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Additions to the avifauna of Himachal Pradesh, India

The northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh has a wide variety of habitats and hence, is rich in avian biodiversity. In this note, we report, in chronological order, five new taxa for Himachal Pradesh with photographs. They are from Nagrota Surian (near Pong Lake, Kangra District; 32.040°N, 76.060°E; c.435 m asl) and Lahaul (Lahaul & Spiti District). These birds were not reported by den Besten (2004), Dhadwal & Kanwar (2018), Dhadwal (2019), and no previous confirmed records of these birds were found in Pittie (2024), Grimmett et al. (2011), eBird, Facebook groups, and other online forums.

Peregrine Falcon (Red-capped) *Falco peregrinus* *babylonicus*

On 09 November 2017, CA visited Nagrota Surian, located on the northeastern side of Pong Lake. There are vast flats around the lake, which are partially cultivated. While driving in these flats, CA saw a small raptor sitting on a lump of soil at 1030 h [24]. It allowed a close approach and gave ample time for observations and photographs. It was a little larger than Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* but smaller than Shaheen Peregrine Falcon *F. peregrinus peregrinator*, also seen earlier this morning. Its face had a rufous wash and prominent white supercilia that met at the nape. The fore crown was pale, while the hind crown was rufous brown. It had a prominent dark brown moustachial stripe. The cheeks and throat were white and had a slight rufous wash. The beak had a black tip. The upperparts were dark with narrow pale

borders of the feathers. The underparts were white with a slight rufous wash, mainly on the flanks, and were finely streaked, except in the central belly and flanks, which were boldly streaked. The primaries were long, reaching the tail tip. Its feet were strong. Based on the above features, CA identified it as an immature Peregrine Falcon (Red-capped) *F. p. babylonicus*, one of India's three subspecies of Peregrine Falcon.

Differentiating an adult *babylonicus* from a typical *peregrinator* and *calidus* is straightforward. However, differentiating a juvenile *babylonicus* from a juvenile *calidus* is difficult (Bhatt & Ganpule 2017). The images were sent to Prasad Ganpule (in litt. e-mail dated 15 November 2017 and 09 August 2024), and Nirav Bhatt (in litt. e-mail dated 10 August 2024), and both confirmed it as an immature *babylonicus*. The identification by them was based on the typical dense streaking on the belly with sparse streaking on the upper breast and lower belly, the presence of some rufous on the cheeks and flanks, and a yellow eye-ring and a pale yellow cere (both would usually be greyish in *calidus* at this stage). All these features agree with those given in Bhatt & Ganpule (2017) for identifying juvenile *babylonicus*.

The taxonomy of the *babylonicus* is unsettled, and it is currently placed under Peregrine Falcon *F. peregrinus* as a subspecies (White et al. 2020; Praveen et al. 2024). Bhatt & Ganpule (2017) provides details on this taxon. It is also known as Red-naped Shaheen and is an uncommon to rare winter visitor to the desert and semi-desert habitats of western India, mainly to Gujarat and Delhi, but straggling eastwards to the Gangetic Plains, Bengal, northern Madhya Pradesh in Central India and even north-western Karnataka (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Bhatt & Ganpule 2017). Naoroji (2006) mentioned its range to be west of Dalhousie, which is near the western border of Himachal Pradesh, and in the distribution map, depicted its range in the surrounding states of Punjab, Haryana, Uttarakhand and Union Territories of Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh, but not in Himachal Pradesh. The location of a record of *babylonicus* is mentioned as Kishapur, Himachal Pradesh. However, the location given in Vertnet (Koelz 1931) is in Pakistan. The present record is the first for Himachal Pradesh.



24. Peregrine Falcon (Red-capped) at Pong Lake on 09 November 2017.

Black-headed Ibis *Threskiornis melanocephalus*

On 04 September 2020 morning, AD was birding along the shoreline of Pong Lake near Nagrota Surian. At 0700 h, an ibis was observed, which looked different from the Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus* and Red-naped Ibis *Pseudibis papillosa*, both

of which have been recorded from Pong Lake. It was completely white, except for black on the head, hindneck, and near tail, and a black bill and legs [25]. It was immediately identified as Black-headed Ibis *Threskiornis melanocephalus*. It was an immature bird, as the front of the neck was white, and the head and hindneck were not completely black. It was feeding close to the shoreline. AD also saw it the next day at the same spot; however, CA and PD could not locate it even after an extensive search on 06 September 2020 and subsequent visits.

The Black-headed Ibis is a widespread resident of India except in the Himalaya (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; eBird 2024a). A record from a place between Una and Amb is there on eBird dated 20 March 2019 (Lath 2019), but there is no supporting evidence. The observer was contacted through eBird for details of the sighting, but no reply was received. Similarly, there are two more records from Solan District from later dates. However, both lack supporting evidence and are from hill forests, which are not a suitable habitat for the species (Sikarwar 2021; Mahajan 2022). Thus, the present record is the first confirmed record for Himachal Pradesh. However, it was not unexpected as it is commonly seen in the plains of the surrounding states of Punjab, Haryana, Uttarakhand, and Jammu & Kashmir (Grimmett et al. 2011; eBird 2024a).



Ankush Dhiman

25. Black-headed Ibis at Pong Lake on 04 September 2020.

Turkestan / Asian Short-toed Lark *Alaudala heinei/cheleensis*

The Turkestan Short-toed Lark *Alaudala heinei* (hereinafter TSTL) was previously named Lesser Short-toed Lark and was treated as conspecific with the Mediterranean Short-toed Lark *A. rufescens* and sometimes with the Asian Short-toed Lark *A. cheleensis* (hereinafter ASTL). Currently there is no clarity regarding the identification features to separate these two species (Christian 2019; Ganpule 2019). There are very few records from India of individuals that belong to this pair of species, and they are considered rare winter migrants or vagrants to India (Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Christian 2019). Praveen et al. (2024) included TSTL in the Indian checklist based on the specimens collected from Sirsa, Haryana (Hume 1870; Sharpe 1890).

On 07 November 2020, CA and PD visited Nagrota Surian near Pong Lake. While birding in the flats around the Lake, we reached a place with short dry grass that was c.500 m away from the shore. Eurasian Skylarks *A. arvensis* and Sand Larks *A. raytal* were feeding in this patch. We came across a sandy-buff lark that looked different from the others. It fed close to the two

other species, making their differences stand out [26]. It had a long primary projection, like the Eurasian Skylark, but it was considerably smaller and more compact. Four primary tips were visible beyond the tertials. The bill was short and stout, unlike the other two species. It appeared slightly larger than the Sand Lark. The Greater Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla* and Hume's Short-toed Lark *C. acutirostris* were ruled out by the absence of dark patch on the sides of the breast and the presence of well-marked streaking on underparts of this bird. We identified it as TSTL/ASTL, as safely separating these two is difficult based on the present knowledge of plumage. However, based on the range given by Alström & Donald (2023) and the inclusion of the former in the Indian Checklist, the bird is likely a TSTL. There is considerable overlap in the identification features used for separating a Sand Lark from TSTL/ASTL. There is no single diagnostic feature that can separate these two in the field. We consulted Christian (2019) and Ganpule (2019) for identification. The images were sent to Prasad Ganpule, who confirmed the identity and further commented that the plumage lacks the greyish tinge of Sand Lark, and the face pattern also looked slightly stronger than Sand Lark (Prasad Ganpule in litt. e-mail dated 07 November 2020). The bird was not seen again on subsequent visits. However, it cannot be ruled out that the bird was wintering in the vicinity of the lake as there is a vast suitable habitat in the Pong Lake area, and this species can be easily overlooked due to its superficial similarity with other larks.

On 31 January 2022, AJ visited Jsrath in Lahaul (32.636°N, 76.855°E; c.2,800 m asl). The area was covered with snow, as Lahaul receives heavy snowfall during winter. A bird was seen feeding on the roof of a traditional kuccha house and photographed [27]. The roofs were free from snow as people regularly clear their roofs from snow. Dried grass for feeding domestic animals is also stored on the roofs. The place was not visited again. The photos revealed a sandy buff lark, with prominent streaking on the white underparts. The primary projection was long, and four primary tips were visible. The bill was short and stout. The tail looked longer than the Sand Lark, an important differentiating feature between these two (Ganpule 2019). The images were sent to Ashwin Viswanathan and CA, who confirmed it as TSTL/ASTL based on the above features. Later, Prasad Ganpule also confirmed it in litt. e-mail dated 09 August 2024. Per Alström (in litt. e-mail dated 26 November 2024) believes both birds are Turkestan Short-toed Lark due to the primary spacing.



C. Abhinav

26. Turkestan / Asian Short-toed Lark at Pong Lake on 07 November 2020.



Amir Jaspa

27. Turkestan / Asian Short-toed Lark at Jasrath, Lahaul on 31 January 2022.

The TSTL is largely migratory, while the ASTL is a resident in much of its range, except for the northernmost populations, which may migrate a short distance to winter in the southern parts of their breeding range (Alström et al. 2023). The non-breeding distribution is poorly understood, partly because of confusion with the former species. Except for the records from Haryana and West Bengal, all the recent records of this pair are from Rajasthan (Christian 2019). Apart from being the first records from Himachal Pradesh, these two records add to the scarce records of this pair from India.

White-winged Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus*

PD visited Nagrota Surian for birding on 30 August 2021. While driving in the flats, PD noticed a tern with blackish underparts flying near the shore [28]. PD clicked a few photographs of the tern. The underwings were almost black, with disjunct patches of white. The belly also had patches of white and black. The black in the ear coverts extended below the level of the eye. By these features it was identified as White-winged Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* in moult. It was easily differentiated from all the terns found inland in India by the black in underparts and underwings. Whiskered Tern *C. hybrida*, Black Tern *C. niger*, and Black-bellied Tern *Sterna acuticauda* have black underparts, but their underwings are not black (Grimmett et al. 2011). It kept flying along the shoreline and soon went out of sight. CA visited the location on the same evening but failed to relocate the bird. It was not seen again on subsequent visits.

White-winged Tern is a scarce non-breeding winter visitor to extreme southern India and a passage migrant throughout most of the region, mainly the coasts of the Indian Peninsula, South Andaman, and the north-western Himalayas (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Five birds were reported during the annual Asian Waterfowl Census in January 1991 from Himachal Pradesh (Perennou & Mundkur 1991; Inskipp 2006). However, the bird is known to winter in coastal regions, not in the Himalayas, and a sighting of five birds during mid-winter is unlikely. Moreover, identifying this species in winter plumage is difficult and there are high chances of misidentification, especially by less experienced birders, who are frequently involved during censuses. There have been records from the surrounding states of Punjab, Haryana, Uttarakhand, and Union Territories of Ladakh and Jammu & Kashmir (Grimmett et al. 2011; eBird 2024b). Most migrant reports are in spring, when identification is obvious, probably overlooked in fall (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). This fall season record, apart from being the first record for Himachal Pradesh, adds to the scarce records of this species in northern India.



Piyush Dogra

28. White-winged Tern at Pong Lake on 30 August 2021.

Eurasian Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*

On 09 May 2024, AJ was birding at Udaipur in Lahaul. A crow-like bird came [29] and settled on the roadside, near the market (32.727°N, 76.658°E; c.2,650 m asl). It stayed there for five minutes, and a few photographs were clicked. It was much smaller than the Large-billed Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos* and had a short, stout bill. The iris was distinctly pale. The flattish forecrown was blackish, while the nape and side of the head were contrastingly grey. By these features, it was identified as Eurasian Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*. The brownish-tinged plumage suggested that it was not an adult bird. CA visited the place the next day, but the bird could not be relocated, and there were no further sightings.

The Eurasian Jackdaw is a resident of Kashmir and winters in Ladakh, occasionally reaching the plains of Punjab (Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Humes (1889) mentioned its sighting during summer in the hills, as far east as the Beas River valley (probably Kullu District), and suspected its breeding between these two in suitable locations. No further details were given. Oates (1889) repeated the same statement. However, Whistler (1923) concluded that there was no evidence that Eurasian Jackdaws ever bred in the Punjab Territory (which included Himachal Pradesh at that time). Whistler (1926), after mentioning this error in the breeding range, stated, "In any case, the occurrence must have been exceptional as in the course of six visits to Kullu, both summer and winter, I have never met with a single Jackdaw." All the subsequent works have ignored this record by Humes (Baker 1922; Baker 1932; Ali & Riley 1987; Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Thus, the present record is the first confirmed record from Himachal Pradesh.



Amir Jaspa

29. Eurasian Jackdaw at Udaipur, Lahaul on 09 May 2024.

CA thanks Prasad Ganpule for confirming the identification and commenting on the Peregrine Falcon (Red-capped) and TSTL/ASTL and Nirav Bhatt for confirming the former.

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Frog in the diet of an Orange Minivet *Pericrocotus flammeus*

The genus *Pericrocotus* contains 15 minivet species within the cuckooshrike family Campephagidae. All *Pericrocotus* species are predominantly insectivorous with a few species recorded feeding on buds, fruits, and occasionally seeds (Winkler et al. 2020). Minivets are gregarious and generally feed on insects in mixed-species flocks. Here, we present the first photographic evidence of an Orange Minivet *P. flammeus* hunting and feeding on a vertebrate.



30. Orange Minivet *Pericrocotus flammeus* feeding on a frog.

On 20 October 2024, at approximately 1700 h at Shola Shack Ecostay (11.864°N, 75.956°E) in Wayanad, Kerala, India we observed a male Orange Minivet fly into an *Erythrina* tree and catch a frog. The minivet then flew into an *Evodia roxburghiana*, perched on an exposed section of the branch, and began striking the frog against the branch [30] similar to behaviour seen in kingfishers with their prey. The minivet then carried the frog away from the tree and out of sight to likely feed on it. The frog appeared to be a Variable Bush Frog *Raorchestes akroparallagi* based on the coloration and other features. The photograph to identify the frog is at Research Grade status on iNaturalist (Menzies 2024). This record adds to the dietary and foraging information of the Orange Minivet. Additionally, it calls for more attention to the diets of minivet species in general, which have long been thought to be almost exclusively insectivorous.

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