



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.



Miridula Sapru

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



Miridula 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