

A Little Tern *Sternula albifrons* at Corbett Tiger Reserve, Uttarakhand, India

On 15 June 2012, at c.1740 h, while birding at Sher Bhujji at Dhikala, Corbett Tiger Reserve, Uttarakhand, India (29.590°N, 78.840°E, c.365 m asl), I photographed a tern flying above Ramganga reservoir. The bird, a small tern with narrow pointed wings, was flying with rapid wingbeats, often hovering and repeatedly diving to pick feed from the water's surface. It was identified as an adult Little Tern *Sternula albifrons* in breeding plumage, based on the features seen in the images [200, 201] that included white forehead with black lores, black outer primaries, and a black-tipped yellow beak.

The Little Tern is a resident in India and breeds locally (Grimmett et al. 2011) during the months of May and June (Gochfeld et al. 2020). Grimmett et al. (2011) and eBird (2024) show that the Little Tern breeds in neighbouring Uttar Pradesh, and hence it is highly likely that the species could breed in Uttarakhand as well. As the bird, a breeding adult, was photographed during mid-June, it is possible that the species may have been breeding at or near the Ramganga Reservoir in Corbett Tiger Reserve. Mohan & Sondhi (2017) does not record the presence of the species from the state of Uttarakhand. There are no records of the species from Uttarakhand on eBird (2024). Arya et al. (2021), based on surveys conducted during January 2019 and December 2020, include the species in their checklist of waterbirds of Haridwar, Uttarakhand, without giving any photographic evidence, any details of description of the species or details of any sightings. Thus, the bird photographed on 15 June 2012 at Sher Bhujji is the first confirmed record of the species from Corbett Tiger Reserve and from the state of Uttarakhand, India.



200. Little Tern at Corbett Tiger Reserve.



201. Little Tern at Corbett Tiger Reserve.

Both: Manoj Sharma

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The Bristled Grassbird *Schoenicola striatus* at Pong Lake, Himachal Pradesh, India

The Bristled Grassbird *Schoenicola striatus* is a large olive-brown grassbird with pale fulvous or buff-brown upperparts, distinctive bold, dark brown streaking on mantle, unmarked pale buff underparts, and a heavy broad rounded tail with whitish tips (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Krishnan 2021). In the breeding season the male shows a dark black bill (Grimmett et al. 1998; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). It is a grassland specialist and occurs in a variety of grasslands from tall and wet types to medium height (>1 m high) and dry grasslands with significant shrub component (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). This note describes the records of the Bristled Grassbird from Pong Lake, Himachal Pradesh, India.

Observations

Pong Lake was created in 1976 by damming Beas River in the foothills of the Himalaya mountains on the northern edge of the Indo-Gangetic Plain. It is situated in Kangra District of Himachal Pradesh and declared as a wildlife sanctuary in 1983 (BirdLife International 2024a). At the outflow area of the Pong dam, water is dammed by the Shah Nehar Barrage at the border with Punjab. Marshland and reedbeds have been created by this barrage in the surrounding area. The reedbeds cover a smaller area on the northern side of the Shah Nehar Barrage Lake, but are more extensive at the south-eastern side. The whole habitat on the latter side is c.3 km in length and c.700 m in width, much of which is inaccessible, and is bounded by hill forest and village fields on other sides. It contains patches of reedbeds, marsh, and few small ponds along with scrub and dry grasses up to 1.5 m in height, along with a few small pastures and scattered trees.

On 14 July 2020, I was walking on a path near a *Typha* sp. patch [202], which measured c.300 X 100 sq. m (31.950°N, 75.924°E; 325 m asl), adjacent to a small pond which was bordered by reeds on one side, and dry grasses and scrub on other side. The *Typha* sp. patch was c.2 m in height and there were other similar patches nearby. I heard a bird vocalizing and immediately recognized that it was a Bristled Grassbird. As I had initially set-out to look for the species in this habitat, I had already made myself familiar with its vocalizations. The loud distinctive song consisted of paired syllables of somewhat metallic *chee-chew*. It was continuously vocalizing, but not visible as it was far from the edge of reeds. I waited for some time and then played its call by speaker for 20 sec. It immediately responded and

emerged from the reeds, perching on the dry grass in the scrub, in close proximity to me [203]. I took a few photographs which clearly showed the characteristic bristles at the base of its black bill. After some time, it flew to its previous spot and continued vocalizing. No further call playback was done on that day.

I revisited the place after a week, on 23 July, and found the bird at same location again. It was vocalizing from a prominent perch which was slightly higher than the average height of the reeds, at the edge of the reed patch. It was observed for about 15 min, during which it continued vocalizing with variable pauses. I decided to survey other reedbeds too for estimating its population by using call playback. After every 50 m of suitable habitat call playback was done for 30 sec and after a pause of three minutes it was repeated twice. If response was heard then no further call playback was used and if no response was heard, even after three call playbacks, I moved further. Responsible playback was used as recommended in Sibley (2011). Within a distance of 200 m from the initial site, I found two more birds. Other reedbeds which were accessible were surveyed too, but I couldn't find more birds. On 08 August 2020, I visited the area again. This time I found an immature bird, showing a prominent gape [204], accompanied with an adult in the tall (c.1 m) dry grass, very close to the reedbeds, where the initial sighting occurred. It was observed begging from the adult bird once. They remained visible in an open area for few minutes, but soon disappeared in the reedbeds. During the next two breeding seasons, I visited the site to find the birds again; however, no birds were located even after using call playback.

Discussion

The Bristled Grassbird is endemic to the Indian Subcontinent (Grimmett et al. 1998). In India, it is patchily distributed from Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Punjab eastward to West Bengal and Assam, and southward to Kerala and Tamil Nadu (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Krishnan 2021). In the north and north-east of its range, it is primarily reported to be breeding and it appears to winter in southern Indian states (Krishnan 2021). The breeding season of the species is apparently tied to the southwest monsoon in most of its range, which is mainly July to September (Krishnan 2021). In the breeding grounds, it sings loudly from an exposed perch and thus conspicuous; however, during winter, it is shy and difficult to observe (Sharma 2009). Due to this reason, there are very few wintering records of this species and its exact wintering range and migration pattern remains poorly unknown (Krishnan 2021).

The Bristled Grassbird was probably breeding at Pong Lake in July–August 2020, as there were multiple individuals holding territories that were reported on several occasions, the first and last reported sightings being 25 days apart. Moreover, an immature was also seen accompanied with an adult, late in the breeding season in early August. The species has not been reported in subsequent years at Pong Lake since these sightings in 2020; however, there were many inaccessible patches of suitable habitat at Pong Lake, where its presence cannot be ruled out. That said, the species is known to be erratic in the breeding season, and its presence at least in some of its breeding grounds is not regular (Krishnan 2021).

A record from Nawanagar in Haryana posted on Facebook (Das 2019), was incorrectly assumed to be from Himachal Pradesh due to its proximity to Baddi township in Himachal Pradesh. Based on this record, the species was included in



202. Habitat of the Bristled Grassbird near Shah Nehar Barrage, Pong Lake.



203. Bristled Grassbird seen near Shah Nehar Barrage, Pong Lake.



204. An immature Bristled Grassbird on 23 July 2020 showing a prominent gape.

All: C. Abhinav

the state checklist of Himachal Pradesh (Lakshminarasimha 2017). However, the precise location of this record (30.909°N, 76.805°E) was confirmed with the observer (Rajive Das, pers. comm., dated 20 November 2023) and was found to be actually in Haryana, more than 1 km beyond the Himachal Pradesh state border with Haryana. Dhadwal (2011) mentioned Bristled Grassbird in the checklist of Pong Lake. However, several species listed in this work, for e.g., Bristled Grassbird, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper *Calidris acuminata*, Grey-tailed Tattler *Tringa brevipes*, Long-billed Plover *Charadrius placidus*, and Oriental Hobby *Falco severus*, were not included in subsequent works of the author (Dhadwal & Bindu 2018; Dhadwal 2019), perhaps due to subsequent corrections of identification errors. The misidentified photos of Sharp-tailed Sandpiper and Grey-tailed Tattler in their work confirmed this suspicion. I could not find any other records of Bristled Grassbird from Himachal Pradesh (den

Besten 2004; Grimmett et al. 2011; eBird 2024; Pittie 2024). Thus, my sightings of Bristled Grassbird appear to be the first records of the species from Himachal Pradesh. However, this record is not unexpected, as the species has been previously reported further west from Pakistan (Roberts 1992; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), and has also been reported from the neighbouring states of Uttarakhand (Sharma 2009), Punjab, and Haryana in India (Grimmett et al. 2011). More recent records are also available on eBird for the aforementioned three states (eBird 2024). Recently, it has also been recorded in the Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir (Kapur 2022).

Bristled Grassbird is a globally threatened species with IUCN status as Vulnerable, owing to declining populations due to the loss and degradation of the tall and dense grassland, on which it is totally dependent (BirdLife International 2024b). Thus, information on new and potential breeding areas and breeding season records of this species is important. This sighting also highlights the need for stringent measures to protect these habitats from the human interference.

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A Booted Eagle *Hieraetus pennatus* unsuccessfully capturing a Fulvous Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna bicolor*

The Booted Eagle *Hieraetus pennatus* is an uncommon winter migrant to Assam, India (Choudhury 2000). I report an observation of a Booted Eagle's failed attempt to catch Fulvous Whistling Ducks *Dendrocygna bicolor*. On 18 February, 2023 while observing birds near Khanajan (26.128°N, 91.633°E), outside notified Deepor beel wildlife sanctuary, my attention was drawn towards some noise. It was a Booted Eagle, which tried to prey upon a Fulvous Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna bicolor*. The duck seems to have been drowned by the eagle, who appeared to lift off with the duck. Despite struggling for several minutes, the eagle was unsuccessful in taking the duck and abandoned its kill. Some Red-crested Pochards *Netta rufina* were not very far (within 10m) from the eagle but they remained indifferent to the attack while the entire flock of some 40 Fulvous Whistling Ducks panicked and took to wings.



205. Booted Eagle drowning a Fulvous Whistling Duck.

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Attempted kleptoparasitism by a Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus* from Tamil Nadu, India

Klepto-parasitism is a foraging tactic where an animal steals or robs food or prey from another animal (Rothschild & Clay 1957). It is a well-documented mode of foraging especially in species belonging to the families Accipitridae, Laridae and Corvidae (Brockmann & Barnard 1979; Iyengar 2008). Six species of harriers are found in India, including the Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus* which is known to prey on small birds (especially land birds), rodents and reptiles (Simmons 2001; Verma and Sharma 2013). Here, I report a case of a Pallid Harrier attempting to kleptoparasitize a Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* in a grassland in Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India.

On 20 December 2023, I was engaged in a routine harrier roost count in a grassland near Moolaikkadu in Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu (8.379°N, 77.673°E). At 1754 h, I observed an adult male Pallid Harrier chase and mob a Common Kestrel. The kestrel