

swallows. Why the sparrows did not breed successfully in this location remains unknown but warrants a follow up study.



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22. A pair of House Sparrows in the Streak-throated Swallow colony.

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## The Black-headed Bunting *Emberiza melanocephala* in Chirang District, Assam

The Black-headed Bunting *Emberiza melanocephala* is a common non-breeding winter visitor in west and central India. It is commonly recorded during winter in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, northern Karnataka, and Madhya Pradesh while being a passage migrant in Pakistan as well as Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, and Jammu (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; eBird 2024). Our recent observation of a Black-headed Bunting flock at Bengtol Road in Chirang District, Assam, India, over a two-month period marks a noteworthy record. While previous studies have reported the species in various areas of north-eastern India, prolonged observation for months at a single site has not occurred.

During a routine bird survey on 31 January 2024 along the Bongaigaon to Gelephu (Bhutan) highway, a small flock of passerine birds was observed in the Chirang district by AP at 0745 h near Bengtol Road (26.575°N, 90.518°E). It was a flock of ten birds where three individuals were male with characteristic yellow underparts, black heads, black cheeks, and contrasting throats [23]. The birds were present for almost two months (Table 1). During our first sighting and across February, the flock was observed foraging on the grains in the harvested paddy fields along with Paddyfield Pipit *Anthus rufulus*, while in March, they were noted perching on bushes and bamboo thickets.



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23. Black-headed Bunting at Bengtol Road.

**Table 1.** Observations of Black-headed Bunting at the Bengtol Road, Chirang District, Assam

Date	Observation	Remarks
31 January 2024	A small flock of 10 individuals with three males	First sighting
29 February 2024	A large flock of c.60 individuals	Individuals of different sizes seen
27 March 2024	Two flocks in the same area, total c.30–40 birds	Flocks were feeding & resting on bamboo thickets
15 April 2024	No sighting of the species	Potential migration back to breeding grounds

Sightings of Black-headed Bunting in north-eastern India are scarce, with only six records available in eBird and iNaturalist (Table 2). No other records were found on social media. In recent years this species has been sighted outside its regular range in South Asia many times, including Bangladesh (Chowdhury 2011), West Bengal (Adhurya et al. 2016), and Nepal (Baral & Neupane 2022). This species has been recorded as a vagrant as far away as Southeast Asia, Borneo, the east coast of China, and even Japan (eBird 2024).

**Table 2.** Records of Black-headed Bunting from north-eastern India

Date	District & State	Count	Reference
12 April 2008	West Kameng, Arunachal Pradesh	1	Colenutt (2008)
01 November 2017	Bishnupur, Manipur	1	Singh (2017)
20 October 2023	Sonitpur, Assam	2	Saikia (2023)
14 November 2023	Baksa, Assam	1	Modak (2023)
04 January 2024	Baksa, Assam	1	Das (2024)
16 January 2024	Kokrajhar, Assam	10	Chanda (2024)

This record from the Chirang District is the first documentation of the species residing in Assam for a long period – two months. The flock's extended presence in the area during February and March suggests it may have spent part of the winter there or used the site for prolonged stopover during migration. These eastern records challenge existing knowledge of the species' distribution and migration patterns, raising questions about potential alternate migratory routes, wintering grounds, and a broader range than previously understood. Future efforts, such as tagging and ringing of individuals at these newly documented sites, could provide valuable insights into their migratory behavior and breeding locations.

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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