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Taxonomy update
Lesser Grey Shrike



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PHOTOGRAPHER: Manjula Mathur

BACK COVER: Pale-billed Parrotbill from Mishmi Hills, Arunachal Pradesh

PHOTOGRAPHER: C. Abhinav

Amur Falcons *Falco amurensis* at Umrongso, Assam: Estimating roost size and monitoring migratory dates

Anwaruddin Choudhury & Fizala Tayebulla

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Abstract: The Amur Falcon *Falco amurensis* is a passage migrant through India. These migrating falcons, while passing through north-eastern India, congregate and roost at some select sites in Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Mizoram, often exceeding a hundred thousand birds. The present study covered such a roost site in Umrongso, Dima Hasao District, Assam during the autumn of 2022. Four enumerators, including two trained assistants from the village, independently estimated the flock size on each day at dusk and the lowest estimate was taken as the minimum number of roosting falcons. The falcons were first seen on 04 October and by 13 December all birds had departed making the total migratory season of 70 days, of which 40 days had more than 1,000 falcons. The second and third week of November had the peak count with more than a hundred thousand birds roosting. The number of falcons increased every day till 07 November when the estimated number reached a staggering figure of more than two hundred thousand birds. This was the first such exercise on these falcons at Umrongso. With local assistance, it can be replicated at other roosting sites. Though illegal killing of Amur Falcons has been a serious problem in the past, we did not record any direct killing at this site.

Introduction

Amur Falcons [182, 183] breed in the basin of the Amur River in eastern Siberia, eastern Mongolia and north-eastern China, and migrate to eastern and southern Africa for their non-breeding season (Dixon et al. 2011; Orta et al. 2024). They regularly undertake trans-continental journeys across the Arabian Sea, which are, by far, the longest migration flights across a seascape amongst all birds of prey (Meyburg et al. 2017). They occur in large numbers in Assam and elsewhere in north-eastern India (hereinafter, NE India) chiefly during autumn in October–December, while reduced numbers pass through during the spring migration in March–April (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Orta et al. 2024). Almost its entire global population is believed to pass through NE India to their non-breeding destination in the southern Africa.

During migration, Amur Falcons pass through all the states in NE India as well as peninsular India and sporadically through northern parts of the country (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; eBird 2024; Orta et al. 2024). However, they are known to aggregate and roost in several hundred thousand in certain sites in NE India (Choudhury et al. 2020), feeding largely on winged termites (Kaur et al. 2024). During their migration, the falcons rest and roost at some select sites with suitable vegetation and abundant food. In NE India, there are a few such sites in Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Assam where they stop over in large numbers. A large number of hunters used to catch or kill the falcons in the past, but conservation interventions have largely contained this activity now (Dalvi et al. 2013; Mero & Mishra 2022).

In Assam, though Amur Falcons can be seen in most districts, there are some specific sites where they frequent to roost in very large numbers. The currently known mass roosts are in Habang (or Umwang) and Umru II (or Umrukhuti, hereinafter, Umru), both in West Karbi Anglong District and Umrongso (also spelt as Umrangsu) in Dima Hasao District (Choudhury et al. 2020). However, the falcons have now abandoned Habang due to

human disturbances. Conservation of such roost sites, where the falcon flocks refuel before they resume their journey, has a great significance for a flyway level conservation of this species.

In this study, our main objective was to monitor the arrival and departure dates of Amur Falcons in autumn and estimate their daily roosting population at a single site, Umrongso. We



182. A male Amur Falcon.



183. A female Amur Falcon.

Both: Anwaruddin Choudhury

also aimed to evaluate the practicality of this study-design to consider its scalability to other sites, and across multiple years, by deploying trained assistants from the village, with considerations to buffer the error margins. Such coordinated annual counts at carefully chosen migratory funnels are necessary for conservation planning, and to monitor the status of the population of a species that is vulnerable to large-scale illegal killing. Long-term monitoring would also help in understanding any changes in arrival or departure dates, if any, in response to climate change.

Study Area

Umrongso is located in the Dima Hasao (formerly known as North Cachar Hills) District of Assam (Fig. 1). The area is part of a plateau at an elevation of 640 m asl at Umrongso; the roost site is at 610 m. The topography of Umrongso is of rolling hills with a large reservoir formed by the dam on the Umrong River. The roost is on the south-eastern side of the reservoir near New Tumbung village (25.506°N, 92.712°E) (Fig. 2).

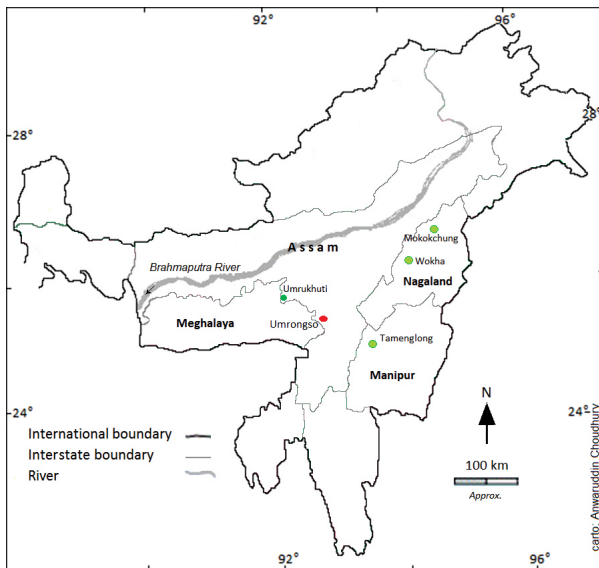


Fig. 1. Location of Umrongso in relation to other roosting sites in north-eastern India.

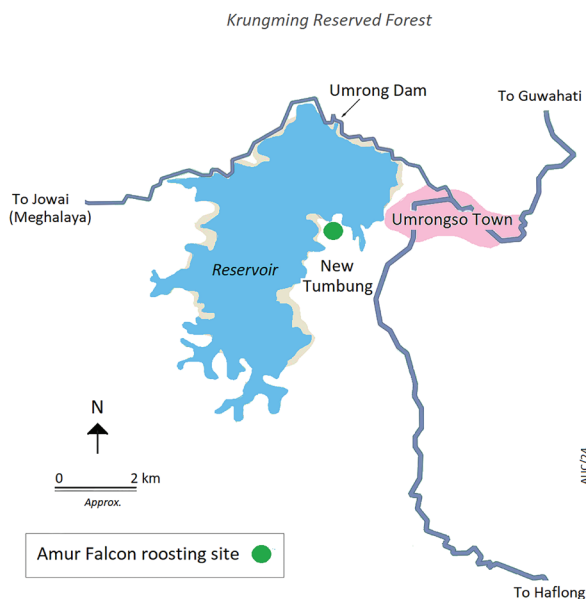


Fig. 2. Roost site at Umrongso. Map: Anwaruddin Choudhury

The natural vegetation of the area in general is tropical deciduous forests with bamboo brakes. There are also meadows with short grasses, cultivations and farms, hutments, and areas filled with sparse trees and shrubs. The banks of the reservoir near New Tumbung are planted with Khasi pine *Pinus kesiya* (old plantations) while there is plenty of oak *Quercus* sp. trees, young and old. Large parts of the grassy areas are submerged when the reservoir is at its full capacity [184].



184. Umrong Plateau with the roosting site. The grassy areas are submerged when the reservoir is full.

Methods

The study was done during October–December 2022 coinciding with the full migratory season in Umrongso; our knowledge from our previous studies elsewhere helped us select these months. AUC was present on 12 days while FT was present on all the days from 03 October to 06 December. We trained two assistants from the village during the same season to count falcon flocks, and they were also present on all the days with FT. An additional trained assistant also participated in the count during the peak 12 days. All of them had participated in counting and estimation as enumerators. The first three days of October, including a few days of estimation when there were less falcons, was a reconnaissance phase as the entire area was traversed by the team to identify vantage positions from where maximum number of birds could be visible. Each enumerator had a pair of binoculars while the authors also used cameras.

The flock size estimation was done by counting and estimating the roosting as well as in-flight birds, every day. The congregations were estimated when they arrived in large flocks and circled overhead for several minutes in late afternoon and evening to roost. The falcons did not all land together at a single area, but perched on trees in loose groups. All estimations were made in the evening, just before dusk, starting our observations at 1430 h and continuing till 1730 h [185]. Though observations were also carried out in the morning (0500–0930 h), we did not use those counts for estimating the congregation as the bulk of the roosting birds departed before or at dawn.

Flock size was estimated using a combination of counting and extrapolation. Counting of a part of the total mass of birds in view was done, and then extrapolated for the entire flock. Blocks of 100 or more, even a thousand are generally used for birds in flight or at roost. The first block is counted one by one, and the mental image of this first block is then used to estimate the number of similar blocks in the flock. For cross-checking our mental images, several photos were taken in the field and used to calibrate our estimates. After initial calibration, each enumerator conducted this process till mid-December. The daily compilation was done by the authors who were also enumerators. The lower



Anwaruddin Choudhury

185. Amur Falcons circling overhead before roosting at Umrongso.

range of daily estimates amongst all enumerators were accepted as the day's tally.

In the absence of another baseline for estimation, our counting methods, however stringent, is not devoid of bias. We also did not have any means to estimate this bias. Hence, for analysis and presentation, we have translated the daily total counts into count bands with multiples of tens as the extreme values. Hence the smaller count bands are tighter, while the larger bands are sparse; our working assumption being that counts of smaller flocks have smaller error margins and vice versa. We feel, this level of caution is justified as we envisage this method to be replicated across sites, with different assistants, who may have different biases, and might encounter different field conditions.

Results & Discussion

The falcons started arriving on 04 October and by 13 of December all the birds had gone (Table 1). Hence, the total stay of falcons at this site is about 70 days. From 15 October, for the next 40 days, there were at least 1,000 falcons roosting at the site. The number of falcons increased every day till 07 November when the estimated number was highest, exceeding two hundred thousand. The congregation was the maximum for a period of two weeks, starting from 04 November. Estimation of counts was relatively easier till 18 October but then became increasingly difficult as numbers swelled to tens of thousands. Though it is not possible to provide an absolute number of falcons that use this roosting site, mainly due to the arrival and departure of flocks, it is clear that the site hosts more than two hundred thousand birds.

It is possible to estimate the numbers of falcons arriving to roost, as they circle overhead, for some time, before they finally land for roosting in the evening. Birds did not arrive at the same time, but streamed in singly, in twos, threes, small to medium flocks, and at the end, a continuous stream. In fact, it appeared that some birds continued to arrive even after sunset, which we could not count, but we could hear. This build-up provided some opportunity to practice counting, every day, as numbers increased gradually. However, to count this number of birds reasonably accurately, in flight, over a shorter time, with worsening light conditions, was quite daunting. It is possible that counts might be so difficult to perform accurately

Table 1. Counts of Amur Falcons rounded to the nearest power of ten.
[†] Probably was present, but not seen by us

Dates	Counts
3 October 2024	0 [†]
4 October 2024	< 100
5–14 October 2024	100–1,000
15–17 October 2024	1,000–10,000
18 October–03 November 2024	10,000–1,00,000
04–17 November 2024	> 1,00,000
18–26 November 2024	10,000–1,00,000
27–30 November 2024	1,000–10,000
01–04 December 2024	100–1,000
05–12 December 2024	< 100
13–14 December 2024	0 [†]
15 December 2024	0

that they would have large errors. However, our counts were monotonically increasing till the peak count on 07 November, and then monotonically decreasing thereafter. Hence, this pattern, without wild fluctuations, provides some support that we are reasonably accurate in what we are claiming in Table 1. Fluctuations in numbers are to be expected, based on local weather conditions, but one would still expect a single major peak. Our response to take the least count may have meant we undercounted the flock size, but our method to classify the large counts as large bands provides some resilience against errors as each day's count is essentially acting as a replicate. However, it may be possible in the future to calibrate our counting methods with more trained observers, counting the same section on the same evening, and compare how their totals correspond.

The arrival and departure of Amur Falcons at Umrongso in 2022 was like the trend observed at Umru during 2017–2019 (Choudhury et al. 2020). At both sites, the first birds arrived around the first week of October and by the first fortnight of December, all the birds had gone. The peak counts of the congregation, which was over a hundred thousand, was during the second and third week of November. As the two sites are close to each other, it is likely that the entire population, before dispersing towards peninsular India, was using these two sites as their stop over.

The falcons usually roosted in oak *Quercus* sp. trees but when the numbers reached a hundred thousand some of the other trees including pine trees were utilized. However, in Umru, the birds used to roost in bamboo brakes and rarely in shrubs. Hence, their existence in Umrongso probably depends on continued presence of oak trees. Since the site is not part of any protected area or reserved forest, there is always a possibility that a few oak trees may get removed. While dispersing from their night roost in the morning, they perch in trees and high electric wires/power lines, and continue to do so throughout the day [186]. However, we are certain that they do not use these artificial structures for night roosting. An interesting observation was that of small gatherings of falcons on the ground at the edge of water in the morning [187], a behaviour not seen during three years of monitoring at Umru (Choudhury et al. 2020).



186. Amur Falcons foraging and resting during the day near Umrangso.



Both: Anwaruddin Choudhury

187. Some falcons were observed at the edge of the water of the reservoir in the morning.

During our study, there was no confirmed case of illegal killing in the area. However, a few dead birds were found, which could have been killed by predators as indicated by the condition of carcasses. It is possible that a few might have been killed or injured by slingshots elsewhere but not near the roost.

Illegal killing of Amur Falcons used to be an annual phenomenon in Umrangso until 2021. Every year local people had waited for the migratory season, when they got an opportunity to kill the falcons in hundreds for local consumption, and for sale in nearby markets. They had used both guns and slingshots. The last large-scale illegal killing took place in 2015 when the State Forest Department confiscated about a hundred birds that had been killed or trapped by hunters (AUC pers. obs.). The killing, however, was drastically reduced when AUC, in his official capacity as the Commissioner of Hill Areas, in association with the State Forest Department carried out awareness programmes in 2016. In the same year, the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council also started celebrating 'Falcon Festival' for awareness raising and popularising the area as a tourist destination. Subsequently, a few forest staff were posted for the protection of the falcons during the migratory season. However, it was in 2022 that the enforcement was most effective. The Deputy Commissioner & District Magistrate, the local Member of the Autonomous Council, the Divisional Forest Officer, the Executive Magistrate and the village headman actively participated in the

awareness programmes.

A large number of tourists, mostly local, gather in the evening to see the arrival of roosting birds. The number of visitors is likely to increase in the future, which might disturb the falcons, unless regulated. Tourists make a lot of noise, and many go in motorcycles through the roosting site, which disturbs the birds.

Conclusion

This study has provided vital information on migration timing and approximate numbers of Amur Falcons at Umrangso. Similar systematic observation and estimation should be done for other large roost sites in NE India. Although the methods have limitations, it still provides a decent estimate of the maximum population at the site and the key periods of peak activity and is replicable across multiple sites with some support from local NGOs and forest departments.

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Taxonomic updates to the checklists of the birds of India and the South Asian region—2025

Praveen J & Rajah Jayapal

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Introduction

This is the tenth annual taxonomic update to the checklists of birds of India, the Indian Subcontinent, and the South Asian¹ region after Praveen et al. (2016). Since our last update (Praveen & Jayapal 2024), there have been single revisions each in the IOC taxonomy (Gill et al. 2024) and the eBird/Clements (Clements et al. 2024). However, after the last revision, we decided to align more closely with eBird/Clements in both taxonomy and nomenclature, and IOC updates, therefore, do not significantly impact our checklist. In this version, we have updated the extended fields of the checklists in accordance with the taxonomic revisions effected here. We also revisit the definitions of ‘vagrant’ and ‘historical record’ to make them more contemporary for our user clientele and we introduce the practice of summarizing the bird statistics for India in terms of number of ‘regular’ species as separate from number of vagrants and historical records².

Methodology

In this update, we complete our transition to the eBird/Clements backbone taxonomy and we shall no longer be following IOC updates. However, there still are discrepancies in the ‘species authority’ field between our Checklist and eBird/Clements (see Praveen J & Jayapal 2023; Praveen & Jayapal 2024); in each case, we have reviewed the currently available evidences that tend to support our claims and we have also communicated the same to eBird/Clements for their consideration. In continuation of our core language policy, we retain the Oxford spellings for variously spelt English words (like grey versus gray, and colour versus color) in the English names of birds (*contra* eBird/Clements). We also reviewed the use of eponyms in English names and have made a partial move to non-eponym names where they were readily available in eBird/Clements (e.g., Tawny Lark for Sykes’s Lark *Galerida deva*). We also embrace two popular group-names from eBird/Clements; ‘Bluetail’ for some *Tarsiger* spp., and ‘Cupwing’ for *Pnoepyga* spp.

With this update we make two important changes to our existing definitions of ‘historical’ and ‘vagrant’ species for the India Checklist.

HISTORICAL: We had originally defined it as “a native species, whether resident (e.g., Himalayan Quail *Ophrysia superciliosa*), or migratory (e.g., Siberian Crane *Leucogeranus leucogeranus*), which has not been reliably reported from India since 01 January,

1950” (Praveen et al. 2019). The cut-off period for considering a record as ‘historical’ is now revised as 01 January, 2000.

Rationale for change: The previous threshold of the year 1950 (immediately after India’s independence) has outlived its purpose, as a defining moment for modern Indian ornithology, with the exponential growth of birding in the country as a serious activity over the last two decades and consequent spurt in species discoveries and range expansion reports. It is, therefore, prudent to have a closer cut-off for this definition and the year 2000 is selected as it marks an important transitional period for Indian ornithology, with the publication of two modern field guides (Grimmett et al. 1998; Kazmierczak 2000), a modern checklist (Manakadan & Pittie 2001), as well as the launch of a number of Internet-based mailing lists for birders. Hence, it is befitting that the last 25 years of the new millennium be considered ‘current’ for Indian ornithology and henceforth, all exclusive records that antedate 2000 be treated as historical.

VAGRANT: Originally defined as “an extralimital species, migratory or otherwise, that has been reliably reported fewer than ten times from India” (Praveen et al. 2019), we now re-define ‘vagrant’ as an extralimital migratory species that has been reliably reported in fewer than *ten* years since 01 January 2000. When a species transitions to the vagrant category or vice versa, we shall review the actual reports. This is to eliminate special situations where the same report in consecutive years is incorrectly counted as two, or reports from two different migratory seasons in the same year is incorrectly treated as one.

Rationale for change: The current definition of a vagrant is found to be seriously inadequate, as ten records seem to be so low a threshold for many true vagrants to be easily mislabelled as ‘regular’ in Indian avifauna. With rapid growth in the number of competent birders and bird photographers in recent years and the vast expanse of the geographical area of the country, more and more observations of vagrancy and eruption in otherwise extralimital species are being documented, with number of reports quickly reaching ten—the upper limit for a vagrant to be elevated to ‘regular’. Sometimes, it is also a challenging task to corroborate how ‘independent’ multiple reports of a vagrant species are from a region or landscape. Considering these factors, we move away from a threshold that counts ‘number of independent records’ of the species to that of ‘number of years’ during which the species has been reported. It is to be noted that the base year for vagrant report (i.e., 2000) would also move up a year with each annual update being published.

¹ South Asia additionally includes Afghanistan and Chagos Archipelago.

² The changes in taxonomy shall be effectuated from the first issue of the 21st volume of *Indian BIRDS*

Table 1. Taxonomic updates and nomenclatural changes to the checklists of the birds of India, and the South Asian region

S. No.	English name	Scientific name	Notes on taxonomy / nomenclature	Type of change
1	Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoo	<i>Chalcites basalis</i> (Horsfield, 1821)	Genus <i>Chalcites</i> split from <i>Chrysococcyx</i> based on the recommendations of Working Group Avian Checklists (hereinafter, WGAC) of the International Ornithological Union.	Genus split
2	Frogmouths	Podargiformes	Order Podargiformes split from Caprimulgiformes based on recommendations of Chen et al. (2019) and WGAC	Order split
3	Swifts	Apodiformes	Order Apodiformes split from Caprimulgiformes based on recommendations of Chen et al. (2019) and WGAC	Order split
4	Demoiselle Crane	<i>Anthropoides virgo</i> (Linnaeus, 1758)	Genus <i>Anthropoides</i> split from <i>Grus</i> based on recommendations from Krajewski et al. (2010) and WGAC.	Genus split
5	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Thinornis dubius</i> (Scopoli, 1786)	Genus <i>Thinornis</i> split from <i>Charadrius</i> based on recommendations from Černý & Natale (2022) and WGAC.	Genus split
6	Long-billed Plover	<i>Thinornis placidus</i> (Gray & Gray, 1863)	As above.	Genus split
7	Mongolian Gull	<i>Larus mongolicus</i> Sushkin, 1925	Species split from <i>Larus smithsonianus</i> sensu lato following recommendations of WGAC.	Extralimital split
8	Black Bittern	<i>Botaurus flavicollis</i> (Latham, 1790)	Genus <i>Ixobrychus</i> lumped with <i>Botaurus</i> based on the recommendations of Chesser et al. (2024) and WGAC.	Genus lump
9	Cinnamon Bittern	<i>Botaurus cinnamomeus</i> (Gmelin, 1789)	As above.	Genus lump
10	Schrenck's Bittern	<i>Botaurus eurhythmus</i> (Swinhoe, 1873)	As above.	Genus lump
11	Little Bittern	<i>Botaurus minutus</i> (Linnaeus, 1766)	As above.	Genus lump
12	Yellow Bittern	<i>Botaurus sinensis</i> (Gmelin, 1789)	As above.	Genus lump
13	Western Cattle-Egret	<i>Ardea ibis</i> Linnaeus, 1758	Genus <i>Bubulcus</i> lumped with <i>Ardea</i> based on the recommendations of Chesser et al. (2024) and WGAC.	Genus lump
14	Eastern Cattle-Egret	<i>Ardea coromanda</i> (Boddaert, 1783)	As above.	Genus lump
15	Crested Goshawk	<i>Lophospiza trivirgata</i> (Temminck, 1824)	Genus <i>Lophospiza</i> split from <i>Accipiter</i> based on recommendations from Catanach et al. (2024) and WGAC.	Genus split
16	Besra	<i>Tachyspiza virgata</i> (Temminck, 1822)	Genus <i>Tachyspiza</i> split from <i>Accipiter</i> based on recommendations from Catanach et al. (2024) and WGAC.	Genus split
17	Japanese Sparrowhawk	<i>Tachyspiza gularis</i> (Temminck & Schlegel, 1844)	As above.	Genus split
18	Shikra	<i>Tachyspiza badia</i> (Gmelin, 1788)	As above.	Genus split
19	Nicobar Sparrowhawk	<i>Tachyspiza butleri</i> (Gurney, 1898)	As above.	Genus split
20	Levant Sparrowhawk	<i>Tachyspiza brevipes</i> (Severtsov, 1850)	As above.	Genus split
21	Chinese Sparrowhawk	<i>Tachyspiza soloensis</i> (Horsfield, 1821)	As above.	Genus split
22	Northern Goshawk	<i>Astur gentilis</i> (Linnaeus, 1758)	Genus <i>Astur</i> split from <i>Accipiter</i> based on recommendations from Catanach et al. (2024) and WGAC.	Genus split
23	Eastern Barn Owl	<i>Tyto javanica</i> (Gmelin, 1788)	Species split from Barn Owl <i>Tyto alba</i> sensu lato, following recommendations of WGAC with a new English name	Extralimital split & English name change
24	Indian Cuckooshrike	<i>Coracina macei</i> (Lesson, 1831)	New English name for <i>Coracina macei</i> sensu stricto following the split of Oriental Cuckooshrike <i>C. javensis</i> from Large Cuckooshrike <i>C. macei</i> sensu lato following recommendations of WGAC.	English name change

Table 1. Taxonomic updates and nomenclatural changes to the checklists of the birds of India, and the South Asian region

S. No.	English name	Scientific name	Notes on taxonomy / nomenclature	Type of change
25	Oriental Cuckooshrike	<i>Coracina javensis</i> (Horsfield, 1821)	Species split from Large Cuckooshrike <i>Coracina macei</i> sensu lato, following recommendations of WGAC.	Species split & English name change
26	Spotted Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga hemispila</i> Vigors, 1831	Species split from Spotted Nutcracker <i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i> sensu lato following recommendations of WGAC.	Extralimital split
27	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i> (Linnaeus, 1758)	Genus <i>Coloeus</i> split from <i>Corvus</i> based on the recommendations of WGAC.	Genus split
28	Jerdon's Bushlark	<i>Plocealauda affinis</i> (Blyth, 1845)	Genus <i>Plocealauda</i> split from <i>Mirafra</i> based on the recommendations of Alström et al. (2023) and WGAC.	Genus split
29	Indian Bushlark	<i>Plocealauda erythroptera</i> (Blyth, 1845)	As above.	Genus split
30	Bengal Bushlark	<i>Plocealauda assamica</i> (Horsfield, 1840)	As above.	Genus split
31	Pacific Swallow	<i>Hirundo javanica</i> Sparrman, 1789	Species split from <i>Hirundo tahitica</i> sensu lato following recommendations of WGAC.	Extralimital split
32	European Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis rufula</i> (Temminck, 1835)	Species split from Red-rumped Swallow <i>Cecropis daurica</i> sensu lato following recommendations of WGAC.	Species split & English name change
33	Eastern Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i> (Laxmann, 1769)	New English name for <i>Cecropis daurica</i> sensu stricto following the split of European Red-rumped Swallow <i>C. rufula</i> and the lump of Striated Swallow <i>C. striolata</i> following recommendations of WGAC.	Species lump & English name change
34	Nicobar Bulbul	<i>Hypsipetes nicobariensis</i> Moore, 1854	Genus change from <i>Ixos</i> to <i>Hypsipetes</i> following recommendations of Goyal et al. (2023) and WGAC.	Genus change
35	Great Parrotbill	<i>Paradoxornis aemodius</i> (Hodgson, 1841)	Genus lump of <i>Cholornis</i> with <i>Paradoxornis</i> based on the recommendations of Cai et al. (2019) and WGAC.	Genus change
36	Brown Parrotbill	<i>Paradoxornis unicolor</i> (Hodgson, 1843)	Genus lump of <i>Cholornis</i> with <i>Paradoxornis</i> based on the recommendations of Cai et al. (2019) and WGAC.	Genus lump
37	Grey-headed Parrotbill	<i>Paradoxornis gularis</i> Gray, 1845	Genus lump of <i>Psittiparus</i> with <i>Paradoxornis</i> based on the recommendations of Cai et al. (2019) and WGAC.	Genus lump
38	White-breasted Parrotbill	<i>Paradoxornis ruficeps</i> Blyth, 1842	As above.	Genus lump
39	Rufous-headed Parrotbill	<i>Paradoxornis bakeri</i> (Hartert, 1900)	As above.	Genus lump
40	Rufous-fronted Babbler	<i>Cyanoderma rufifrons</i> (Hume, 1873)	Species lump of Buff-chested Babbler <i>Cyanoderma ambiguum</i> with <i>Cyanoderma rufifrons</i> EL following recommendations of WGAC with a new English name.	Extralimital lump & English name change.
41	Spotted Creepers	Salpornithidae	Family split from Certhiidae (Tree-creepers) following recommendations of Oliveros et al. (2019), Imfeld et al. (2024), and WGAC.	Family split
42	Sri Lanka Shama	<i>Copsychus leggei</i> (Whistler, 1941)	Split from White-rumped Shama <i>Copsychus malabaricus</i> sensu lato, following recommendations of WGAC.	Species split
43	Hainan Blue Flycatcher	<i>Cyornis hainanus</i> (Ogilvie-Grant, 1900)	Regionally occurring subspecies <i>diallaemus</i> moved from Blue-throated Flycatcher <i>Cyornis rubeculoides</i> to Hainan Blue Flycatcher <i>Cyornis hainanus</i> following recommendations of Singh et al. (2020) and WGAC.	Species change
44	Thick-billed Flowerpecker	<i>Pachyglossa agilis</i> (Tickell, 1833)	Genus <i>Pachyglossa</i> split from <i>Dicaeum</i> based on the recommendations of Nyári et al. (2009) and WGAC.	Genus split
45	Yellow-vented Flowerpecker	<i>Pachyglossa chrysorrhea</i> (Temminck, 1829)	As above.	Genus split
46	Yellow-bellied Flowerpecker	<i>Pachyglossa melanozantha</i> Blyth, 1843	As above.	Genus split
47	Legge's Flowerpecker	<i>Pachyglossa vincens</i> (Sclater, 1872)	As above.	Genus split

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S. No.	English name	Scientific name	Notes on taxonomy / nomenclature	Type of change
48	Buff-bellied Pipit	<i>Anthus japonicus</i> Temminck & Schlegel, 1847	Species split from American Pipit <i>Anthus rubescens</i> sensu lato following recommendations of WGAC.	Extralimital split
49	Grey-crowned Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis caniceps</i> Vigors, 1831	Species split from European Goldfinch <i>Carduelis carduelis</i> sensu lato following recommendations of WGAC with a new English name.	Extralimital split & English name change

Table 2. A taxonomic summary of the checklists of South Asia, Indian Subcontinent, and India

Region	South Asia	Indian Subcontinent	India		
			Regular	Vagrant	Historical
Order	28	28	27	1	0
Family	117	117	111	4	1
Genus	520	514	465	28	8
Species	1467	1450	1210	134	29

Another major change with this update pertains to the communication of bird statistics. We, no longer, state the total number of bird species reported from India. Henceforth, we are inclined to report the total number of the 'regularly occurring' species, as separate from number of vagrants and historical species. This is important, particularly for conservation plans, policy decisions, database management, and scientific analyses to not inflate the country's avifauna, as 'vagrant' and 'historical' taxa do not contribute much to the biodiversity value of the country and they are disproportionately reported more in birds, compared to other taxa owing to the size of the active birding community. We believe that this practice would also impart some stability in bird statistics of the country. Currently, this change is done only for the India Checklist, where these categories are explicitly defined and classified, and not for the Indian Subcontinent or South Asia lists. We shall also publish different categories of the India Checklist as text including a brief summary of the results to enable web crawlers and database managers to obtain this information quickly.

Results

In this update (Table 1), three new species have been added to the checklists following taxonomic splits in the regionally occurring forms of species. One regionally occurring species has been lumped with another; six changes involve extralimital splits that result in a change in the specific epithet of the regional form; and one is an extralimital lump. In addition, genera have changed for 33 species, including both lumps and splits. We have also made one family level split and two order level splits. As stated above, with this update, the taxonomic sequence and scientific names of birds in both, the India Checklist, and eBird/Clements have been completely aligned with each other. However, there are still seven instances wherein the year of description in 'species authority' field in the India Checklist differs from eBird/Clements (see Praveen J & Jayapal 2023; Praveen & Jayapal 2024). We found that the data in the India Checklist are in order in line with the rules of the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature (ICZN) and we have communicated the same to eBird/Clements for their consideration.

We continue to use English names that maintain a nomenclature that is largely stable and familiar to the local birding community, yet alive to current global usage and taxonomy. Primary English names of seven species have been changed due to taxonomic rearrangements. In addition, the English names of an additional 32 species have now been aligned with eBird/Clements.

With all these changes and updates, the total number of bird species now stands at 1,467 for South Asia and 1,450 for the Indian Subcontinent; for India, it is 1,210 regularly occurring species with 134 vagrants and 29 historical species in addition (Table 2).


List of Historical Species with year of last report in parentheses:

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor* (1897), Pink-headed Duck* *Rhodonessa caryophyllacea* (1935), Green Peafowl* *Pavo muticus* (1928), Japanese Quail *Coturnix japonica* (1923), Himalayan Quail* *Ophrysia superciliosa* (1876), Manipur Bush Quail* *Perdica manipurensis* (1932), Pallas's Sandgrouse *Syrhaptes paradoxus* (1924), Pin-tailed Sandgrouse *Pterocles alchata* (1902), European Turtle-Dove *Streptopelia turtur* (1982), Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax* (1910), Red Kite *Milvus milvus* (1994), Masked Finfoot* *Heliopais personatus* (1910), Great Snipe *Gallinago media* (1933), Swinhoe's Snipe *Gallinago megala* (1912), White-faced Storm-Petrel *Pelagodroma marina* (1964), Black-bellied Storm-Petrel *Fregetta tropica* (1960), Barau's Petrel *Pterodroma barau* (1985), Rufous-backed Dwarf-Kingfisher *Ceyx rufidorsa* (1909), Red-footed Falcon *Falco vespertinus* (1880), Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus* (1936), Azure Tit *Cyanistes cyanus* (1930), Clicking Shrike-Babbler *Pteruthius intermedius* (1950), Collared Myna *Acridotheres albocinctus* (1945), Chinese Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus yunnanensis* (1951), Claudia's Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus claudiae* (1950), Manchurian Bush Warbler *Horornis canturians* (1955), Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus* (1990), White's Thrush *Zoothera aurea* (1987), and Sillem's Rosefinch *Carpodacus sillemi* (1929). Of these 29 species, five resident species are marked with an asterisk (*), signifying possible local extinctions (SolB 2023).

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A Lesser Grey Shrike *Lanius minor* from Sri Lanka

On 08 June 2024, AA observed and photographed a pale grey-coloured shrike *Lanius* sp. at Kumana National Park (6.529°N, 81.709°E; 4m asl) in southern Sri Lanka [188–189]. The individual was initially suspected to be a possible Great Grey Shrike *L. excubitor*. However, the photos were sent to MK, who identified that the bird was, in fact, a Lesser Grey Shrike *L. minor*, a species new to Sri Lanka. The bird had a prominent black mask extending over the forehead and grey extending uniformly from the crown up to the upper tail coverts. It showed a black tail with white restricted to the outer most feathers and black wings with a prominent white patch at the primary bases. The throat was white, except the part closest to the bill base which was stained pale brown (possibly as a result of feeding or other external factors), and the underparts were pale pinkish brown. The bill was black, feet dark greyish black, and iris dark brown. The broad black mask extending over the forehead, the compact structure with a relatively shorter tail, and the pinkish-brown stained underparts were the features that identified the bird as Lesser Grey Shrike and distinguished it from Great Grey Shrike. The plumage features also suggested the individual to be an adult and presumably a male (Lefrank & Woodcock 2023).

The bird was first observed at 0646 h, on a short *Salvadora persica* bush beside a dirt road, inside the park. It usually perched about one meter above the ground and frequently moved between several small bushes in the area. It was observed for c.90 min and would regularly swoop down to the ground to catch prey, mostly small invertebrates. That evening, the bird was seen briefly, but was found at the same location the next morning, on 09 June 2024. It was observed again actively foraging for an hour and showing the same feeding behaviour. It was not seen thereafter.

Lesser Grey Shrike is a long-distance migratory species breeding from western Europe to Mongolia and western China, and the entire population spends their non-breeding period in southern Africa (Yosef & ISWG 2020; Lefrank & Woodcock 2023). In South Asia, it has been scarcely recorded from Ladakh, northern India and Balochistan, Pakistan (Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Interestingly, another record of a Lesser Grey Shrike was reported from Kole, Enamavu, Thrissur District, Kerala, India on 04 June 2024, a few days before our sighting in Sri Lanka (Kerala Rarities (Group Account) 2024; Pmk 2024). Considering the date of observation, it is possible that this could be an individual that spent the last months in southern Sri Lanka and was on its northward migration. There is also a possibility that both birds may have been on their northward migration from southern Africa and were deflected east to southern Sri Lanka and southwestern India, possibly due to the prevailing wind conditions in the north-western Indian Ocean owing to the tropical cyclonic storm Cyclone Remal which formed in late May 2024 (Anonymous 2024).

Five species of shrikes *Lanius* spp. have been reported in Sri Lanka namely, Long-tailed Shrike *L. schach*, Brown Shrike *L. cristatus*, Bay-backed Shrike *L. vittatus*, Great Grey Shrike and Red-backed Shrike *L. collurio*. Of these, the first is a breeding resident in the northern dry zone of Sri Lanka, and the rest are



188. Lesser Grey Shrike at Kumana National Park, Sri Lanka.



189. Lesser Grey Shrike at Kumana National Park, Sri Lanka.

Both: Ashok Amaraseena

migrants, with the last three being vagrants (Warakagoda et al. 2012; Darshana 2020). Lesser Grey Shrike is the sixth *Lanius* spp. addition for Sri Lanka.

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Status of the Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis* in Arunachal Pradesh

On 26 April 2019, I was birding with a group on the Mandala-Dirang Road in West Kameng, Arunachal Pradesh. It was a cloudy morning with light rain. At 0940 h, I was exploring a trail a little away from my group. The trail had *Rhododendron sp.* forest on one side and a grassy pasture on the other. The grassy area had stray cattle grazing and a few Russet Sparrows *Passer cinnamomeus* drinking from a puddle. I accidentally startled a drab brown bird that was with the Russet Sparrows. It scurried away initially but settled near the cattle, after which it did not seem perturbed by my close presence. The sparse vegetation allowed me to obtain great views and photographs [190–191].

The observed bird looked very similar to an Olive-backed Pipit *Anthus hodgsoni*, which is common in this region, but on examining the details of the plumage it was identified as a Tree Pipit *A. trivialis*. The Olive-backed Pipit is closely related to the Tree Pipit, and it has a strong buffy-white supercilium, olive back, a lightly streaked mantle, and a strongly marked face, including ear coverts with a single black spot below a single white spot (Grimmett et al. 2016). On the other hand, this bird had a weakly marked face (including a weak supercilium), brown as opposed to olive tones on the back, more prominent streaks on the mantle, and only a white spot on its ear coverts. We could not use its call as an identification pointer as the bird did not vocalize, but its plumage was enough to confirm the identification. The media and observation were uploaded to eBird (Vyas 2019). This sighting was not given much attention for almost five years, until as recently as 09 April 2024, when it was further discussed with Dhyey Shah, Ashwin Viswanathan, and Kousheyo Bagchi, who also agreed that the bird is a Tree Pipit.



Vyom Vyas

190. Tree Pipit from Mandala Road.



Vyom Vyas

191. Tree Pipit from Mandala Road.

Tyler (2020) recognizes two subspecies of the Tree Pipit. The nominate race breeds extensively across temperate Asia and migrates to sub-Saharan Africa and India for the northern winter. Additionally, the *haringtoni* race, breeds in the northwest Himalayas, including Kashmir, and winters in India. Although specimens of the two subspecies show minor differences, they are not considered distinguishable in the field or from photographs. (Alström & Mild 2003).

The first public report of Tree Pipit from north-eastern India is in Srinivasan et al. (2010). Their published record is sourced from unpublished sightings made between 1997–2007 in Namdapha National Park by Aparajita Dutta. Whether it was one or multiple sightings is unknown because specific dates are not mentioned. Identifying characteristics, precise location, and elevation are not mentioned either. The second public record is from 15 April 2019 on an unnamed road near Mandala, in the West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh (Ramachandran 2019). The bird was identified in the field by its relatively unmarked face and lack of olive on the back. The ‘*yunnanensis*’ subspecies of Olive-backed Pipit was eliminated by the lack of white and black spots on the ear coverts. No media was submitted. The sighting reported in this note occurred just 11 days after the above sighting, and the locations are merely 12 km apart. We found two additional public records from north-eastern India, both from the Assam plains. An individual was reported in an eBird checklist from the Central Range of Kaziranga National Park on 18 December 2004 (Steiner 2004). The record was substantiated by a description of field marks, “Brownish back (no olive tones) with bold dark markings, unmarked rump, tertials with pale fringes, finer flank streaks compared to breast streaks, face markings less contrasty.” A second observation is claimed from a bird diversity survey of Dibru-Saikhowa National Park (Joshi et al. 2014). No date and identification details were provided, so we consider this record doubtful. Sharma et al. (2014) reported Tree Pipits from Lohit valley. However, the accompanying photo does not show any characteristics of a Tree Pipit like the shorter tail and well-streaked flanks. Hence, the same is treated here as doubtful.

I express my sincere gratitude to Ashwin Viswanathan for curating the idea for this manuscript and providing guidance throughout the process. The literature survey to find published records was performed using Pittie (2024).

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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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An Oriental Plover *Anarhynchus veredus* near Port Blair, South Andaman Island

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are located east of the Indian mainland and are home to several endemic birds as well as south-east Asian species that are not usually seen in mainland India. This makes the islands quite attractive to bird watchers.

MM and MS had gone for a bird watching trip with VS to the Andamans in April of this year. On the morning of 26 April 2024, we were exploring various wetlands at Sippighat (11.606°N, 92.695°E) near Port Blair and looking at a variety of birds. It was almost noon, hot and humid with a very bright sun when we reached this particular pond. VS saw a plover which was different in size and appearance to other sand plovers but the bird suddenly took off. We followed its movement as it flew c. 100 m across the pond and landed on a grassy bank near a red flag. Through our binoculars, we could see a chestnut breast band on the plover and considering the size and jizz, we presumed it to be a Caspian Plover *A. asiaticus*. We were all quite excited as it was a rare bird and would have been new bird for MS and VS.

We drove around the pond to get nearer to its new location and walked through swampy mud and grass trying to get closer to the bird. However, we could not obtain a clear photograph. It was feeding by moving rapidly and by probing its beak into marshy grass and soft mud at the edge of the pond. A Pacific Golden-Plover *Pluvialis fulva* was feeding nearby. We were inching towards it when it flew back to its original position on the other side of the pond. Very quickly we ran to the car and drove back, this time positioning the vehicle in such a way that MS could obtain photographs [196, 197] from a reasonable distance. We did not want to disturb the bird so we left for the hotel for some lunch and respite the from heat.



Mridula Sapru

196. Oriental Plover showing broad dark pectoral band and yellow legs.



Mridula Sapru

197. Oriental Plover showing ivory supercilium and light brown cheeks.

While waiting for lunch we realized that the chance of finding a Caspian Plover here was remote and that this was probably an Oriental Plover *A. veredus* considering that the Andaman and Nicobar Islands are on the edge of the East Asian-Australasian flyway and rather far from the African-Eurasian flyway normally used by the Caspian Plover. They are closely related and at one time were considered conspecific. They are quite difficult to differentiate during non-breeding plumage, however this bird was transitioning into its breeding plumage. We describe here its plumage from our photographs.

This medium sized plover, was similar in size to the Golden Plover feeding nearby and had a long-legged and upright appearance. Its legs were yellow (*contra* greenish-grey in Caspian), and it had a rufous pectoral band that was diffused towards the white throat rather than a sharp colour-break between rufous and white as in a Caspian Plover in a similar plumage stage. A wider dark band at the lower edge of the rufous breast demarcated the white belly instead of a narrower black line as in a Caspian Plover. It also had a long ivory-white supercilium extending behind the eye with light brown cheeks and head compared to the dark-brown eye-stripe of a Caspian Plover. The hind neck was pale and whitish; mantle was brown, the tapering bill was black, and the iris dark. A female Oriental Plover lacks the dark border between the rufous breast band and the white belly and is otherwise similar to its non-breeding plumage (Sangha 2021) and hence ours must have been a male.

One of the easier ways to separate an Oriental Plover from Caspian would be by the colour of the underwing (Sangha 2021), which is dark brown in Oriental (*contra* pale in Caspian). However, we did not pay heed to this feature in the field as we did not realize its importance. With sun overhead, it would have been difficult to see this feature though. We revisited the site in the afternoon, but it was high tide, and the ponds were flooded. We also visited the mornings of two subsequent days of our stay but the bird was not to be found. Though VS visited the area subsequently after the return of MM and MS, he did not see the bird. A perusal of the eBird checklists before and after our sighting indicate that nobody else seem to have found this or any similar bird (eBird 2024).

Oriental Plover breeds in the steppes of Mongolia, southern Siberia, and northern China and mostly spend their non-breeding period in Australia, New Guinea and the islands of Southeast Asia. This bird was possibly in passage towards its northern breeding grounds as return migration takes place between February and April (Ozerskaya & Zabelin 2006; Wiersma & Kirwan 2023). It is a vagrant to the Indian subcontinent (Sangha 2021) with the

earliest record in May 1872 from Andaman Island (Ball 1872:288; Abdulali 1964) and subsequently a breeding plumaged bird in Narcondam Island on 11 May 1998 (Sangha 2021). An adult in non-breeding plumage was photographed from 08 till 16 November 2020 at Digha-Shankarpur Estuary, West Bengal (Payra 2021) while another from the North Andaman Island on 21 December 2022 (Govindarasu et al. 2023). It has also been reported twice from Sri Lanka (Samaraweera 2006) and once from Bangladesh (Ahmed & Jannat 2020). Hence, ours would be the fourth report for the Andaman and Nicobar Island and the eighth for the Indian subcontinent.

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The Isabelline Shrike *Lanius isabellinus* from eastern India, including an addition to the avifauna of Odisha

The Isabelline Shrike *Lanius isabellinus* is a polytypic species, widely distributed from Mongolia and Russia in the east, through China, India, Pakistan, the Arabian Peninsula, Africa, the Persian Gulf, and further westward into Europe. It breeds in Central and East Asia and migrates southwest to spend their non-breeding season in the northwestern part of the Indian Peninsula, western Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, and eastern Africa (Yosef et al. 2020). In India, it is a passage migrant and a winter visitor mainly to the northern and western states (Ali & Ripley 1996; Grimmett et al. 2011). Records from the eastern and southern parts of the Indian Peninsula are rare (eBird 2024). Instead, the similar-looking Brown Shrike *L. cristatus* is a common winter visitor in these regions. We report two new records of Isabelline Shrike from eastern India, one each from Odisha and West Bengal.

Record from Kalahandi, Odisha

On 27 February 2024, while birding in Tikirapara, Kalahandi

district, Odisha (19.969°N, 83.312°E), at 0823 h, AM photographed a shrike that was identified as a Brown Shrike *L. cristatus* at that moment, since it is common in that region. However, on further scrutiny of photographs, the individual was confirmed to be an Isabelline Shrike: a small shrike with sandy brown plumage, a long rusty tail, mask not extending to the lores, indistinct supercilium, pale or pinkish bill, black iris, and black legs [198]. The overall plumage suggests it belongs to the *arenarius* subspecies, as per Ganpule (2017). To the best of our knowledge, this is the first confirmed record of the species from Odisha state. An Isabelline Shrike was observed in Padampur, Bargarh district, Odisha, in 2012 by Manoj V. Nair (pers. comm. 07 July 2024), but no photographs exist from the state. The closest known confirmed record of the species is c.200 km away in Chhattisgarh state (Fig 1).



198. Isabelline Shrike from Kalahandi, Odisha.

Anurag Mishra

The bird was perched on an *Ipomoea* bush and did not attempt to fly away despite our close approach. Later, it flew a short distance and hid inside a shrub, avoiding coming into the open. It was also seen moving on the ground briefly, probably foraging for insects. The area where this individual was photographed can be described as a wetland adjacent to agricultural fields, with a few trees dotting the landscape. The water body had *Ipomoea* bushes and *Typha* reeds on the periphery and was a roosting site for Black-crowned Night Herons *Nycticorax nycticorax*. Other species seen on that date include waterfowl such as the Cotton Pygmy Goose *Nettapus coromandelianus*, Gadwall *Mareca strepera*, Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*, Little Cormorant *Microcarbo niger*, and Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*; along with more typical scrubland/open habitat species such as the Jerdon's Bushlark *Mirafra affinis*, Paddyfield Pipit *Anthus rufulus*, Plaintive Cuckoo *Cacomantis merulinus*, Black-winged Kite *Elanus caeruleus*, Plain Prinia *Prinia inornata*, Zitting Cisticola *Cisticola juncidis*, and Indian Silverbill *Euodice malabarica* (Mishra 2024).

Record from Kolkata, West Bengal

AG photographed one shrike each on 05 November 2015 (0945 h) and 16 December 2015 (1030 h) in Newtown, North 24 Parganas district, West Bengal (22.617°N, 88.457°E). While going through the photographs later, these individuals were confirmed to be Isabelline Shrikes, based on the pale sandy underparts, greyish upperparts, pale base to the bill, diffused face mask, and lacking a clear supercilium [199]. The habit was grassland interspersed by marshland patches dominated by *Typha* reeds.

Other common species in this area are the Paddyfield Pipit *A. rufulus*, Bengal Bushlark *Mirafra assamica*, Zitting Cisticola, Plain Prinia, Booted Warbler *Iduna caligata*, Blyth's Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum*, Red Munia *Amandava amandava*, Scaly-breasted Munia *Lonchura punctulata*, and Tricoloured Munia *L. malacca*.



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199. Isabelline Shrike from Newtown, West Bengal.

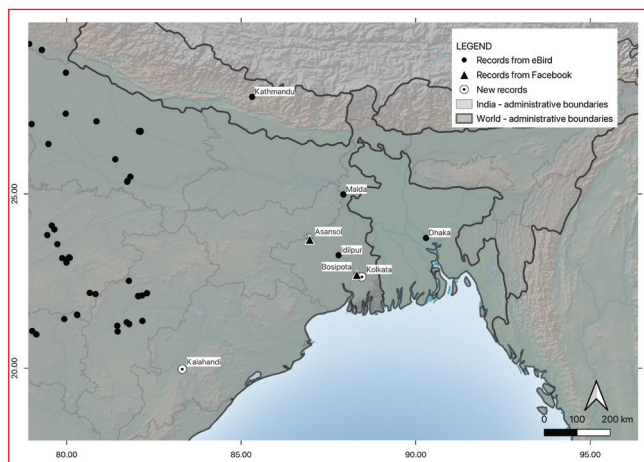


Fig 1. Location of the two new records relative to the species' closest records in the west and recent records in the east.

The Isabelline Shrike has been commonly recorded as far east as Chhattisgarh, but there are no confirmed records from eastern Uttar Pradesh and the states of Odisha, Bihar, and Jharkhand (eBird 2024). Though infrequent, this species has been reported from multiple locations in West Bengal (Fig 1; Table 1) in the winter months, as evidenced by records in eBird and Facebook. It has also been recorded in Dhaka (Miller 2021) and central Nepal (Hearn 2019). These locations are at significant distances from its regular wintering range. Given this new revelation from Odisha and West Bengal, the absence of records from other eastern Indian states may be due to insufficient exploration.

Isabelline Shrike is a Least Concern species on the IUCN Red List (BirdLife International 2024). However, its population in India shows declining long-term and short-term trends, and is a cause for concern (SoIB 2023). A better understanding of its distribution

Table 1. Records of Isabelline Shrike in the eastern region of the Indian subcontinent

Sl. No.	Date	Location	Location	Citation
1	05 November 2015	Kolkata, West Bengal, India	22.616°N, 88.457°E	This work
2	09 January 2021	Dhaka, Bangladesh	23.735°N, 90.299°E	Miller (2021)
3	30 December 2019	Bagmati, Kathmandu, Nepal	27.785°N, 85.316°E	Hearn (2019)
4	24 October 2015	Idilpur, West Bengal, India	23.240°N, 87.792°E	Das (2015)
5	February 2021	Asansol, West Bengal, India	23.688°N, 86.966°E	Chattopadhyay (2021)
6	23 January 2017	Bosipota, West Bengal, India	22.681°N, 88.315°E	Gupta (2017)
7	14 January 2017	Malda, West Bengal, India	24.984°N, 87.929°E	Manna (2017)
8	27 February 2024	Kalahandi, Odisha, India	19.969°N, 83.312°E	This work

in the Indian subcontinent, especially from regions where its records are uncommon, can help strengthen conservation and management strategies for the species.

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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.



Both: Manoj Sharma

201. Little Tern at Corbett Tiger Reserve.

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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 mis-identified 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 *Hieraaetus pennatus* unsuccessfully capturing a Fulvous Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna bicolor*

The Booted Eagle *Hieraaetus 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.



Anwaruddin Chaudhary

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

had a bird in its talons, which appeared to be a passerine. The harrier made a few attempts to snatch the bird from the kestrel but failed in its effort as the kestrel perched on a stone fence pole. The harrier also perched on a similar fence pole c.150 m away. The kestrel defeathered the bird and consumed it while constantly looking in the direction of the harrier. After about four minutes, at 1758 h, the harrier flew away while the kestrel fed on its quarry.

Medium-sized raptors such as harriers have been known to employ kleptoparasitism as a tactic to procure opportunistic prey. For example, Northern Harriers *C. hudsonius* have been observed stealing from smaller raptors (Temeles 1990). On the contrary, Northern Harriers, Marsh Harriers *Circus* spp., and Hen Harriers *C. cyaneus* have been victims of kleptoparasitism by other large raptors (Brockmann & Barnard 1979). More specifically in India, Brahminy Kites *Haliastur indus* and Black Kites *Milvus migrans* in Tirunelveli and Laggar Falcons *F. jugger* in Rajasthan have been observed to kleptoparasitize Montagu's Harriers *C. pygargus* (T. Ganesh, *verbally*, dated 27 December 2023).

My observation, to the best of my knowledge, is the first recorded instance of a Pallid Harrier trying to kleptoparasitize a smaller raptor. Further behavioural studies of Pallid Harriers could reveal more insights into whether kleptoparasitism is a rare occurrence or a strategically adapted foraging tactic to combat dwindling prey availability across their breeding and wintering ranges.

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Plastic in the nest of a Bronze-winged Jacana *Metopidius indicus*

The Bronze-winged Jacana *Metopidius indicus* is a widespread resident throughout the Indian Subcontinent, occupying freshwater wetlands with floating vegetation (Grimmett et al. 2011). On 10 July 2024, I was birding at Pichola Lake (24.563°N, 73.684°E), in Udaipur District, Rajasthan, India. The lake has Lotus *Nelumbo nucifera* and Water Lily *Nymphaeaceae* sp. growing in a small patch. On the edge of this patch, I saw a Bronze-winged Jacana *Metopidius indicus* foraging among the vegetation. I observed it gathering leaves and vegetation and begin constructing a nest. After constructing a base, it took a big piece of plastic floating in the lake and carried it to its

nest, placing it on top of the nest base [206]. Guidelines for nesting biology (Barve et al. 2020) were carefully followed during my documentation. I visited the nest in late afternoon to avoid disturbance to the birds and made sure my activities had minimum impact on the vegetation and surroundings.



206. Bronze-winged Jacana placing plastic on its nest base. Photo: Rajat Chordia

Urbanization can affect several aspects of nest design (Reynolds et al. 2019). Studies have highlighted a change in nesting materials with the main changes in nest composition being an increased use of anthropogenic nesting materials and reduction in use of natural materials (Wang et al. 2009; Radhamany et al. 2016; Reynolds et al. 2016). Bronze-winged Jacanas are known to construct floating nests (Butchart 2000) and the floating quality of plastic may be conducive to nest construction in this group.

Several hypotheses have been suggested as to why birds use anthropogenic nesting materials in their nests (Jagiello et al. 2023). The 'availability hypothesis' proposes that the most commonly available materials in the nesting environment are used by birds to construct their nests (Wang et al. 2009; Antczak et al. 2010). The proximity of the nest site to the city along with a lot of plastic waste dumped in the lake make such nesting materials more readily available.

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Seabirds foraging alongside a Sperm Whale *Physeter macrocephalus*

The oceanic waters of the Arabian Sea around the Lakshadweep Archipelago are characterized by an abundance of nutrients, supporting a wide variety of marine life including, fishes, cephalopods and planktonic organisms (Murty 2002; James 2011). As a result, these waters serve as vital foraging grounds for large marine fauna, including the Sperm Whale *Physeter macrocephalus* and various seabird species (Moazzam et al. 2020). I describe an observation of seabirds engaged in foraging alongside a Sperm Whale near Kavaratti Island (10.740°N, 72.520°E).

On 31 January 2024, during a research expedition, a Sperm Whale was sighted alongside a flock of seabirds in the Arabian Sea at 1635 h approximately 23 km off the coast of Kavaratti Island. The observation was made through binoculars (Nikon Prostaff P7 8x42) from a research vessel at a distance of at least 200 to 300 m. The whale appeared black in colour with an extremely large head and large body size that was visually estimated to be more than 15 m in length. During its surfacing, for a short time, small spatula-shaped flippers were seen along with typical blows projecting forward and to the left. However, no photographs of the whale could be obtained. Throughout the observation period of five to six minutes, three species of seabirds including 20 individuals of Great Crested Terns *Thalasseus bergii*, and eight individuals of Lesser Crested Terns *T. bengalensis* were observed diving into the sea, plunging beneath the surface to capture prey. Additionally, five Sooty Terns *Onychoprion fuscatus* were observed catching prey from the sea surface. Meanwhile, the whale was observed surfacing three times actively engaging in foraging activities alongside the seabirds.

The Sperm Whale and the seabirds were suspected to be feeding on Purpleback Flying Squid *Sthenoteuthis oualaniensis* as numerous individuals were seen in the vicinity flying with fins first and arms splayed in similar shapes. A high concentration of

these squids has already been reported from the northern Arabian Sea upon which Sperm Whales in the region are likely feeding (Moazzam et al. 2020). Seabirds are known to prey upon juvenile and small squids (Croxall et al. 1996), swiftly diving into the water accurately to seize their prey, the terns demonstrated agile aerial manoeuvres. The potential advantages for seabirds to associate with marine mammals may be heightened under conditions of reduced prey availability or limitations in accessing prey at depth as shown in research elsewhere (Ashmole 1971; Clark & Mangel 1984). The observed foraging behaviour of the Sperm Whale aligns with established knowledge regarding the species' feeding habits. The presence of Sperm Whales in proximity to the Lakshadweep Islands underscores the importance of these waters as critical habitats providing essential resources for marine mammals and seabirds.

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Status of the Eurasian Siskin *Spinus spinus* in the Indian Himalaya

The Eurasian Siskin *Spinus spinus* is a monotypic species that breeds across Europe and Asia, from Scandinavia to Greece, east to Siberia and south to Iran. The breeding range extends to north-eastern China, possibly to Kamchatka in north-eastern Russia and the Hokkaido Island in Japan (Clement 2020). The bird winters in northern Africa, Cyprus, Middle East, Korea, Japan, China, and Taiwan (Clement 2020). India falls outside of its breeding range and usual migratory paths and is considered a vagrant to the Indian Subcontinent (Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012) with confirmed reports only from Arunachal Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, and Ladakh (Pop et al. 2022) apart from its regular occurrence around Gilgit (eBird 2024). This note documents two observations in 2024 by two different groups in Arunachal Pradesh and Jammu & Kashmir and reviews its present status in India.

The first observation was on 19 January 2024 at 0755 h from Helmet Top (28.150°N, 97.005°E; c.2,300m asl) near Walong, north-eastern Arunachal Pradesh. After birding, we (KAS, GS, SBS, STL, & BH) walked down c.100m and settled near a small waterhole which was being visited by a few species like

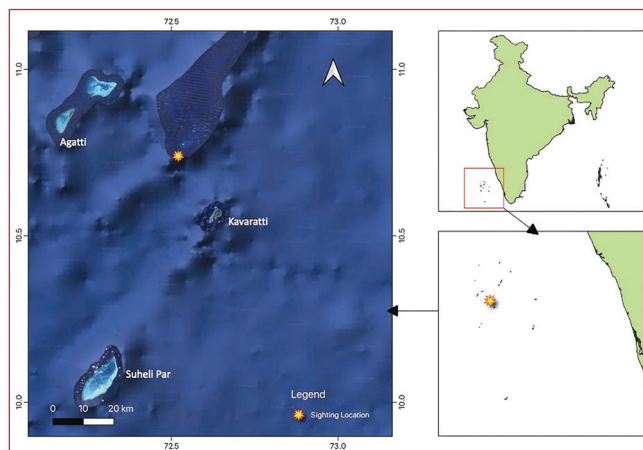


Figure 1: Map showing the location of the observation.

Himalayan Bush Robin *Tarsiger rufilatus*, Rufous-breasted Bush Robin *T. hyperythrus*, Godlewski's Bunting *Emberiza godlewskii*, Yellow-breasted Greenfinch *Chloris spinoides*, and Blue-fronted Redstart *Phoenicurus frontalis*. A lone male Eurasian Siskin was seen just as the authors settled to observe the birds. The bird was seen among a group of Sichuan Leaf Warblers *Phylloscopus forresti*. It had perched and quickly took off and was thought to be a Yellow-breasted Greenfinch in the field. While reviewing the images [207–208] we noticed that the yellow supercilium in Eurasian Siskin started from just above the eye and yellow sub-moustachial stripe of the greenfinch was absent. Also, the prominent yellow wing-bar and the black cap from the forehead ruled-out a Tibetan Serin *S. thibetanus* (Clement 2020).



207. Eurasian Siskin male showing black cap and yellow underparts at Helmet Top.



208. Eurasian Siskin male showing prominent yellow wingbar at Helmet Top.

Both: Kannan A. S.

The second observation was on 13 April 2024 at 1015 h in Dachigam National Park (34.151°N, 74.919°E, c.1,700m), Jammu & Kashmir by MS and SBR. We took some photographs of birds perched on a tree. The birds were initially thought to be Yellow-breasted Greenfinches. Later, one of the birds in the photograph [209] was identified by Ansar Ahmad Bhat as a female Eurasian Siskin with features like finer bill, streaked body and prominent yellow wing-bars (Clement 2020) pointing to its identification. The other two birds looked similar in size and plumage and are believed to be the same species. In Jammu & Kashmir, this is the first record of this bird (Kichloo et al. 2024).



Maleen

209. Eurasian Siskin female at Dachigam National Park, showing finer bill, streaked breast, and a prominent yellow wing-bar.

We reviewed past literature (Pittie 2024) and online portals (www.ebird.org, www.gbif.org) for past records in the Indian Subcontinent and unsurprisingly, there were very few. Based on records in eBird (eBird 2024) and websites on birds of Gilgit-Baltistan, clearly the bird is somewhat regular in Gilgit-Baltistan where it is listed as a '...frequent winter vagrant' during between September and February with most reports in November (Shah 2024a). Their flickr website had 57 photographs of Eurasian Siskin taken between 2016 and 2022 (Shah 2024b). Most, if not all, reports are from Hunza district (Karam & Shaikh 2021), the most well-watched area in Gilgit-Baltistan. Discounting reports from that region, there are in total nine confirmed reports from India (Table 1, Fig. 1). All reports are during the period of November to April. Though (Pop et al. 2022) listed a Srinagar

Table 1. Reports of the Eurasian Siskin from the Indian Himalaya excluding Gilgit-Baltistan

Sl. No.	Date	Site	State/UT	Type of Observation	Reference	Remarks
1	25 January 1980	Solang Nalla, Solang Valley near Manali	Himachal Pradesh	O	Gaston & Chattopadhyaya (1981)	A flock of 21 birds observed, including males.
2	23 April 2013	Mandala Road (road from Dirang jct. to Mandala village, Eaglenest Region)	Arunachal Pradesh	P	Robson (2013)	A male photographed.
3	07 March 2017	Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary, Eaglenest Region	Arunachal Pradesh	O	Islam (2017)	Five individuals observed on a tree.
4	16 November 2021	Gushaini, Kullu	Himachal Pradesh	P	Pop et al. (2022)	A male photographed.
5	07 December 2022	Phyang, Leh District	Ladakh	P	Cyatso (2022)	One amongst a pair photographed.
6	02 January 2024	Campsite Dree Afra, Upper Dibang Valley	Arunachal Pradesh	P	Bora (2024)	A male and a female photographed from a flock (presumably) of 20.
7	19 January 2024	Helmet Top, Walong	Arunachal Pradesh	P	This work	One photographed.
8	13 April 2024	Dachigam National Park Road, Srinagar	Jammu & Kashmir	P	This work	One female amongst three photographed.
9	23 April 2024	Spituk, Leh District	Ladakh	P	Gasha (2024)	Single bird, photographed for consecutive two days.

sighting from 2021, we are unable to trace any evidence of such a record. Such a record has not been listed in the latest bird checklist for Jammu & Kashmir (Kichloo et al. 2024). Another sighting listed by (Pop et al. 2022) from northern West Bengal has been treated as unconfirmed for the West Bengal state bird checklist (Manna et al. 2024). We follow these state assessments and do not list them in our table.

Considering the known breeding and wintering areas of the Eurasian Siskin, it can be considered a rare vagrant to the Himalaya. Some sightings, like the present from Jammu & Kashmir and that of Ladakh possibly are birds in their spring passage. Birds occurring in other Himalayan regions might be going unnoticed, or overlooked as Yellow-breasted Greenfinches, as was the situation in both records mentioned in this work.

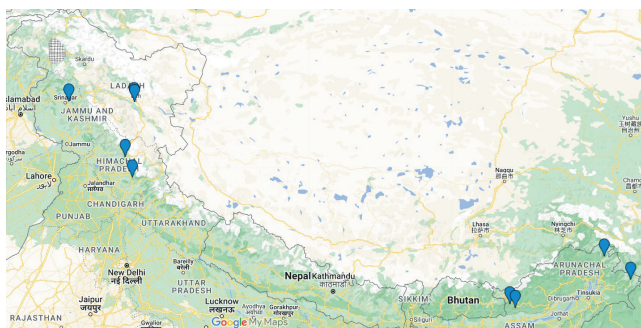


Fig 1: Map of Eurasian Siskin records from the Indian Himalaya.

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Hill Prinias *Prinia supercilialis* feeding a juvenile Plaintive Cuckoo *Cacomantis merulinus*

On 20 August 2024, I started my birding session near my home in Gandhigram (27.278° N, 96.912°E; c. 1,070m), Changlang District, eastern Arunachal Pradesh, India at 0600 h, and I was surprised to see a Hill Prinia *Prinia supercilialis* feeding a young cuckoo that appeared to be a juvenile Plaintive Cuckoo *Cacomantis merulinus* [210–211]. The birds were in close proximity and I was able to watch them for the next couple of hours. I carefully observed their interactions without disturbing the birds. Identity of the chick as to a Plaintive Cuckoo is evident from its size and its hepatic plumage. Though Hill Prinia is absent in most of north-eastern India, it is a locally common species in Gandhigram.



210. An adult Hill Prinia with a caterpillar ready to feed the juvenile Plaintive Cuckoo at Gandhigram.



211. Adult Hill Prinia feeding the caterpillar to the juvenile Plaintive Cuckoo at Gandhigram.

This interaction was striking due to the significant size difference between the host bird and the cuckoo chick. The juvenile Cuckoo, notably larger and more robust than the Hill Prinia, was being consistently fed by both adult birds. The prinias brought an assortment of food items, including caterpillars [210], spiders [211], and grasshoppers [212], to the cuckoo chick,

which was clearly demanding and receiving nourishment. During a span of about two hours, the young cuckoo was fed 18 times.

On the very next day, I saw the same birds at the site, with the young cuckoo perched on a bamboo stick above the bushes. I watched the Hill Prinias feeding the young cuckoo for about half an hour. After that, I decided not to disturb the birds though I could hear Hill Prinias singing from a distance as well as the begging calls of the cuckoo on subsequent days as well.



212. Adult Hill Prinia feeding a spider to the juvenile Plaintive Cuckoo at Gandhigram.



Both: Yolisa Yobin

213. Adult Hill Prinia having fed a grasshopper to the juvenile Plaintive Cuckoo at Gandhigram.

Plaintive Cuckoo has been known to parasitise on prinias and tailorbirds in South Asia (Praveen & Lowther 2020) but there has not been any instance of parasitism of Hill Prinias. Though Payne & Kirwan (2020) includes Hill Prinia as a host of Plaintive Cuckoo, it is evident from the scientific name *P. atrogularis* that they were referring to the Black-throated Prinia, when both prinias were considered conspecific. Hence, this is probably the first instance of this brood parasitism pair from the world (Payne 2005; Payne & Kirwan 2020). It is yet another instance that demonstrates that Plaintive Cuckoos will choose any locally common *Prinia sp.* as its host, and almost all parts of its range have some resident *Prinia sp.* to parasitize on.

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Reports of the Black-crested Bulbul *Rubigula flaviventris* from Palamau Tiger Reserve, Jharkhand, India

The Palamau Tiger Reserve (hereinafter, PTR) is located in the western part of the Chota Nagpur Plateau, spanning the districts of Latehar and Garhwa in Jharkhand, India. Covering an area of 1,129 sq. km (Shahid et al. 2023), the PTR serves as the core area of the Chota Nagpur region (Rawat 2013). The PTR has been designated as an Important Bird Area (IBA) and 210 bird species have been documented from the reserve (Rawat 2013; BirdLife International 2024). However, this region has historically lacked proper documentation of its avian diversity (Rawat 2013), primarily due to disturbances caused by political extremism since the 1980s (Iqbal & Ilyas 2023).

During our bird survey period (05 April to 27 June 2024), the Black-crested Bulbul *Rubigula flaviventris* was observed on, at least, two occasions. The first sighting, reported by SKG, was on 16 June 2024, at 0700 h, in the Baresanr forest range of the PTR (23.604°N, 84.082°E; 454m asl). The bird, characterized by an erect black crest, olive green upper parts, and yellow underparts, was perched on a bush c.4 m above the ground. On the same day, at 1600 h, SI observed the species again, c.300 m away from the initial sighting, possibly the same individual, perched on a toothbrush tree *Salvadora persica* c.5 m above the ground. The species has not been spotted again at PTR since these sightings.

The species is resident in the Himalaya, from Himachal Pradesh to Arunachal Pradesh, hills of north-east India south of the Brahmaputra River, eastern Bangladesh (Sylhet and Chittagong Hill Tracts), and also disjunctly distributed in the Eastern Ghats from Odisha to Andhra Pradesh and hills of Madhya Pradesh; from foothills up to c.1,500 m asl (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Fishpool & Tobias 2020). The species is mostly found singly or in pairs, and occasionally in groups (Grimmett et al. 2011). In PTR, both sightings were of a solitary individual and it is possible that it was the same individual that was sighted twice. The species is known to prefer the lower forest storey and bushes (Ali & Ripley 1987; Grimmett et al. 2011), which aligns with our observations.

Recent records indicate that the species has been reported from nearby regions (eBird 2024), with nearest records from Ramanujganj and Pavai Falls in Chhattisgarh, both locations c.45 km west of our PTR sightings. In Jharkhand, the species has been previously recorded in Thalkobad, Saranda (Gupta 2006), and as recently on 31 October 2023 (Roy 2023), at a location c.200 km from our study area. Additionally, it has been regularly reported in the neighbouring states of Chhattisgarh and Odisha (eBird 2024). Thus, our records from PTR are not unexpected, however,



Sheena Kumar Gupta

214. Black-crested Bulbul in Palamau Tiger Reserve, Jharkhand, India.

it is not fully understood whether the occurrence of the species is seasonal as a result of seasonal dispersal or whether the species is resident in the region.

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The Greater Scaup *Aythya marila* from Siswan, Punjab, India

The Greater Scaup *Aythya marila* is a rare and irregular non-breeding visitor to the Indian Subcontinent (Ali & Ripley 1978; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), with scattered records from all over the country, except for southern India (eBird 2024). On 05 February 2023, during a visit to Siswan Lake (30.870°N, 76.757°E) in Sahibzada Ajit Singh Nagar, Punjab, for birdwatching, PB saw a duck that looked like a Tufted Duck *A. fuligula*, from a distance. It was in a loose flock of about 18 waterfowl (six Tufted Ducks, four Common Pochards *Aythya ferina*, and eight Indian Spot-billed Ducks *Anas poecilorhyncha*) and was diving frequently. Upon examining the photographs, it seemed different from the Tufted Duck due to the greenish gloss on the head, greyish back, and total lack of crest. A discussion with other birders (Neerja V. & Rajive Das) confirmed its identity as a male Greater Scaup. Since the photos were not very good, another visit was made to the location on the same day. This time, the photographs were better [215]. The identification as male Greater Scaup was based on the lack of a crest, grey upper parts contrasting with black rear end, and green gloss to blackish head (Grimmett et al. 2011). This individual remained at the location for at least a week, and other birders also visited after seeing the present sighting on social media. It was

mostly seen with the same waterfowl mentioned previously and kept to the relatively shallower eastern part of the lake.



Pushkar Bai

215. Greater Scaup male, Siswan Lake, Punjab.

To locate previous records from Punjab, India, we searched the online 'Bibliography of South Asian Ornithology' (Pittie 2024). The earliest relevant mention of Greater Scaup in Punjab, India, is by Dhindsa et al. (1991). However, they only mention, "Recorded at Harike Bird Sanctuary on a few occasions; a winter visitor to Punjab." We asked the lead author, M.S. Dhindsa, on what basis it was included in the list. He informed (in litt. email dated 20 July 2024), "For some years between 1983 and 1986, researchers from the Bombay Natural History Society had set up bird ringing camps at Harike during winters. We visited them a few times and did bird watching together. That was when this duck was spotted." Robson (1997) attributes a sight record of two Greater Scaup to Per Undeland, from 02 March 1997. Most mentions of this species in Punjab are from Harike (Perennou et al. 1990; Prakash et al. 1997; Kazmierczak et al. 1998; Alfred et al. 2001). Singh (1993) included it in a checklist of birds of Punjab, but no primary source is indicated. Away from Harike, an occurrence has been reported from Ropar, now Roopnagar (Kumar et al. 2006). However, the record is ambiguous as no details are provided. Thus, we consider only three previous records from Punjab, all from Harike, as reliable: Perennou et al. (1990), Dhindsa et al. (1991), and the one attributed to Per Undeland (Robson 1997).

Therefore, the current record is significant being that it is far away from Harike (c.170 km) and because it is supported by photographic evidence. It underscores the importance of conserving all existing habitats where winter visitors can find an abode. This sighting is also a reminder for birdwatchers that they should always look for the presence of uncommon birds that may get overlooked due to similarities with their more common congeners.

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Some significant avian records from Majuli Island, Assam

The Majuli Island (26.996°N, 93.243°E, c.80 m asl) is a large river island of c.352 sq. km, bounded in the south by the Brahmaputra River and in the north by the Subansiri River and Kherkatia Suti (a small channel of River Brahmaputra in Assam, India). The island was assessed as an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA) in 2004 and as a Biodiversity Heritage Site (BHS) in 2019 (Islam & Rahmani 2004; Assam State Biodiversity Board 2019). The Majuli Island is covered by agricultural fields, wetlands, and grasslands, interspersed by a few woodlands (BirdLife International 2023a). Majuli Island and its adjacent riverine tracts is a district as per the government of Assam. In this article, we report the sighting of some important bird species previously not reported from the island.

Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*

The Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola* is an IUCN Vulnerable species (BirdLife International 2024b) that has been previously reported in Assam from Orang National Park, Dibru-Saikhowa National Park, Sivasagar District, and Neemati Wetlands of Jorhat District (Choudhury 1991; Talukdar 1996; eBird 2024a). In Majuli, it was seen in 2020 and 2021 in a flat sandy bank of a braided channel of the Brahmaputra River near Darbar Chapori (26.913°N, 94.175°E). Three individuals were encountered on 28 November 2020 at 1525 h, feeding with other waders in a muddy area. The following year, one individual was seen on 26 November at the exact location, feeding close to the river channel. Both times, the species was ignored in the field as they looked very similar to the Pacific Golden Plover *P. fulva*, a regular wintering species in Majuli. They were correctly identified only recently when we noticed the distinctive black armpits and white rump (Poole et al. 2020) while reviewing photographs on the computer [216]. The area was also surveyed in 2022 and 2023, but the species was not observed, likely due to the presence of newly grown grassy vegetation, particularly *Saccharum spontaneum* and *Typha sp.* Easily mistaken for the more common Pacific Golden Plover, we encourage birdwatchers to observe carefully to help determine its status in Assam.



216. Grey Plover from Majuli. Photographed by Shyamal Saikia.

Long-billed Plover *Charadrius placidus*

The Long-billed Plover *Charadrius placidus* is a wader that mostly prefers stony banks of fast-flowing rivers and can also be found in mudflats and fields (Grimmett et al. 2011; Wiersma et al. 2020). On 18 January 2024 at about 1510 h, two Long-billed Plovers were encountered while counting waders near the Bhareki Beel (26.935°N, 94.141°E), a large wetland of Majuli. Both were seen foraging with other waders on the edge of the wetland. They looked superficially like the Little Ringed Plover *C. dubius* but had a larger bill, lighter upper parts, slower movements, larger size, and longer legs [217]. Choudhury (2012) mentions Long-billed Plover from Majuli with no specific details or photos. This is the first photographic record from Majuli.



217. Long-billed Plover, Majuli.

Mongolian Short-toed Lark *Calandrella dukhunensis*

On 12 April 2024 at 0911 h, a Mongolian Short-toed Lark *Calandrella dukhunensis* was observed in the Darbar Chapori grassland (26.916°N, 94.169°E). It was feeding on the ground in an open area, and we managed to photograph it [218]. It initially appeared to be a Hume's Short-toed Lark *C. acutirostris*. However, after reviewing the photographs, it was confirmed to be a Mongolian Short-toed Lark due to its pale and short bill (yellow and long in Hume's Short-toed Lark) and more contrasting facial pattern, including a prominent supercilium. In north-eastern India, this species has previously been reported in the Kamrup, Tinsukia, and Baksa districts of Assam, with a few sightings in the West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh (eBird 2024b). Most reports occur in April, with a few in October, indicating the species is a passage migrant in this region. The individual we encountered was likely on its migration to its breeding grounds.



218. Mongolian Short-toed Lark, Majuli.

Bristled Grassbird *Schoenicola striatus*

The Bristled Grassbird *Schoenicola striatus* is an IUCN Vulnerable species (BirdLife International 2024c), that is a breeding visitor to the Brahmaputra plains of Assam. It has been recorded from protected areas such as Manas National Park, Kaziranga National Park, Dibru Saikhowa National Park, and Orang National Park, as well as scattered wetlands in Kamrup, Nagaon, Dhemaji districts (Choudhury 2000; Joshi et al. 2014; Rahmani 2023; eBird 2024c). Our first encounter was with a male Bristled Grassbird on 18 April 2024 at 1540 h, while surveying for grassland birds in the Darbar Chapori (26.915°N, 94.170°E). The bird was first seen singing in flight for about a minute as it flew over several patches of grass—this behaviour is consistent with its known flight display (Krishnan 2021)—then landed on a nearby exposed perch and vocalized for another minute. The bird was identified based on its vocalizations and photographs [219]. In the following days, two more males were seen in nearby areas, one c.500 m (26.918°N, 94.177°E) and another c.2 km away (26.929°N, 94.179°E) from the location of the first individual. All three sites were dominated by *Saccharum spontaneum* interspersed by *Typha sp.*, *Tamarix sp.*, and *Ziziphus mauritiana*. No individuals were found in *Phragmites karka* grassland even after several surveys using playback.



All: Shyamal Saikia

219. Bristled Grassbird perched on *Saccharum spontaneum*, Majuli.

Chestnut-crowned Bush Warbler *Cettia major*

On 10 December 2023 at 1555 h, while birdwatching in Bherekhi Beel (26.935°N, 94.141°E), we played the song of Chestnut-crowned Bush Warbler *Cettia major* to check for its presence. After about a minute of playback, a Chestnut-crowned Bush Warbler responded with its characteristic long, aggressive clicking

call (Clement et al. 2024), from a bush very close to us. After about thirty seconds of continuously calling, it gave the warbling “chew-chewey-you” song (Clement et al. 2024) shown in Fig. 1, for a few seconds and then went silent for two minutes. Finally, four minutes after we first heard it, the bird became visible when it came out to an open perch and started to sing its primary song (Clement et al. 2024), shown in Fig 2. We observed the bird through our binoculars, and it looked superficially like the Grey-sided Bush Warbler *C. brunifrons* but larger and robust with less grey on the breast and flanks [220]. It was also more shy than the Grey-sided Bush Warbler. In Assam, Chestnut-crowned Bush Warblers have been reported mainly from the Dibrugarh and Tinsukia Districts, with few reports from Manas and Kaziranga National Parks (eBird 2024d). This is the first photographic record from Majuli.

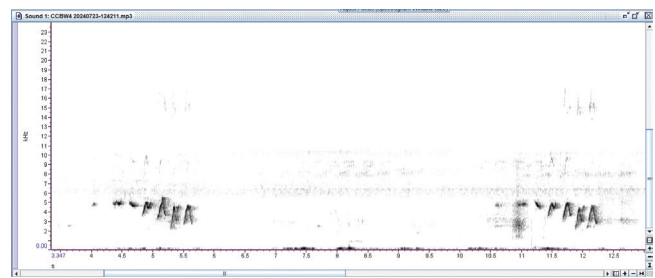


Fig. 1: Spectrogram of the “chew-chewey-you” song of the Chestnut-crowned Bush Warbler recorded on 10 December 2023

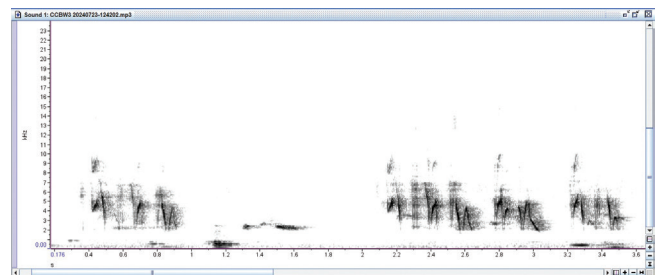


Fig. 2: Spectrogram of the primary song of the Chestnut-crowned Bush Warbler recorded on 10 December 2023



220. Chestnut-crowned Bush Warbler, Majuli.

Brownish-flanked Bush Warbler *Horornis fortipes*

On 23 December 2023 at 1100 h, while observing a Slaty-bellied Tesia *Tesia olivea* in a woodland near Jugunidhari (26.925°N, 94.126°E), we heard an unfamiliar sound from the undergrowth but could not obtain a good recording. After some time, we briefly

saw the bird but could not identify it. On a return visit on 07 January 2024 at 1200 h, we heard the same sound, successfully recorded it (Fig. 3), and identified the bird as a Brownish-flanked Bush Warbler after playback. We photographed the bird on 08 January 2024 [221]. Although few recent records exist from Assam, this species is a common resident in the hills of north-eastern India (Rahmani et al. 2022; eBird 2024e) and is likely a regular winter migrant in the plains, often overlooked due to its subtle calls and plumage. Choudhury (2012) mentions it from Majuli without specific details or photos. This is the first photographic record from Majuli.

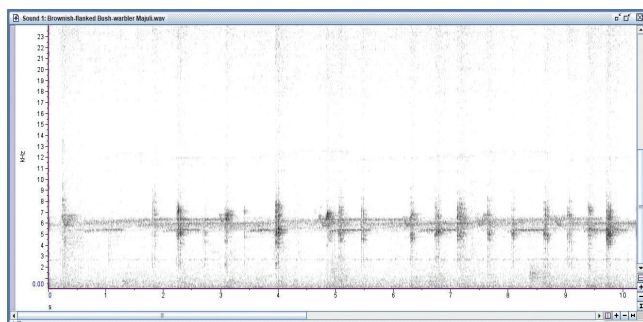


Fig 3. Spectrogram of the call of Brownish-flanked Bush Warbler recorded on 07 January 2023



All: Shyamal Saikia

221. Brownish-flanked Bush Warbler, Majuli.

Rusty-bellied Shortwing *Brachypteryx hyperythra*

Rusty-bellied Shortwing *Brachypteryx hyperythra* is presently categorized under IUCN 'Near Threatened' category (Collar 2020; BirdLife International 2023d; eBird 2024f). It occurs in small disjunct populations from southern Sikkim to southern China (Collar 2020). Most of the recent records of the species in Assam are from the Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts (eBird 2024b), but there are historical as well as one recent record from Lakhimpur district (Stevens 1914, 1915a,b; Boruah & Borah 2024; eBird

2024f). There are also records from Kaziranga National Park (Rahmani et al. 2022), Hoollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary (Firoz Hussain pers. comm. November 2023), and Dhemaji (eBird 2024b). The Rusty-bellied Shortwing is found at an elevation of 1800–3000 m asl during its breeding season, and it winters at an elevation of 450–2950 m asl (Collar 2020). We report four records of this species from Majuli in Table 1. Based on the presence of several individuals across one month, it is likely that Rusty-bellied Shortwing is a regular winter migrant to the island.



222. Female Rusty-bellied Shortwing, Majuli.



223. Male Rusty-bellied Shortwing, Majuli.

Himalayan Bush Robin *Tarsiger rufilatus*

On 11 November 2023, at around 1600 h, we were birdwatching in a woodland with dense undergrowth near the Jugunidhari area (26.925°N, 94.126°E) of Majuli. We were observing a Pygmy Wren-Babbler *Pnoepyga pusilla* when a blue-coloured bird came onto a clear patch of the forest floor about five meters away from where we stood. We quickly observed the bird with our binoculars and noticed it had blue upperparts, white underparts, and orange flanks. It foraged in that clear patch for c. 10 seconds and then

Table 1. Rusty-bellied Shortwing records from Majuli

Date & Time	Location	Coordinates	Sex	Habitat
28 November 2023 0800 h	Meragarh	26.963°N, 94.297°E	Female [222]	Scrub consisting of ferns, <i>Calamus tenuis</i> , <i>Schumannianthus dichotomus</i> , and <i>Phragmites karka</i> near forest with large trees and bamboo, c. 100 m from human habitation.
04 December 2023 1430 h	Kamalabari	26.946°N, 94.161°E	Male [223]	Dense undergrowth of <i>Calamus tenuis</i> (a type of palm) and <i>Schumannianthus dichotomus</i> near a woodland pond, c. 10 m from human habitation.
28 December 2023 1300 h	Gayan Gaon	26.979°N, 94.305°E	Male (seen)	Small dense scrubby patch of tall grass (mostly <i>Phragmites karka</i>), close to woodland, c. 100 m from human habitation and beside a busy road.
28 December 2023 1300 h	Gayan Gaon	26.979°N, 94.305°E	Unknown (heard)	Woodland with dense undergrowth of <i>Calamus tenuis</i> and <i>Schumannianthus dichotomus</i> .

flew towards the forest's edge. We relocated the bird foraging in the leaf litter and photographed it [224]. We identified the bird as a Himalayan Bush Robin *Tarsiger rufilatus* using Grimmett et al. (2016). We searched for the bird the next morning but could not find it. This is a highly uncommon bird in the plains of Assam, and it has been previously reported within Assam in winter from Manas National Park, Kaziranga National Park, Dihing-Patkai National Park, and Dum Duma Reserve Forest, but none from Majuli (Rahmani et al. 2022; eBird 2024g).



Shyamal Saikia

224. Himalayan Bush Robin foraging in the leaf litter.

These observations shed new light on the above species' distribution, migration routes, and wintering habits. Additionally, they highlight the need to conserve often overlooked habitats such as grasslands, bushes, and thickets, which many birds rely on. These areas are increasingly threatened by development, deforestation, and the conversion of wetlands into ponds or agricultural land. Urgent conservation efforts are needed to protect the island's ecosystems and valuable bird species.

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A Brown Fish-Owl *Ketupa zeylonensis* preying on hatchling of the Mugger *Crocodylus palustris*

Fish-owls *Ketupa* sp. are large, powerful, nocturnal birds, with some species exclusively piscivorous (König & Weick 2008). They are often diurnal and live along lakes, rivers, and streams with well-wooded banks and feed mainly on freshwater prey from branches or rocks overhanging water, although other prey, such as, small aquatic and terrestrial animals (even carrion) has been recorded (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). The Brown Fish Owl *Ketupa zeylonensis* is a widespread resident in South Asia, and the species *K. z. leschenaulti* occurs from northern Pakistan and India (south of the Himalayas) east to Myanmar (except north-east), and Thailand (Holt et al. 2020). Here, we describe an observation of the Brown Fish-Owl preying on a hatchling of the Mugger crocodile *Crocodylus palustris*.

On 06 May 2024, PS was visiting the Tourist Zone 3 of Ranthambore National Park in Rajasthan, India. This area is famous for tiger-watching locations, including Jogi Mahal, High Point, Padam Talab, Raj Bagh, and Mandook. While exploring the forest area at Jogi Mahal and the surrounding wetlands (26.026 °N, 76.455 °E; 305 m asl), at 0745 h, an adult Brown Fish Owl was found actively feeding, on prey in a canopy of a large tamarind tree *Tamarindus indica* [225–226]. It was bright and sunny with a partly cloudy sky and we could observe the owl clearly with good views. The prey was partially eaten and the posterior part of the prey item had not been consumed until then. The owl was in the process of consuming the prey item during our period of observation, and therefore we were able to identify the prey species. The prey was identified as a hatchling of the Mugger crocodile based on examination of various images that visibly showed the distinct features of the species, such as, scale pattern of the belly, hind feet, and tail with scutes. We did not witness the owl during the actual hunting of the prey, and thus, we are unable to describe how the prey item was captured, or whether the prey was situated on land or water when it was captured, and whether it was alive or dead and decaying when it was captured. However, our observation confirms that the owl had successfully captured and consumed the prey item.

Brown Fish Owls mainly feed on fish, frogs, and freshwater crabs; also, crayfish, snakes, and lizards, including a monitor lizard *Varanus* sp. of c.28 cm; occasionally rodents and birds (Konig et al. 2008; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012); also, insects, e.g., large beetles (Wadatar et al. 2014). Prey identified in 192 feeding visits to a nest of the species in western India in Jambughoda Wildlife Sanctuary, Gujarat, consisted of 116 invertebrates (insects, crabs, prawns), 48 anurans, 20 snakes, three lizards, four fish, and one bird (Vyas et al. 2013). There are also occasional records of the species feeding on carrion and it has also been recorded feeding on crocodile carcass (Ali & Ripley 1981; Holt et al. 2020). The diet of Brown Fish-Owl is known to include a variety of prey (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Holt et al. 2020) and our observation proves that the hatchlings of Mugger crocodiles are part of its diet. This incident also highlights the diverse feeding habits of the species in the complex ecosystem of the Ranthambore National Park (see, Tana et al. 2024).

Previous literature shows that some large waterbirds are capable of predating hatchlings of Mugger crocodiles, including Black-necked Stork *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus*, Painted Stork *Mycteria leucocephala*, Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*



225. Brown Fish-Owl with a hatchling of Mugger crocodile as prey at Ranthambore National Park, Rajasthan, India.



226. Brown Fish-Owl with a hatchling of Mugger crocodile as prey at Ranthambore National Park, Rajasthan, India.

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(Somaweera et al. 2013; Vyas 2019), and Grey Heron *A. cinerea* (Tana et al. 2024). Some photographic records are available on electronic media on different bird species consuming hatchlings of crocodile spp. (Gillian 2020; Fitzsimons 2020). However, a recent study documented 23 species of birds, bitterns, herons, storks, and cranes were involved in preying/feeding of hatchlings of 15 different species and subspecies of crocodiles (Somaweera et al. 2013). To reverse the situation, Hakim & Sharma (2024) reported an adult Mugger capturing a Brown Fish-Owl that was wading in shallow water in Girwa River at Bardiya National Park, Nepal. Predatory interactions are complex, and have influenced and driven various adaptations in both predators and prey, however, such a role reversal in predator-prey relationships is rare (Vyas 2024).

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Three additions to the avifauna of the Union Territory of Ladakh, India

Oriental Pratincole *Glareola maldivarum* from Hanley Wetland Complex

During a butterfly survey organized by GoI-UNDP-GEF SECURE Himalaya Project from 11–20 August 2023 in eastern Ladakh, I photographed a bird in flight near the Ragar marshes (32.756°N, 78.958°E; 4,301 m asl), in the Hanley Wetland Complex on 15 August at 0724 h in the morning. Although my initial impression was that of the commonly occurring Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*, I left the area without reviewing my photos properly and identifying the bird correctly. After reaching Rumtse village (33.628°N, 77.759°E; 4,208 m asl) on 19 August, I was able to review my photos on the computer and noticed some reddish tinge on the underwings. Careful examination of the bird's bill length, tail length and pattern in the photos, led me to eliminate Green Sandpiper which was structurally very different from the bird I had photographed. I deduced the bird to be a pratincole *Glareola* spp., and after forwarding the images to Ashwin Viswanathan, it was suggested that the bird could be an Oriental Pratincole *G. maldivarum*. The absence of white trailing edge to the secondaries and the shallow tail-fork (Grimmett et al. 2011)—features that were visible in the photograph [227]—eliminated the similar looking Collared Pratincole *G. pratincola*. While Collared Pratincole has been reported from a single sighting

in the Upper Indus Valley between Choglamsar and Thiksey in spring of 1982 (Delany et al. 2017), there are no recent records of Oriental Pratincole from Ladakh (Pfister 2014; Sharma et al. 2021; eBird 2024). However, this species is listed in a historical checklist for the region but without any details or location (Ward 1907), and thus it cannot be ascertained whether the report was from Ladakh or Jammu & Kashmir.



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227. Oriental Pratincole at Ragar marshes.

Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica* from Tsokar Wetland Complex

Tsokar Lake (33.301°N, 78.001°E; 4,530 m asl) is a Ramsar site in eastern Ladakh, and an Important Bird Area (IBA) that serves as the breeding site of species such as Bar-headed Goose *Anser indicus*, Brown-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus brunnicephalus*, and the State bird of Ladakh – the Black-necked Crane *Grus nigricollis* among many other species. During the autumn season from mid-August to mid-September, the number of species near and around the lake is augmented by the presence of passage migrant birds and several rare birds can be seen during this time. With the hope to find some lesser-known passage migrants, I went birding at Tsokar Lake on 08 September 2023. At 0911 h, near Newul Hamlet (33.323°N, 78.039°E; 4,529 m asl), I photographed a godwit *Limosa* spp. which was seen feeding on the shoreline alongside Common Redshanks *T. totanus* and Temminck's Stint *Calidris temminckii*. Initially the bird could not be identified properly due to the heat haze which led to blurry photographs. Then after a while when the bird took off and flew some distance away before landing again to forage, I was able to take few photographs in flight. The photograph [228] clearly revealed a barred tail and a white V-shape on the back, eliminating the regular passage migrant Black-tailed Godwit *L. limosa*. The slightly upturned bi-colored bill also helped in elimination of Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata*, Whimbrel *N. phaeopus*, and Asian Dowitcher *Limnodromus semipalmatus* all of which look similar in appearance from the back in flight. More images are available in Gyalpo (2023a). Although the Dowitcher has not yet been reported from Ladakh, both Eurasian Curlew and Whimbrel are common passage migrant birds and can be seen in the Tsokar wetland complex during August and September (Chamba 2022; Gyalpo 2024). Subsequent to my sighting, there was another record near the same area, on 10 September 2023, possibly the same bird, but without any photos (Norboo 2023). There is one previous record of the species listed in an old report (Gautam et al. 2007), but without any supporting documentation or photographs, and thus rendering the latter two records unconfirmed. Apart from these two unconfirmed records, there

are no other reports of Bar-tailed Godwit either from Ladakh or from any other States covering Himalayan or Trans-Himalayan regions (eBird 2024).



228. Bar-tailed Godwit at Tsokar Lake.

Black-faced Bunting *Emberiza spodocephala* from Spituk Marshes

On 11 November 2023, while birding in the Spituk Marshes (34.121°N, 77.521°E; 3,202 m asl), with Sudeshna Dey and Harish Thangaraj, I photographed a bird perched deep in willow *Salix* sp. trees in the area at 0430 h, but it did not give a clear view. It seemed timid and shy perhaps due to the presence of White-winged Redstarts *Phoenicurus erythrogastrus* in the same habitat, which showed a tendency for mobbing this particular bird whenever it came out in the open. After showing the pictures to my fellow birders, we agreed it to be a Black-faced Bunting *Emberiza spodocephala*. After a few attempts, I managed to get a few clear pictures. Visible characteristics, such as, greyish upper breast with lower underparts yellow, brownish mantle with black streaks, greyish head and nape with dark lores and chin, and a pinkish bill, were observed. A clear photograph [229] was achieved on 25 November at the same location (Gyalpo 2023b). The bird was observed throughout the winter season at this location regularly, evident from various checklists from the same area (eBird 2024c), from the first day of the sighting on 11 November 2023 till the last sighting on 25 April 2024 (Phuntsog 2024). This observation appears to be the eastern-most wintering record of this species in South Asia (eBird 2024d).



229. Black-faced Bunting at Spituk marshes.

The above three species are not listed or mentioned in any of the standard references (Osmaston 1925, 1926; Sillem 1934; Vaurie 1972; Holmes 1986; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Delany et al. 2014; Pfister 2014; Grimmett et al. 2011; Sharma

et al. 2021) making these records new additions to the avifauna of Ladakh.

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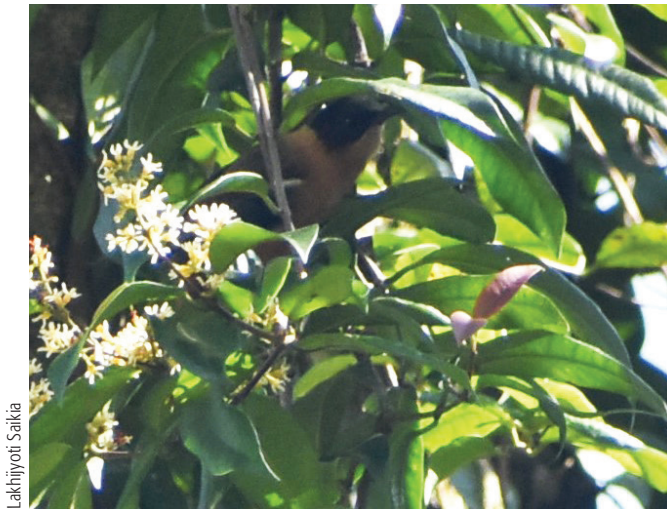
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A Rufous Sibia *Heterophasia capistrata* from Upper Assam

On 15 May 2024, while bird watching in the Dulung Reserve Forest (27.445°N, 94.213°E; 126 m asl) of Lakhimpur District of Upper Assam, India, we observed a bird that had rufous underparts, a black head, and a long tail with grey tips, and black subterminal band. The bird was sitting alone on a branch of a tall flowering tree, c. 10 m above the ground. We observed it for 20 minutes, and we were able to take a few photographs [230–231] before it flew away. By matching the photographs with Grimmett



Lakhijyoti Saikia

230. Rufous Sibia at Dulung Reserve Forest, Lakhimpur, Assam, India.



Lakhijyoti Saikia

231. Rufous Sibia at Dulung Reserve Forest, Lakhimpur, Assam, India.

et al. (2011) and Grewal et al. (2016), we identified the bird as a Rufous Sibia *Heterophasia capistrata*.

The Rufous Sibia is a resident in the Himalaya across India, Nepal, and Bhutan (Collar & Robson 2020). It is found in broadleaf evergreen forests between 1,200 to 3,400 m asl but descends in winter down to 800 m asl. However, it can locally descend even to 100 m asl in winter (Collar & Robson 2020). Our record may not be considered a winter record as most wintering species leave in April, and our sighting was on 15 May.

In the Eastern Himalaya, this species is commonly seen in Sikkim, north Bengal, the northern parts of extreme western Arunachal Pradesh, India (particularly in the Tawang & West Kameng Districts), and Bhutan. Low elevation records from north-eastern India are from Jaldapara National Park, Buxa Tiger Reserve, and Manas National Park, and the closest records to ours are from c.250 km away in Samdrup Jhonkar in Bhutan (eBird 2024). There are no records east of Kameng District. Since ours is a low elevation record, the bird must have either moved eastwards after descending to the lowlands below its regular range, or it is an uncommon resident in the temperate forests above Lakhimpur District (East Kameng to Upper Subansiri districts of Arunachal Pradesh). Literature on the hills of Assam (Choudhury 2000; Baruah 2015; Barua & Sharma 2005) report its congeners Rufous-backed Sibia *Leioptila annectans*, Grey Sibia

H. gracilis, Long-tailed Sibia *H. picaoides*, and Beautiful Sibia *H. pulchella*. Still, there is no mention of Rufous Sibia. Therefore, our current observation report of the species is the first confirmed occurrence in Assam outside Manas National Park.

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