]. This tern was perched adjacent to a Bridled Tern. The tern had dark wings with shorter legs and neck (contra Common Tern). The bill was short, black with a tiny pale-yellow tip. Forked tail with streamers longer than a typical Common Tern were visible. Photographs again showed a grey underbody with a white rump and tail, black tips to primary feathers, and translucent secondaries.



151. Along with a Bridled, the Arctic Tern shows dark grey wings, short neck and legs. 07 August.



152. The worn pointed tip to P10 (10th primary) on the Arctic Tern indicates that it is the same bird as the one on the previous day. 07 August.

Both: Padiyavanti Mane

Based on our photographs, the Arctic Tern was aged as a likely third-calendar-year bird rather than an adult based on darker grey on the median primary coverts and upper-wing. Adult Arctic Terns have very light grey on upper-wing while the darker grey on the forewing is typically a sub-adult feature. (Killian Mullarney, in email dated 21 August 2024). This bird is considerably worn than individuals typically seen in Europe and higher latitudes; possibly due to the strong tropical sun.

An Arctic Tern was photographed from Sassoon Dock (18.9139° N, 72.8238° E) and Elephanta Caves multiple times between 27 and 31 July 2024 as well, but was reported much later after our photographs got identified as this species. From available photographs, it appeared rather similar to our bird. Hence, this individual was probably present there for at least a few days but was overlooked by bird-watchers until we saw it on 06 August 2024. However, it was not seen there after 07 August. From 29 August 2024 until 07 September 2024, an Arctic Tern was seen quite regularly at Sassoon Dock in South Mumbai. This individual's head pattern [153–155] was slightly different from the bird that we saw at Elephanta Island as all photographs showed a broad white front contra our individual that had almost a fuller black cap. The bird was also comparatively lighter on its upper parts. Therefore, it is presumed that there were at least two Arctic Terns in Mumbai region. Birders who visited after 11 September 2024 did not see that tern.



153. Arctic Tern showing long tail-streamers and short bill on 02 September.



154. Arctic Tern showing broad white front on 02 September.



155. Arctic Tern showing short legs and well-defined dark tips to the retained primaries on 02 September.

All: Mayuresh Khataavkar

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Rusty-tailed Flycatcher *Ficedula ruficauda* from Nangal, Punjab, India

On 13 April 2024, at about 1745 h, while birdwatching in the woodlands of the Nangal Wildlife Sanctuary (31.396°N, 76.364°E; 364 m asl) in Nangal, Rupnagar district, Punjab, India, PSA observed two *Muscicapa* flycatchers and a flock of Small Minivet *Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*. One of the flycatchers was identified as an Asian Brown Flycatcher *M. dauurica*. The second one turned out to be a Rusty-tailed Flycatcher *Ficedula ruficauda*, based on its rufous rump to tail, plain underparts, and grey upperparts (Clement



156. Rusty-tailed Flycatcher at Nangal (Dorsal View).



157. Rusty-tailed Flycatcher at Nangal (Lateral View).

Both: Paramoor Singh Anhal

& Taylor 2006; Grimmett et al. 2011). It was catching insects while frequently flitting from one perch to another in the lower canopy [156–157]. The location was not visited again by the authors.

In comparison to the Rusty-tailed Flycatcher, the Slaty-blue Flycatcher *F. tricolor* female also has rufous in the tail, but it is slightly smaller, has a black bill, and may be seen in the area only in the winters as an altitudinal migrant. Rufous-bellied Niltava *Niltava sundara* female has a paler rufous tail (in the race *whistleri*), but it has a broad white gorget across the lower throat and may be seen in the area only in the winters as an altitudinal migrant. Rusty-tailed Flycatcher's rufous upper tail coverts and tail may make it appear like a female *Phoenicurus* Redstart but can be differentiated by its entirely pale lower mandible (compared to entirely black bill in Redstarts), slightly smaller size, and upright stance. Behaviourally, the lack of characteristic tail shivering and jerky body movements typical of a Redstart clearly distinguishes this species and eliminates any confusion.

Ali & Ripley (1996) states this species "has been recorded in southeastern Punjab." However, this seemingly refers to an area in present-day Haryana, as Haryana used to be a part of Punjab. This record may correspond to the circle placed near Delhi in the distribution map by Grimmett et al. (2011). As per Clement & Taylor (2006), during winter migration, the Rusty-tailed Flycatcher passes "throughout Punjab and NW plains." But the authors do not mention Punjab for return passage. As per Rasmussen & Anderton (2012), Rusty-tailed Flycatcher breeds in the Himalaya from north-eastern Afghanistan to eastern Nepal, between 1800–1300 m asl, but found at lower elevations on passage. It further says that during fall migration, it travels through the western Himalayan foothills and the northwestern plains to the southern Western Ghats, where it spends the winter. During spring migration, it returns through the eastern Peninsula and then moves west along the base of the Himalaya. Though Punjab is not specifically mentioned, it is obvious that the Rusty-tailed Flycatcher passes through (some territory of) Punjab in both migration directions as it is part of the northwestern plains. The present observation is in a valley along the Sutlej River in the foothills of the Shivalik Range of the lower Himalaya.

No specific published record of Rusty-tailed Flycatcher was found from Punjab, India while searching through sources obtained from the Bibliography of South Asian Ornithology (Pittie 2024). There are also no records in the specimen database of the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF). We also found no records on Facebook and Instagram, eBird and iNaturalist. Therefore, the present observation is the first confirmed photographic record of Rusty-tailed Flycatcher from Punjab, India, seemingly on passage to its breeding grounds.

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An African Openbill *Anastomus lamelligerus* from Kole Wetlands, Kerala, India and its potential origins

On 19 November 2023, during a survey at the Kanjani Kole wetlands (10.473°N, 76.121°E) as part of the Kerala Bird Race, a stork was observed flying at a short distance. Initially, it looked like a Black Stork *Ciconia nigra* due to its dark coloration. I was able to take several photographs [158–163], and upon closer inspection, it was noted that the bird lacked the typical white belly of the Black Stork. Further examination of the bill confirmed the bird to be an Openbill *Anastomus sp.*, and it was then thought to be a strangely coloured Asian Openbill *A. oscitans*, as it joined a flock of four other individuals of that species.



158. African Openbill along with Asian Openbill, see similar size and structure.



159. African Openbill showing thick pale bill showing the obvious gap of an adult. Bill base is also pale.



160. African Openbill showing a white patch around the shoulders and adjoining base of wings.



161. African Openbill showing a white median covert bar and white speckles on its body.



162. Wing was in active moult, legs projected well beyond the tail, while the tail feathers itself were not moulting.



163. African Openbill showing narrow white shaft streaks at the base of the upper primaries.

All: Subim K S

I posted these photographs in *Facebook* and I came to know that photographs of a similar bird had previously been shared in the *Facebook* group *Ask IDs of Indian BIRDS*, from Majorda Beach, Goa on 14 October 2021 (Laad 2021), where opinions differed, with some identifying it as an African Openbill while others felt it was a melanistic form of the Asian Openbill. My photographs were later shared across multiple *Facebook* groups, yielding very similar mixed opinions.

Here, I use the photographs to analyse the identification and discuss the possibilities of African Openbill occurring in India.

Description

The stork appeared identical in shape and proportions as the Asian Openbills flying alongside [1]. While it appeared uniformly black in the field, photographs revealed a few other details. The thick pale bill had the obvious characteristic gap indicating the bird to be an adult [2]. Some photographs showed the base of the bill to be whitish [2]. There is a patch of white at the base of the right wing extending a bit into the neck, rather symmetrically though photographs are not clear enough to determine if the patch is

similar on both sides [159, 160]. There are white speckles on the lower body and on median coverts [161]. The wing is under active moult, the ragged secondaries indicate they are moulting with one secondary feather missing on its right wing [162]. There appears to be a narrow white covert bar (similar to a juvenile Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis*, but thinner) [161]. The tail did not show any signs of moult [162]. The legs projected well beyond the tail tip, including the entire toes [162]. On the upper wing, there are narrow white shaft streaks at the base of the primaries and a roundish white patch on the coverts, closer to the body [163]. Colour of the legs appeared paler than the body [159].

Identification

No treatise deals with separation of African Openbills and Asian Openbills as they are readily told apart. They do not co-occur, and hence even the possibility of a colour aberrant of one species being mistaken for the other has not ever occurred (Hancock et al. 1992; Elliott et al. 2020a, b). Hence, I worked out the entire identification using photographs in Macaulay Library.

The white at the base of the bill is congruent with several photographs of African Openbill (e.g., Viswanathan 2023). Asian Openbill never shows white in that area. The thin white median covert bar visible in one of my photographs is a feature of African Openbill and so are the white shaft streaks on upper primaries (Petersson 2012; Bruycker 2022). The speckles in the belly are also a typical African Openbill feature (Bruycker 2022; Zhao 2024). The varying amount of white on the neck sides and shoulders visible in the photographs, more prominently in photographs that are not very clear, could be ascribed to the white speckles on the neck sides that sometimes glisten in the sun (see Willson 2018; Bertrands 2022a, b; Viswanathan 2023).

Melanistic birds typically would have their black/dark patterns bolder and that colour over-run their typical boundaries (van Grouw 2021), but none of this is evident in my bird. Colour aberration in storks is rare. Reviews have not found any colour aberration in storks from India (Mahabal et al. 2016; Pittie 2024). In the past, stained White Storks *Ciconia ciconia* have been reported as melanistic birds (Gordinho 2008). Overall, the white parts of the plumage are congruent with what is expected in an African Openbill and that should rule out a melanistic or colour aberrant Asian Openbill.

I also analysed the bird reported from Goa (Laad 2021) which was photographed sitting as well as in flight. An adult with a clear gap in the bill, it appeared to have less white at the base of the bill than my bird. The shiny, green-glossed sequin-like feathers on its back and coverts are typical of the breeding plumage of this species apart from the white elongated plume-type feathers on its lower neck. The single flight image showed that the bird was moulting, with some secondaries as well as some primaries missing. Legs appeared darker than in my bird. Some white shafts on the inner primaries are also visible. Based on a combination of features, I have no reticence in identifying this bird also as an African Openbill (*contra* melanistic Asian Openbill).

Origins

Reports of any African bird in India invariably brings up the discussion of captive origins (see Saikia & Goswami 2017; Devmurari 2018; Trivedi & Trivedi 2018; Praveen et al. 2019). Large stocks of exotic birds are kept as pets by the affluent in undocumented private collections and a cage escapee, even from far, can appear in our wetlands. Plumage of this particular bird as well as the bird from

Goa were not in mint condition though it could be attributed to moulting rather than abraded feathers that is typically associated with captive birds. Though the records are spaced apart by two years, it is possible that the same individual is involved; it may have escaped from captivity a while back, and may have been roaming in the western coast. The other possibility where two different individuals are involved also exists, both resulting from a single event of escape from captivity. The third remote possibility would be two independent captive escapees while other combinations (one wild, one escapee) are also possible.

Though no knowledge exists on captive African Openbills in India, there exists 24 holdings worldwide with three in Asia (<https://www.zootierliste.de/>). Though this listing is by no means comprehensive, this can be considered relative to other species that are currently treated as of unknown origin in India. E.g., African Sacred Ibis *Threskiornis aethiopicus* has 232 holdings worldwide, 17 in Asia, while Spur-winged Lapwing *Vanellus spinosus* has 36 holdings with two in Asia. Hence, it appears African Openbill is a less popular aviary/zoo species compared to some others.

African Openbill is known to migrate from their breeding grounds in eastern and southern Africa to parts of the continent that are north of the equator, notably during October to April (Elliott et al. 2020a). Much of its movements are also nomadic and are in response to rainfall (Hancock et al. 1992). They are present in several countries in western Africa including Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania.

However, quite recently, several records, all believed to be dispersers from wild populations, have been noted in several parts of the Arabian Peninsula since July 2021 (eBird 2024; OSME 2024), the timing matching with our Indian records. Photographs in eBird from the Arabian Peninsula showed several individuals with active wing moults. The first United Arab Emirates (UAE) record was of a flock of seven in July–August 2021, just a few months before the Goa record. The first Oman record was a flock of four, probably from the former flock, in August 2021, and at least one bird stayed till March 2022. Another dead bird was reported in January 2022 from Oman. Further records from Oman are of a single individual during the next season from October 2022 till March 2023. Two juveniles from a four-strong flock were photographed in south-western Saudi Arabia (KSA) in September 2021. Numbers increased from the subsequent January to about 19 birds in April 2022. There were reports of one from January–March 2023, and another one from February–March 2024. Clearly, all these records (eBird 2024; OSME 2024) show a recent migratory influx and our birds could have been a spillover from this recent event (Fig. 1).

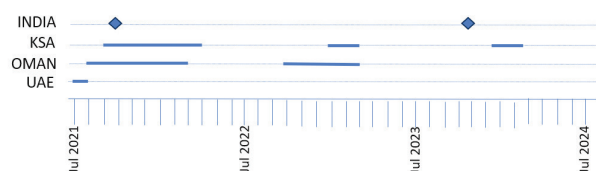


Fig 1. Records and periods of stay of African Openbills in various West Asian countries and India after 2021.

While a case can be put up for captive origins of African Openbills, evidence on the contrary, particularly from Arabian Peninsula, is so strong that it is advisable to consider both Goa and Kerala records as of birds of wild origins.

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Yellow-breasted Bunting *Emberiza aureola*: An addition to the avifauna of Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, India

Yellow-breasted Bunting *Emberiza aureola* once bred across the northern Palaearctic from eastern Finland and western Russia, east to Kamchatka, south to northern Ukraine, north to Kazakhstan, Mongolia, north-eastern China, Sakhalin Island and northern Japan; however, after a precipitous decline, it is now thought to

have potentially completely disappeared from Finland, Belarus, Ukraine, and large parts of Russia (Kamp et al. 2015; Mlíkovský & Stýblo 2016). It migrates in winter to South and Southeast Asia and southern China (Mlíkovský & Stýblo 2016). Vagrants have been recorded as west as in western Europe (north up to Iceland and west up to Ireland, Britain, and Spain), Turkey, and much of the Middle East, Egypt, Pakistan, and south-eastern to Philippines, Borneo, Brunei, and even to Alaska (Copete & Sharpe 2020; Birdlife International 2024). This note describes two sightings of Yellow-breasted Bunting from Himachal Pradesh and its regular wintering records from Baur Reservoir, Uttarakhand.

Baur Reservoir, Uttarakhand

The Baur Dam is an embankment dam built on the Baur and Kakrala Rivers in the Udham Singh Nagar District of Uttarakhand. Patches of reedbeds and grasslands have developed around the reservoir. There is also scrubland with scattered trees, cultivated fields and villages in the surroundings of this reservoir. On 21 December 2019, RP was birding around mustard fields in the outflow area of this dam (29.132°N, 79.256°E; c.250 m asl). A bunting with bright yellow underparts with a distinct chestnut breast band and prominent facial markings was photographed [164]. There was a broad band of white on its inner wing coverts. On the basis of these features, it was identified as a male Yellow-breasted Bunting. Multiple birds of both sexes were recorded regularly during the past five winters at Baur Reservoir by RP from 2019–20 until 2023–24. These birds were mostly observed feeding on the ground in mustard fields close to the reservoir. Sometimes the birds were also seen in fields with paddy stubble. As it is a sensitive species in eBird, the details of sightings are not available publicly in eBird. On the basis of the data provided by eBird after request and by searching the Indian Birds Facebook group, it was noted that every year, it was recorded on multiple occasions by several birders from late November to late February, many of whom were accompanied by RP. Mostly 1–7 birds were seen, and a maximum of 12 birds were seen on 22 November 2023 by RP.



Rajesh Panwar

164. A male Yellow-breasted Bunting showing bright yellow underparts and a broad white band on the wings at Baur Reservoir, Uttarakhand.

Great Himalayan National Park, Himachal Pradesh

MS visited Sainj Valley in the Great Himalayan National Park (GHNP), Kullu District, Himachal Pradesh, in early May 2023. The GHNP is a large protected area with altitudes ranging between 1,500 and 5,805 m and is a designated World Heritage Natural Site (Rahmani et al. 2016). On 09 May at 0825 h, MS reached near a small, open, grassy patch very close to the Humkhani

meadow (31.780°N, 77.485°E; c.2,860 m asl). While walking on the trail, MS saw a flock of c.25 sparrow-sized birds foraging on the ground. Since the sun was behind the flock, it took a moment to identify these as Plain Mountain Finches *Leucosticte nemoricola*. MS scanned the flock using binoculars and found a completely different looking bird. It was a bunting with significant yellow on its underparts [165]. Soon thereafter, the flock took off after an alarm call, and the bunting perched on a Kharshu oak *Quercus semecarpifolia* for a few minutes before flying away. Photographs were taken when the bird was on the ground and while it perched on the tree. After spending an hour or so in the area, MS could not relocate the bunting. It was a medium-sized bunting with a well-marked face, having a broad, yellowish white supercilium, black bordered ear coverts, and black lateral crown stripes. The mantle was boldly streaked, and there were two prominent, buff wing bars. The underparts were pale yellow with streaking on the throat and flanks. The lower mandible was pale. After the photographs were analyzed, it was identified as a likely female Yellow-breasted Bunting, which was not considered initially, as it was outside its usual distribution range and habitat. It was probably a female because of pale yellow underparts and streaking on the throat. Female of Yellow-breasted can be confused with females of several other regional bunting species whose underparts are yellow. It was differentiated from the Yellowhammer *E. citrinella*, which is frequently observed in the state by its smaller size, different structure, pale lower mandible, and prominent white wing-bar. The Red-headed Bunting *E. bruniceps* and Black-headed Bunting *E. melanocephala* females were easily ruled out by the presence of prominent streaking on upperparts and flanks and a prominent head pattern. The similar Chestnut Bunting *E. rutila* female was separated by the presence of a more prominent head pattern and whitish wing bar. The female Black-faced Bunting *E. spodocephala* was ruled out by the presence of a rufous on the rump and a more prominent head pattern. (Grimmett et al. 1998; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Shirihai & Svensson 2018)



Mukesh Sehgal

165. Yellow-breasted Bunting at Humkhani, Great Himalayan National Park, Himachal Pradesh, on 09 May 2023, showing a prominent head pattern.

Sissu Lake, Himachal Pradesh

On 15 May 2023, DS visited Sissu Lake, Lahaul & Spiti District, Himachal Pradesh (32.475°N, 77.128°E; c.3,034 m asl) for birding. Sissu Lake is a small, high-altitude, horse-shoe shaped

lake, measuring c.400x200 sq. m. A pool with surrounding marsh is formed on the south-eastern side of the lake by a small stream [166]. The habitat at this lake is unique to the Lahaul Valley, which provides a suitable resting and feeding place for many migratory birds. DO spotted a bunting with prominent yellow on its face and underparts feeding near the water edge of this pool. The face was very well marked, with prominent black and chestnut borders to the ear coverts, lateral crown stripe and moustachial stripes. The boldly streaked upperparts showed significant chestnut, mainly on scapulars and rump. There were two prominent whitish wing bars. There was a narrow and broken chestnut band over the breast. The underparts were bright yellow, with paler, well-streaked flanks. The lower mandible was pale. On the basis of its distinctive facial pattern, chestnut rump, prominent wing bars and prominent streaking, it was later identified as Yellow-breasted Bunting. It was perhaps a male, as it was brightly coloured with warm chestnut in plumage, including a warm chestnut rump, small black blotches on the face and a breast band. RR recorded this bunting on the same evening, and CA photographed it on 17 May 2023 [167]. During the first few days of stay, the bird was seen feeding along with wagtails *Motacilla* sp. and was taking off along with these wagtails on disturbance. Later, the wagtails left the place to resume their migration, and then, the bird was observed feeding alone on small invertebrates near the water edge and on grass seeds in the surrounding areas. It was extremely bold when it was seen alone. In the afternoon, it was mostly observed resting in a shrub, growing inside the pond, and rarely in the surrounding shrubs. It was frequently seen raising the tail, almost raised vertically. The last sighting was on 19 May 2023.



Dipender Othangba

166. Habitat in Sissu Lake, Lahaul Valley, which contains pools and small marshes, where Yellow-breasted Bunting was reported.



C. Abhinav

167. Yellow-breasted Bunting at Sissu Lake, Himachal Pradesh on 17 May 2023.

Discussion

In the Indian Subcontinent, Yellow-breasted Bunting winters in the Himalayan foothills, mainly from central Nepal to the Assam Valley, hills south and east of Brahmaputra and north-eastern Bangladesh, sporadic further west in the Himalayan foothills and vagrant to Pakistan (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). There have been scattered records of Yellow-breasted Bunting in western peninsular India, from Gujarat to southernmost Tamil Nadu (Rajeevan & Bijumon 2018; Mengar 2019; eBird 2024) and the Andaman & Nicobar Islands (Gokulakrishnan et al. 2018). The Yellow-breasted Bunting was one of the most abundant songbirds of the Palearctic, with a very large breeding range; however, its population declined by 84.3–94.7% between 1980 and 2013, and the species' range contracted by 5,000 km (Kamp et al. 2015). This rapid decrease in population is due to the rampant illegal trapping of the species in its passage and non-breeding ranges in China (Kamp et al. 2015; Birdlife International 2024). Thus, its previous 'Least Concern' IUCN status changed rapidly after 2004, and ultimately, it was uplisted to 'Critically Endangered' in 2017 (Birdlife International 2024). Owing to this decline in population, once common species in Northeast India (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), Yellow-breasted Bunting has also become rare in this region (Choudhury & Choudhury 2021). However, flocks of variable sizes are still observed in few places in this region (Saikia & Choudhury 2023).

The species was not mentioned from Uttarakhand by Mohan & Sondhi (2017), and we could not find any other published records or records on social media before the above-mentioned records from the Baur Reservoir. Thus, the record of Yellow-breasted Bunting from the Baur Reservoir, which occurred in 2019, is the first record for Uttarakhand. More importantly, it seems to be a regular wintering ground for this critically endangered species, as it has been recorded regularly at this location for the past five winters. Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) mentioned it as sporadic in the Himalayan foothills, further west of Central Nepal; however, the present records further extend its regular wintering range to Uttarakhand. These records also urge the protection of this habitat to safeguard the species.

The birds seen in the records from Himachal Pradesh were probably migrating to their breeding grounds further north, as the places where the birds were recorded during spring migration are high-altitude regions, which are not wintering habitats (cultivation and grasslands) of the species (Grimmett et al. 1998), and the nearest breeding grounds in western-most Mongolia and eastern-most Tajikistan are c.2,000 km away (as seen in the distribution map by Copete & Sharpe 2020 and measured via Google Maps). Spring migration occurs during April to June, and many birds are still in their wintering grounds in May (Copete & Sharpe 2020). The sightings of Yellow-breasted Buntings among a flock of Plain Mountain Finches and wagtails are not unusual, as the species is highly gregarious in its wintering grounds and is often seen with other buntings and munias (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). We could not find any records of Yellow-breasted Bunting in prominent works from Himachal Pradesh (den Besten 2004; Dhadwal 2011, 2018), or in Grimmett et al. (2011) or in eBird (2024), making these records first for the state. The records of Yellow-breasted Bunting from Himachal Pradesh are not surprising, as the birds were migrating and species has been reported from the surrounding states and Union Territories (Grimmett et al. 2011). Yellow-breasted Bunting was photographed near the

Gharana Wetland, Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir, on 27 January 2020 (Kumar 2020). The species was reported twice from Jagadhari, Yamunanagar District, Haryana, on 22 February 1920 and 05 March 1935 (Jones 1927; Waite 1937). In Punjab, the species was reported once from Harike Wetland on 01 April 1994 (Robson 1994), and a flock of 13 buntings was recorded at Kiratpur, Rupnagar District, on 04 and 05 January 1997 (Robson 1997). Further west, there have been more recent records from Pakistan (Karam & Ahmed 2021).

CA thanks Pritam Baruah for helping in sexing the birds.

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Observations on the nesting ecology of the Long-tailed Broadbill *Psarismomus dalhousiae*

Birds have evolved a variety of parental behaviours to reduce predator-induced nest loss, which includes the construction of elaborate, cryptic or concealed nests; distraction displays; and nest guarding (Gottfried 1979). The quality of the breeding habitat may directly affect the survival and development of progeny; therefore, the selection of a suitable nest site is an important factor affecting the reproductive success of birds (Zhou et al. 2020). The Long-tailed Broadbill *Psarismomus dalhousiae* is distributed in tropical and sub-tropical forests from the northwestern Himalayas to Southeast Asia (Billerman et al. 2022).

Long-tailed Broadbills are gregarious species that are often observed in small flocks. In India, Long-tailed Broadbills breed from March to August. They build large pear-shaped hanging nests, usually at the end of a branch, typically near a water body, with small pieces of dry twigs/sticks, roots, leaves, and grasses. (Cameron & Harrison 1978; Bruce 2020). They are also known to nest on electricity transmission lines (Zhou et al. 2020). A study carried out in China revealed that these birds prefer to nest on power lines (88.5%), and nest site selection is affected mainly by predation pressure and food resources (Zhou et al. 2020).



168. A pair of a Long-tailed Broadbill building a nest near Kolukhet village, Dehradun-Mussoorie Road.

On 26 May 2022, one nest of Long-tailed Broadbill was observed (30.416°N, 78.079°E) near Kolukhet village, which is located across the Dehradun-Mussoorie Road, Uttarakhand.

The nest was being built at the end of a dry and delicate branch of the cutch tree *Acacia catechu*. It was surprising to record that those birds chose such a thin twig of the tree to build its nest [168]. We continued opportunistic observations of the nest for the next few days. Both male and female were involved in nest building. The nest was built within the forest area, near a natural, perennial water source. The highest nest-building activity was observed during the early morning hours, followed by the evening hours, when birds were observed bringing nest-construction material at the nest site. The pair took c.18–20 days to build the nest. Notably, the nest site is adjacent to Dehradun-Mussoorie Road, on which vehicular traffic is quite high throughout the year, especially during the summer season. On 21 May 2022, another nest was found near Benog Wildlife Sanctuary (30.442°N, 78.060°E), which was suspended from a live overhead electric wire c.5–6 m from the ground. However, no broadbills were observed near the nest. The nest may have been damaged due to exposure to high winds in the previous weeks. Thereafter, on 11 June 2022, another nest was encountered near the Dhobighat area (30.464°N, 78.071°E) across the Benog Wildlife Sanctuary. This nest was woven at the end of a small dangling branch of a Palas tree, as in the Kolukhet area [169], which is also near a stream.



Raju Pushola

169. A Long-tailed Broadbill perching over the nest at Dhobighat area, near Benog Wildlife Sanctuary.

Observations indicate that in the Mussoorie area, as in other parts of its range, the species also prefers to nest at the end of a dangling branch of moderately tall trees in an undisturbed forested habitat or on electric wires of moderate height (Bruce 2003). However, this choice of nesting site may expose nests to high winds. Although it is considered a resident in the Himalayan foothills up to c.2000m asl, this species is most commonly seen in Uttarakhand between April to September, the breeding season (Singh 2000; Tak & Sati 2010; Mohan & Sondhi 2015; Joshi & Bhatt 2015). Considering the rarity of the species outside its breeding season, it is likely that it performs local or altitudinal movements. However, this would indicate upslope migration during the winter, which is rare but known in some Himalayan birds.

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An assessment of the origins of the two Spur-winged Lapwings *Vanellus spinosus* in Warangal, Telangana, India

Spur-winged Lapwing *Vanellus spinosus* is a monotypic, medium to large-sized wader recognizable by its distinctive black crown, a prominent black stripe extending from the chest to the upper neck, a black tail and a unique spur located at the wrist joint (Hayman et al. 1986; Wiersma & Kirwan 2020). It is primarily distributed in Sub-Saharan Africa (Snow & Perrins 1998; Wiersma & Kirwan 2020), the Nile Valley, the Nile delta (Goodman & Meininger 1989), and southeastern Europe. It typically inhabits wetlands, marshes, and agricultural fields and feeds on insects and other small invertebrates. These birds are social, often observed in pairs or in small groups, and are known for their loud, persistent calls that contribute to the acoustic environment of their habitats. Both the River Lapwing *V. duvacelli* and the Masked Lapwing *V. miles* were once considered conspecific with Spur-winged Lapwing. In this article, we discuss the first report of Spur-winged Lapwing from South Asia at Ammavaripeta Cheruvu, Warangal, Telangana, and examine its potential origins.

Observations

On 24 January 2024, JP observed a single Spur-winged Lapwing alongside Red-wattled Lapwings *V. indicus* at Ammavaripeta Cheruvu (17.942°N, 79.553°E), Warangal District, Telangana. It was initially misidentified as River Lapwing owing to its similarity and greater likelihood in the region. During the subsequent visit by INR, JP and AR on 18 February 2024, the species was identified as a Spur-winged Lapwing using Google Lens [170, 171]. Because this was the first report of the species from India, the site has since been visited by a large number of birders who have continued to document its presence at least until 29 October 2024 (JP).



Jagan Pannala

170. The Spur-winged Lapwing feeding by the lakeshore on 18 February 2024.



Sriram Reddy

171. Dorsal view of the Spur-winged Lapwing in flight on 21 February 2024.

Ammavaripeta Cheruvu is bordered to the north by a bund, beyond which paddy fields stretch out, while the western side features rocky hillocks, and agriculture extends southwards to the east of the bund. Primarily, a rainfed lake, Ammavaripeta Cheruvu, has a substantial catchment area that supports a diverse array of birdlife (eBird 2024). The region is a network of several small lakes interspersed with vegetation and agricultural fields, creating an ideal environment for waterbirds. The shallow edges of the lake provide habitat for numerous waders, including lapwings and stilts, whereas the central part of the lake features several small- and medium-sized islands that offer safe havens for birds.

At the lake, most observers noted that the Spur-winged Lapwing typically associated with a pair of Red-wattled Lapwings [172]. Although the birds were confiding, the trio took to flight if any one bird was disturbed. During mornings, the Spur-winged Lapwing would leave the lake area to feed in adjacent paddy fields alongside Wood Sandpipers *Tringa glareola* and Eastern Cattle Egrets *Bubulcus coromandus* [170]. When disturbed in

the paddy fields by farmers or feral dogs, it would either fly further to more distant paddy fields or back to the company of Red-wattled Lapwings at the lake. During the later hours of the day, it would frequent islands or marshy banks where it fed near the lake edge with Red-wattled Lapwings, Black-winged Stilts *Himantopus himantopus*, and other shorebirds. When disturbed here, it would move to one of the several rocky islands deeper in the lake where River Terns *Sterna aurantia*, Grey Herons *Ardea cinerea*, Indian Cormorants *Phalacrocorax fuscicollis*, and Black-winged Stilts used to rest [173]. The stilts would sometimes mob this bird [174, 175]. Sometimes, it was observed to roost with the Red-wattled Lapwings on one of the islands [176]. It was also found to occasionally feed on insects infesting the paddy left to dry beside the lake [177]. We also observed several mounting attempts by the Spur-winged Lapwing on a Red-wattled Lapwing from April until June [178]. This probably indicates that this individual was a male.



172. The Spur-winged Lapwing alongside two Red-wattled Lapwings on 19 February 2024.



173. The Spur-winged Lapwings with waders on an island on 21 February 2024.

Both: Sriram Reddy



174. The Spur-winged Lapwing chased by a River Tern on 03 March 2024.

I Nageshwar Rao



Jagan Pammala

175. The Spur-winged Lapwing being mobbed by Black-winged Stilts on 23 February 2024.



Copalakrishna Ramachandran

176. The Spur-winged Lapwing roosting alongside a Red-wattled Lapwing on 5 May 2024.



Abdul Raheem

177. The Spur-winged Lapwing feeding on insects in the harvested paddy on 26 June 2024.



Jagan Pammala

178. Mounting attempts by the Spur-winged Lapwing on a Red-wattled Lapwing on 21 May 2024.

Interestingly, on 28 April 2024, two Spur-winged Lapwings were observed by AV, SR, and GR [179]. Both birds were initially seen in different corners of the wetland; the first was feeding with a large flock of waders far away from the approach path for birders, and the second was seen simultaneously near the path associating with Red-wattled Lapwings. Both birds eventually converged to the middle of the lake where the shorebird feeding flock had slowly moved. They did not show any signs of association and eventually moved away from each other. Both birds were observed together once again on 05 May 2024 (Ramachandran et al. 2024).



Sriram Reddy

179. The two Spur-winged Lapwings were photographed on 28 April 2024.

Discussion

This record of the Spur-winged Lapwing in Ammavaripeta, Warangal, represents one of the furthest documented extralimital reports of the species and the first record from South Asia, prompting inquiries into whether these individuals are wild vagrants or escapees from captivity. We examined its migratory behaviour and wandering tendencies and discuss its potential for vagrancy and for being an escapee from captivity.

Wild vagrant

The Spur-winged Lapwing was traditionally considered non-migratory but is known to exhibit erratic and unpredictable local movements. In recent decades, the southeastern European population of the Spur-winged Lapwing has been documented as migratory, arriving in Greece and Turkey in March and migrating in October, passing through Cyprus and Crete, although their ultimate destinations remain unclear (Hayman et al. 1986; Wiersma & Kirwan 2020). Vagrant Spur-winged Lapwings, potentially from this migratory population, have been recorded in numerous countries, including Bahrain, Bulgaria, Cape Verde Islands, Croatia, Czechia, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Malta, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Qatar, Poland, Romania, Serbia, the United Arab Emirates, and Ukraine. But even in parts of its range where the species is not conventionally migratory, it has repeatedly occurred very far from known range, showing that it has a tendency for long-distance wandering and range expansion.

Once regarded as a wanderer in Tanzania, it is now known to breed in the region (Anon 1994). The species has expanded into southern Africa, initially as a vagrant but has now been confirmed to be breeding in Congo-Brazzaville (Demey 2015), Zambia (Dowsett et al. 2008), Zimbabwe (Riddell 2007, 2014), Namibia (Dowsett et al. 2008; Gollnisch 2013), and Botswana (Tyler et al. 2008) in the recent past. Reports from Sao Tome and Principe (Valle & Patacho 2014) over 250 km from the nearest population and reports from Cape Verde Islands (Hazevoet 2003) over 600

km from the nearest population and the record from Seychelles (November 2010 to April 2011) at least 1,300 km from the nearest coast (in Somalia), where the species breeds, support its potential for vagrancy even across the sea (Skerrett 2011; Seychelles Birds Records Committee 2011). Reports from Libya and Algeria indicate over-land journeys of more than 2,000 km from the nearest breeding site in the Nile Valley (Herring 2012; Farhi et al. 2020). Several additional instances have been recorded of the species straying c.2,000 km from breeding grounds, such as records in southern South Africa (Ward-Smith 2019), Poland (Dabrowski 2017), and France (Moulin 2024). Despite the large distances involved, all these birds were considered naturally occurring (Fig. 1).

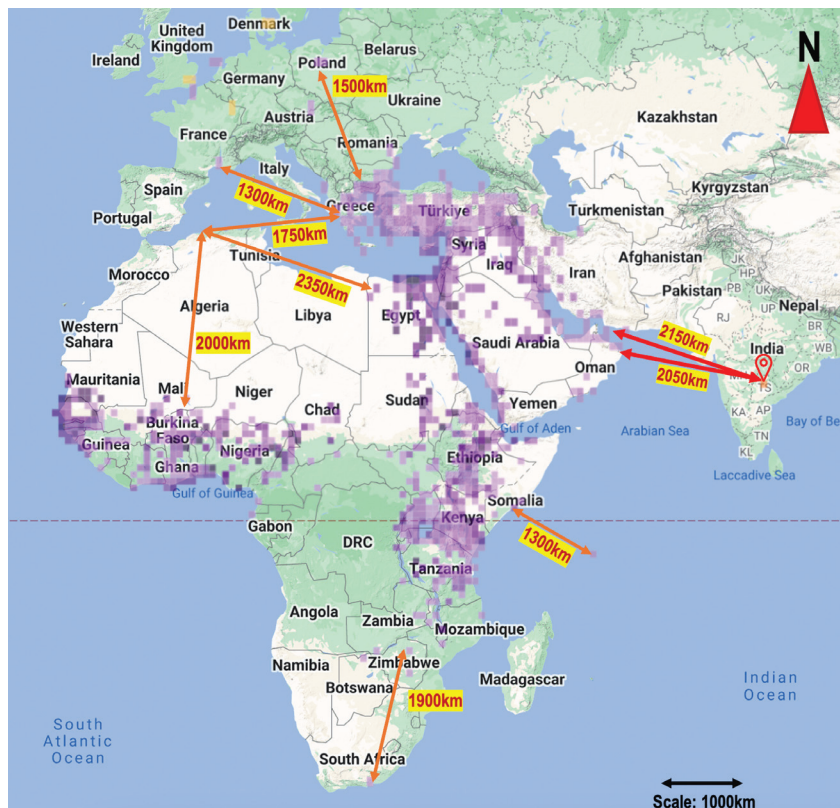


Fig. 1. Distance covered by vagrant Spur-winged Lapwings from their nearest establish range alongside the current records in India.

The Middle Eastern population of the Spur-winged Lapwing, which extends along the eastern Mediterranean from Arabian Peninsula to southwestern Iran, is considered 'dispersive' (Aye & Salmanzadeh 2007; Wiersma & Kirwan 2020). Birds from this population have been observed in Yemen (Jennings 2010), Oman (Eriksen & Victor 2013; Eriksen 2016; Unnithan 2017), Kuwait (Gregory 2005), and Saudi Arabia (Jennings 1981; Porter et al. 1996). The largest Middle Eastern population is in Turkey (Burfield & van Bommel 2004), where they are common as both migrants and breeding residents in various regions (Ozkan et al. 2012). In Iran, the species has been increasingly recorded since 2000 in Khuzestan, where it is now a resident breeding bird (Aye & Salmanzadeh 2007). In southwestern Iran, it was once regarded as a 'scarce winter visitor' but has recently been confirmed to breed there as well (Aye & Salmanzadeh 2007), which would be the closest breeding location to India (Figure 1). With its range noted to be expanding, breeding populations

of Spur-winged Lapwings were established in the West and East Azerbaijan provinces from 2014 (Khaleghizadeh et al. 2017). Since the 1960s, the population of Spur-winged Lapwings has increased significantly in Egypt and Israel, with a fivefold increase observed around the Gaza Strip between 1996 and 2003, attributed to the development of new irrigation fields, reservoirs, and sewage farms (Al-Safadi 2006). Previously considered a rare passage migrant in Lebanon, the Spur-winged Lapwing is now common and has been documented to breed in the region (Ramadan-Jaradi & Bara 2009). Additionally, local populations in Saudi Arabia, where the species was first recorded in 1984, have been reported to be increasing, with evidence of breeding activity (Jennings 2004). The Spur-winged Lapwing population in Turkey has been noted to spread further east (Kirwan et al. 2008), bringing them closer to South Asia and the Indian Subcontinent.

However, given the exceptional distances involved in our case, the vagrancy of Spur-winged Lapwing to Telangana is a low probability event. Hence, the fact that two birds migrated together or separately, possibly even from two different source populations, makes it truly exceptional. None of the prior reports of long-distance vagrancy of Spur-winged Lapwings involved multiple individuals. However, there is one case of two wild vagrant Masked Lapwings *V. miles novaehollandiae*, in New Zealand in 1932 (McCormack 2005), where they subsequently established a population.

Ammavaripeta's distance from ports in Mumbai (c.700 km) and Goa (c.650 km) to the west, and Vishakhapatnam (c.390 km), Kakinada (c.310 km), and Chennai (c.550 km) to the east suggests that ship-assisted vagrancy is an unlikely prospect. In this case, the chances of two non-associating birds being transported via the same ship, surviving the voyage, and arriving at the same wetland, which is at a significant distance from the ports, independently, are exceedingly low and hence discounted.

In summary, there are strong reasons to believe that the Spur-winged Lapwings in Telangana could have been vagrants from a more westerly native population, and that this case was a natural event for a species known to be expanding its range. If such events had occurred in the past in the intervening region between Iran and Telangana, there is a high likelihood that the birds may have been overlooked as the similar-looking River Lapwing. However, the case here is very unique, where two individuals reached the same spot at a locality skipping a large region of seemingly suitable habitat.

Escapee

Spur-winged Lapwing is one of the popular captive waders in zoos and private collections in the west (Zoo Tier List 2024); hence, an escapee from a captive population cannot be ruled out. Should these Lapwings indeed be escapees; the question of its local source arises. Our local birding network remains oblivious to any nearby aviaries, and Warangal's distance from major urban centres diminishes the likelihood of individual collections, especially lapwings. We reached out to several aviaries across the country, but none were in possession or aware

of the possession of lapwings, including Spur-winged Lapwings at similar facilities. Moreover, the Spur-winged Lapwing is not listed by CITES as a “traded species”. However, the depth of the wild bird trade in India is poorly understood, and private collectors may obtain these birds through illegal markets. Their aviaries remain undocumented, collections secretive, and the loss of individuals is not advertised for concerns of reprisal.

The healthy plumage and soft glossy feathers observed in our observations and photos indicate that the bird is in very good condition, unlike typical caged birds, which have abraded feathers or soft parts. Behaviourally, these birds may have been more consistent with wild birds because they did not show any signs of disability and were only as bold as the Red-wattled Lapwings that they associated with.

Typically, vagrants, if they survive, leave the staging grounds and move towards their home range. However, in this case, at least one bird has stayed through the summer, indicating a lack of migratory potential, which is sometimes associated with a captive stock of birds. However, it should also be noted that over-summering phenomenon is particularly common in the Charadriidae families of waders (McNeil et al. 1994).

Conclusion

On the basis of the observed physical, behavioural, and movement patterns, we infer that the presence of the Spur-winged Lapwings at Ammavaripeta Cheruvu, Warangal, Telangana is more likely to be a case of wild vagrancy rather than an instance of escape from captivity. However, we cannot definitively determine the reason for this atypical movement or the origin of these two individuals at Ammavaripeta. Together with the unknowns of bird trade, we remain cautious in discounting potential captive origins of these birds. It is likely that more such records will emerge from the Indian subcontinent in the future if the species is indeed expanding into the Indian Subcontinent. Birders should specifically check out River Lapwings in the western parts of the subcontinent for any Spur-winged Lapwing. Until we obtain more records from the intervening regions between Iran and Telangana, we recommend that this species may be included in the India checklist of birds as a ‘Species of unknown origin’ (Appendix 2).

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Status of the Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella naevia* in Tamil Nadu, India

The Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella naevia* is a small migratory passerine that breeds across much of temperate Europe and the western Palearctic and winters in South Asia, northern and western Africa. The wintering grounds in India include lake and marsh edges, thick grass and tamarisk scrub, rice fields, and grassy slopes with scattered bushes; lowlands, to 1,800 m in Western Ghats (Pearson et al. 2020). It winters in southern Western Ghats between October and February (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012) and is considered an uncommon winter migrant in Kerala (Sashikumar et al. 2011). I document an observation of this species from Nilgiris and assess the existing records from the Indian state of Tamil Nadu to suggest its status.

We saw a Grasshopper Warbler at Koranur, Ebbanad, The Nilgiris (11.486°N, 76.785°E; c.1,865 asl) on 23 November 2022 at 0952 h among scattered tea bushes. The bird was spotted on the way to a vulture vantage point count. While walking along the trail in tea plantations, a Red-whiskered Bulbul *Pycnonotus jocosus* flew up and sat upon a tea bush, and that time, we heard an unfamiliar call from the inside of the bush. After a few minutes, the bird came out and foraged on the top of the bush. We photographed the species and readily identified it as a Grasshopper Warbler using the field guide (Grimmett et al. 2011). It had clear, dark streaks on the upperparts and whitish throat, which made us think this is a Grasshopper Warbler.

Grimmett et al. (2011) and Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) map the entire southern Western Ghats of Kerala and adjoining Tamil Nadu as its winter range. We reviewed past literature using Pittie (2024) and accessed online portals such as www.gbif.org, www.indiabiodiversityportal.org, www.ebird.org and www.inaturalist.org to enlist all available records of this species from Tamil Nadu. We additionally searched social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to find any more records but found none. The records we compiled (Table 1) indicate that it is a rare bird in the state, with records in the winter months from November to February. According to the records of the Thiruvananthapuram Natural History Museum, it is believed to have a male Grasshopper Warbler specimen on display that was collected on 05 April 1901 from Muthukuly [=Muthukuzhy] in Kalakkad-Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve, Tirunelveli District.



Karthikeyan R

180. Grasshopper Warbler from Nilgiris showing streaked upperparts and a longish graduated tail and whitish throat.

However, the warbler specimens are not currently in good condition for identification (Praveen J., in email dated 27 July 2024). Grasshopper Warbler is not unexpected in The Nilgiris, as it has been recorded just outside its territorial boundaries in Sispara of the Silent Valley NP, Kerala (Sashikumar et al. 2011). While most records of the species from Kerala until 2010 were from Munnar hills and Silent Valley, both adjacent to similar habitats in Tamil Nadu, several additional sites have been documented recently (eBird 2024), including lowlands. Hence, the lack of records from Tamil Nadu is somewhat surprising.

Table 1. Records of Grasshopper Warbler from Tamil Nadu

Sl No.	Date	Reference	Districts	Remarks
1	21 February 1997	Raman (1997)	Tirunelveli	Sighting with detailed field notes including all diagnostic features.
2	15 March 2018	Joshi (2018)	Coimbatore	Seen and call recording available.
3	13 March 2020	Jambu (2020)	Coimbatore	Sighting of a <i>Locustella</i> warbler considered this species on range and habitat.
4	13 February 2021	Joshi (2021)	Dindigul	Call heard but further details unavailable.
5	23 November 2022	This work	The Nilgiris	Photographed.

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Black-throated Parrotbill *Suthora nipalensis* from the East Khasi Hills, Meghalaya

On 21 April 2024, JB, MK, and RS were birdwatching along the Mawkdok Dympep Valley while traveling towards Sohra. At around 1100 h, we reached Khatarshnong Laitkroh (25.393°N, 91.766°E; 1780 m asl), where a flock of small birds grabbed our attention. The birds were observed and photographed [181]. They were Black-throated Parrotbill *Suthora nipalensis*. Identification was straightforward as no other similar-looking species exists. They were feeding on small seeds in a mixed flock with Green-tailed Sunbirds *Aethopyga nipalensis* and Whiskered Yuhinas *Yuhina flavicollis* (Baishya 2024). There were ten Black-throated Parrotbills in the flock. We observed these restless birds for about five minutes before they flew out of sight down the hill. The weather was sunny, and the sky was clear, with a temperature of 23°C. The habitat was subtropical broadleaf forest. The birds were foraging on bamboo and small seeding bushes.

The Black-throated Parrotbill is found in the Central and Eastern Himalaya and adjoining Southeast Asia. This species is variable across its large range, and ten subspecies are recognized, with six occurring in the Indian subcontinent (Robson 2023). The race that is extant over much of its range in Northeast India (excluding Mizoram and possibly southern Manipur) is the grey-breasted form named *poliotis*. This race is distinctively marked with grey cheeks and breast. The birds we saw had grey cheeks and breasts that matched the *poliotis* subspecies.

Our sighting is the first report of this species in eBird from Meghalaya, and we did not find any other recent records from Meghalaya on the internet. Historical literature and records show this species is known to occur in Meghalaya. According to Blyth (1851), the type locality for this race is Cherrapunji in the Khasi Hills. He considered it a full species, 'Grey-breasted Parrotbill' *Suthora poliotis*. It was subsequently reported in historical checklists for the Khasi Hills and Meghalaya (Stuart Baker 1907; Stuart Baker 1923; Mazumdar & Roy 1995). Stewart G. collected eggs of "*Paradoxornis nipalensis*" (older taxonomy) from the

Khasi Hills in 1905 (Vertnet 2024a). Walter Koelz collected multiple specimens of this species from the Khasi Hills between 1949 & 1952 (Vertnet 2024b).

The lack of recent sightings of this species in Meghalaya is probably due to habitat destruction and hunting. However, with increased birdwatching and conservation awareness in the region, there is hope that species known to occur but lacking recent records will continue to be discovered, thereby offering hope for their recovery. This region has faced substantial habitat destruction from agriculture, mining, and timber extraction. This highlights the critical need for intensified conservation efforts to preserve the region's rich biodiversity.



181. Black-throated Parrotbill from East Khasi Hills.

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