

Correspondence

The Band-bellied Crake *Zapornia paykullii* from Chidiyatapu, Andaman and Nicobar Islands: An addition to the South Asian avifauna

On the morning of 19 April 2024, I was guiding a birding tour group near Chidiyatapu forest (11.624°N, 92.676°E), South Andaman District, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, India. We were birding in a forest patch with flowing stream nearby. At 0710h, I spotted a crane-like bird on the road. One of our group members was able to take few photographs of it [5–8]. My initial field impression was that of a Slaty-legged Crake *Rallina eurizonoides*, a rare bird in the islands (Raman et al. 2013; Dalvi et al. 2022). However, after checking the photographs, I came to a conclusion that it is probably a Band-bellied Crake *Zapornia paykullii* due to its red legs [7–8] and strikingly-banded belly [6]. I also referred to photographs in www.ebird.org and *Birds of the World* (Taylor & Bonan 2020) and compared with that of the Slaty-legged Crake. Subsequently, I consulted others (see acknowledgements) who agreed with my identification.

The Band-bellied Crake breeds in eastern Asia and winters in Southeast Asia to as far south as the islands of Sumatra, Java, and Borneo. Hence, a vagrant during migration in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands is always a possibility. However, this is the first report for India and South Asia and there are other crakes in Andamans. Hence, a brief description of this individual's plumage and reasons for eliminating other similar crakes is needed.



5. Band-bellied Crake showing bars on underparts, undertail and red legs.



6. Band-bellied Crake reddish face and paler throat and supercilium.



7. Band-bellied Crake front view.



8. Band-bellied Crake showing red legs.

The crane had brown upperparts, reddish face turning paler at the sides of the neck, and again turning richer on the flanks and upper breast. The iris was red with a broad, paler chestnut supercilium that merged with the pale chestnut on the sides of the neck. The bill was horny in colour while the legs were red. The most striking feature in this bird was the black-and-white banded lower breast, belly, and under tail. The bands started with a thin white band followed by a thick black band, after which the black and white bands were nearly of equal width and both bands broadening towards the tail. All bars appeared to be black rather than dark-brown and hence this bird was possibly an adult male.

The resident and endemic Andaman Crake *R. canningi* with its green bill, dark chestnut plumage, unbarred undertail coverts, and slate-coloured legs could be easily told apart from my bird. The shape of its bill, being more pointed, is also different from my bird which showed a more swollen distal half. The Slaty-legged Crake is more similar but its feet are greyish-slaty, has more richer upperparts, and does not show the white and black markings on the wing coverts, a feature visible in my bird [5]. The Red-legged Crake *R. fasciata*, known from the Nicobar Islands (Dalvi et al. 2022), is also similar with red legs, but the start of barring is higher in the breast and is more rich chestnut all over its face, including the crown. The Red-legged Crake typically shows more white spots on the wings than the Band-bellied Crake and also has white spots in its primaries, which is absent in my bird. Great Nicobar Island has an undescribed crane (Rajeshkumar et al. 2012), which has orange-red legs, but available photographs

show a pale-yellow bill and rather thickset legs, unlike my bird. Hence, all visible features are indicative of a Band-bellied Crake, eliminating other similar crakes.

In its regular range, the Band-bellied Crake prefers wet grass and paddyfields as well as grassy hummocks with bushes or small trees, in meadows and swamps (Taylor & Bonan 2020). Considering this is an April record, this particular bird might have been on its return migration to its breeding grounds in northeastern Asia. Overall, a scarce bird, very little information is available on its migratory habits. There are very few observation records from its wintering range in Southeast Asia (eBird 2024); in fact, except for a long-staying bird in Singapore in 2018, there are only two other April records of this species in the 21st century from the entire world! This makes our record of this little-known species, rather special.

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Grey-streaked Flycatcher *Muscicapa greseiatica* from South Andaman, Andaman and Nicobar Islands: An addition to the avifauna of South Asia

The Grey-streaked Flycatcher *Muscicapa greseiatica* (hereinafter, GSFC) is a migratory old-world flycatcher that breeds in parts of north-eastern China, eastern Mongolia, North Korea, and south-eastern Russia (Clement 2020). Its non-breeding range primarily extends from Taiwan and Philippines through North Borneo, Sulawesi, and western Papua, up till the Lesser Sunda islands. There exist a few records from beyond the western edge of its main non-breeding range from Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and Cocos (Keeling) islands, where it is considered a vagrant (eBird 2024).

On 08 November, 2024, starting at 1515 h, we were birding on the path to the top of Mount Harriet (Mount Manipur) in South Andaman, Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Upon reaching the highest point of the peak (11.720°N, 92.733°E, c.365 m) at 1630 h, we spotted a flycatcher atop an 8–10 m tall tree [9]. Being at an elevated position, we observed the bird almost at eye-level. It was almost dusk, and light was fading. The bird was observed sallying periodically from the same perch for about 5–7 minutes, after which it took off to a neighboring tree but returning to its earlier perch ten minutes later. It remained on its perch but occasionally sallied. After another 5–7 minutes, it flew

away, not to be seen again. The most distinct feature observed through binoculars was bold and well-defined streaking on clean whitish flanks, breast and to some extent on the belly. There was no brownish wash or buff coloration on the underparts which appeared clean white.

We discussed the oddity of the streaked plumage as we compared to other Muscicapid flycatchers that we were familiar with and were possible in the region. At first, we considered the Dark-sided Flycatcher *Muscicapa sibirica* (hereinafter, DSFC) and the Asian Brown Flycatcher *M. dauurica* (hereinafter, ABFC). These two flycatchers are known from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and we had already seen three ABFCs during the past one week on the islands; however, none of them had shown any prominent streaking on the underparts. We noted later that the Brown-streaked Flycatcher *M. williamsoni* (hereinafter, BSFC), a recent split from the ABFC, also needs to be taken into account. The bird we observed looked quite different compared to the DSFC subspecies (*gulmergi* & *cacabata*) of the Himalaya; which we are familiar with. These birds (both first-year and adults) tend to have very dark underparts with a brown wash and darker ill-defined streaking, if not blotches, on the flanks and the breast, with a prominent white band running from the lower breast to the belly. However, the bird that we observed did not show any of these features. The ABFC never shows very strong, well-defined streaking as in the bird that we observed. The Spotted Flycatcher *M. striata* can show thin distinct streaking on the underparts. However, being familiar with that species, and absence of distinctive features of that species like streaky forehead and crown, concolorous lores with rest of face, long tail extending much beyond the tip of the folded primaries, and slim and elongated overall appearance helped us easily eliminate that species.



9. Grey-streaked Flycatcher as sighted atop a tree.

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After a literature search, we realized that the bird must be a GSFC (Robson 2000). Below, we compare the plumage and structural characteristics of the observed bird with two other 'streaked' Muscicapidae flycatchers, and argue that ours is a GSFC. Our comparisons are based on a thorough inspection of the photographic database on eBird along with relevant literature (Alström & Hirschfeld 1991; Bradshaw et al. 1991) and personal communications (Dave Bakewell, in litt., e-mail dated 11 November 2024; Craig Robson, in litt., e-mail dated 12 November 2024; James Eaton, in litt., e-mail dated 24 November 2024). The flycatchers considered are BSFC, GSFC, and the nominate subspecies of DSFC (hereinafter, just DSFC); all known to winter in Southeast Asia.