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Aerial hunting and feeding by Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis* on Asian Palm Swift *Cypsiurus balasiensis* and House Swift *Apus nipalensis*

The Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis* (hereinafter, STEA) is a winter migrant throughout the Indian subcontinent. Most STEAs migrating to the sub-continent tend to be juveniles or sub-adults (Naoroji 2006). They prey on reptiles, mammals, and birds though most of the time during the winter they are observed scavenging (Naoroji 2006). This raptor is commonly sighted around Rani, Kamrup district of Assam, India during winter (November to April). On 04 January 2023, we observed a sub-adult STEA hunting Asian Palm Swifts *Cypsiurus balasiensis*. At 1056 h, four STEAs were soaring in the sky where 5–6 Asian Palm Swifts were also present. One of the STEAs gained height above the swifts and then dove to catch one swift on the first attempt itself. Seeing the successful hunt, rest of the sub-adult STEAs started chasing the first eagle. During the piracy attack, the eagle lost its kill in the air, but retrieved it in mid-air and ate it immediately.

In the next winter, on 14 December 2023, 1054 h, we observed a successful hunt by a STEA on an Asian Palm Swift followed by another successful hunt on a House Swift *Apus nipalensis*. In this case also, the hunter consumed both prey mid-air, dodging a conspecific and two Black-eared Kites *Milvus migrans*. STEAs are known for hunting across the steppe landscape. In this case we observed hunting and feeding high in the air (seemingly c.250 m). We could find only one reported incident of STEA hunting in mid-air at Eilat, Israel during raptor migration, in which the prey was a Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo* (Weiss & Yosef 2010). In our sightings, the prey items are comparatively small, agile, and probably novel prey item for STEAs.

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The Chinese Pond-Heron *Ardeola bacchus* in Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh, India

On 14 May 2024, at 1910 h, RB briefly saw a pond-heron *Ardeola* sp. c. 100 m away, flying from the Khoh riverbed and perch in a mango tree near his house, at Kashirampur Talla, Kotdwar, Pauri Garhwal District, Uttarakhand (29.739°N, 78.521°E; 388 m asl). In the fading light, the bird appeared similar to an Indian Pond-Heron *A. grayii* in breeding plumage, but considerably darker, almost black on the back and with a hint of purple colouration to its head. RB suspected the bird to be a Chinese Pond-Heron *A. bacchus*. On 16 May 2024, at 1030 h, while birding at another location along the Khoh River at Saneh park, near Saneh Forest Resthouse (29.690°N, 78.522°E; 331 m asl), RB came across a Chinese Pond-Heron, possibly the same individual he had seen two days ago, c.5 km north of this site [192]. Due to some disturbance caused by a group of people who were walking across the riverbed here, the bird took flight and flew across to the opposite side of the riverbank. As the border between the states of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand runs along the Khoh River at this location, the bird had actually flown across and into the state of Uttar Pradesh. On 17 May 2024, at 0810 h, a Chinese Pond Heron, also in breeding plumage, was seen and photographed at the same location in the Khoh riverbed by RB, MS and PK, both within the boundaries of Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh states. The bird was again photographed in flight crossing the river, and thus, the border between the states by PK [193].

The Chinese Pond-Heron breeds from Russian Far East, north-eastern and eastern China, and Japan south-west to Assam in north-eastern India and northern Myanmar; and it spends its non-breeding period in Andaman Islands, Malay Peninsula, Indochina, Borneo and Sumatra, and north-east to Ryukyu Islands in Japan (Martínez-Vilalta et al. 2020). In India, the species primarily occurs in north-eastern India and the Andaman Islands (Grimmett et al. 2011). Apart from its regular distribution range in the country, there are several scattered records of the species from West Bengal (Gupta 2017; eBird 2024), Tamil Nadu (Kaninde 2013), Kerala (Jacob 2021), Maharashtra (Taware et al. 2012), Gujarat (Parasharya 1983, 2004), Rajasthan (Poonia et al. 2013), and Odisha (Khopkar 2017). In South Asia, the species has been reported from Bhutan (Viswanathan 2016; eBird 2024), Bangladesh (Roddis & Loseby 2018), Nepal (eBird 2024), Sri Lanka (Roddis & Loseby 2020, 2021), and Pakistan (Khan et al. 2015). There are no known records of the species from the states of Uttarakhand (Mohan & Sondhi 2017; eBird 2024) and Uttar Pradesh (eBird 2024). The present sightings appear to be the first records of the species documented from the states of Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh.



192. Chinese Pond-Heron in the Khoh riverbed. Photo credits: Rajeev Bisht



193. Chinese Pond-Heron in flight. Photo credits: Prashant Kumar

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The Slender-billed Gull *Chroicocephalus genei* from Dal Lake, Jammu & Kashmir, India

On 24 March 2024, during an early morning birding event at 0930 h, along the banks of Dal Lake, Jammu & Kashmir, we spotted a Slender-billed Gull *Chroicocephalus genei* near foreshore road, Shalimar Ghat (34.141°N, 74.861°E), perching with a mixed flock of Brown-headed Gulls *C. brunnicephalus*, Whiskered Terns *Chlidonias hybrida*, and Mallards *Anas platyrhynchos* [194]. It was identified as a Slender-billed Gull by its elongated slender neck and distinct head shape, and shallow sloping forehead (Grant 1997; Olsen & Larsson 2004), slightly drooping slender dark red

bill, grey back and upper wings, white underparts, with rosy pink breast and belly in fresh plumage (Olsen & Larsson 2004; Burger et al. 2020). There was possibly a second individual as well [195], based on the analysis of our photographs.

The Slender-billed Gull is a medium-sized seabird species with scattered coastal distribution from Senegal to India through the Mediterranean, Black and Red seas, the Persian Gulf, Kazakhstan, and some inland waters of Southwest Asia (Olsen & Larsson 2004; Burger et al. 2020). In India, it is considered a regular along the western coast with several records from wetlands of northern India (Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; eBird 2024) such as Pong (e.g., Abhinav 2019) and Harike (e.g., Satose 2023). There are no previous records of Slender-billed Gull from Jammu & Kashmir (Kichloo et al. 2024) and this appears to be the first record of this species from the region.



194. Slender-billed Gull at Dal Lake showing clean white head, thin black bill and sloping forehead.



195. The second individual, possibly a Slender-billed Gull with its head tucked in.

We are grateful to Intesar Suhail for helping us correctly identify the species. We are thankful to Shakeel Shah who also photographed, presumably the same individual, the next day (Shah 2024), got them identified, and posted it on Facebook.

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