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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

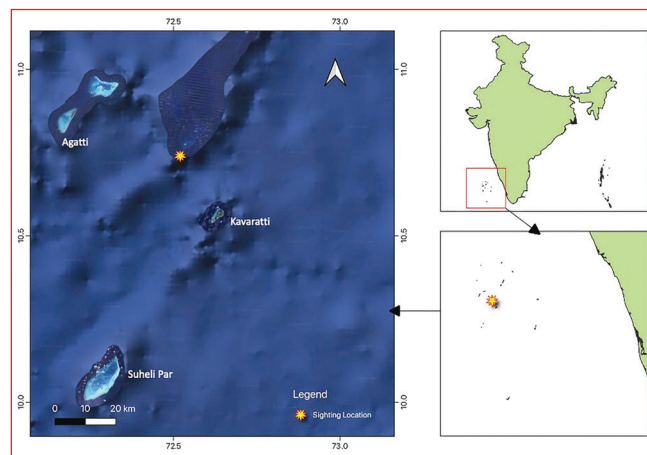


Figure 1: Map showing the location of the observation.

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.



Both: Kannan A. S.

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

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	Gyatso (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.

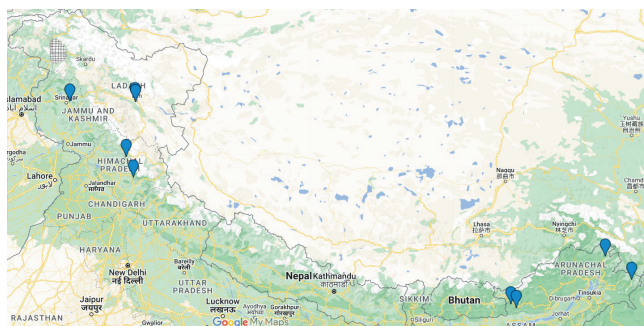


Fig 1: Map of Eurasian Siskin records from the Indian Himalaya.

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Hill Prinias *Prinia superciliaris* 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 superciliaris* 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,