

& 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).

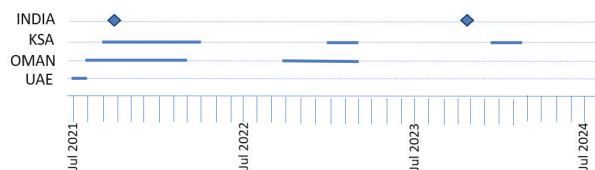


Fig 1. Records and periods of stay of African Openbills in various West Asian countries and India after 2021.

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