

The Daurian Starling *Agropsar sturninus* in Ladakh, India

The Daurian Starling *Agropsar sturninus* is widely distributed throughout the Oriental Region, ranging from Russia and China to most Southeast Asian countries and the Sundas (BirdLife International 2024). It breeds in eastern Mongolia, the Trans-Baikal region, the Amur Valley in China, and extending southwards into North Korea (Dickinson 2003). Its primary wintering areas include southern China, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Sumatra, Java, and Myanmar (King & Dickinson 1975). The species was considered as a vagrant in South Asia and has been documented in northern Pakistan, Nepal, Sundarbans in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, southern India, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, India (Kotagama et al. 2006; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Thompson et al. 2014); however, recent records from the latter two regions in India indicate that it is probably regular there (eBird 2024a).

On 17 June 2022, SS & JG while birding near Hanle village (32.783°N, 79.001°E; 4,302 m asl), in eastern Ladakh, spotted a fast-moving bird that eventually perched on a low bush and allowed them to photograph it. They were initially puzzled by its identity, however, after consulting the field-guide (Grimmett et al. 2011) and browsing images on eBird confirmed it to be a Daurian Starling [53]. A single individual was found at this time and the habitat of the location was characterized by fast flowing streams with scattered shrubbery and minimal vegetation.

On 6 June 2024, at 0827 h, VR observed one individual near Leh (34.066°N, 76.601°E; 3,219 m asl), Ladakh, during a birdwatching excursion, accompanied with visitors from

Singapore [54]. The bird was identified by features, such as, a mainly pale grey body, the wings, tail and back blackish with a purple iridescent sheen, and showing a glossy purplish patch on the hind crown and a white ring around the eye. When viewed from behind, the bird showed a distinctive white V-pattern formed by its rear scapulars. Females and juveniles of the species share a similar pattern to adult males but appear duller, with a grey-brown mantle and less vibrant wings and tail (Grimmett et al. 2011). Thus, the plumage characteristics of the bird we observed were consistent with that of an adult male. This location was adjacent to the Indus River, and the habitat was predominantly composed of poplar *spp.* with dense shrubbery [55]. Other birds observed in the vicinity here included the Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops*, Long-tailed Shrike *Lanius schach*, Brahminy Starling *Sturnia pagodarum*, and Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica*.



53. Daurian Starling near Hanle village, Ladakh on 17 June 2022.



54. Daurian Starling in Leh, Ladakh on 06 June 2024.



55. Habitat where Daurian Starling was sighted on 06 June 2024.

In the Indian Subcontinent, the first mainland record of the species was documented from Chitral in Pakistan (Fulton 1904). On mainland India, only a handful of records of the species in over a century, were reported up until at least 2012 (Sharma & Sangha 2012). However, several reports in recent years have emerged from Kerala and Tamil Nadu in southern India (eBird 2024a). The only record from the Western Himalaya in northern India has been recently documented by Kumar et al. (2024). A pair of birds, one male and one female, was reported in May 2021, followed by a sighting of a single female in May 2022, both from Chamoli, Uttarakhand, at an elevation of 1,451 m asl (Kumar et al. 2024). No subsequent sightings have been reported from the Western Himalaya or the surrounding region. The nearest previous record of the species is from Nepal in the Central Himalaya (Basnet & Chaudhary 2003), c.850 km southeast of the sighting from Uttarakhand, India. Thus, our two records of Daurian Starling from Ladakh, one each from June 2022 and 2024, appear to be the first records of the species for Ladakh.

Ladakh, located at the junction of the Palearctic and the Indo-Malayan zoogeographic zones, supports species from both regions and boasts a uniquely diverse avifauna with 438 bird species documented to date (eBird 2024b). Several comprehensive studies have documented the avifaunal diversity of Ladakh region (Meinertzhagen 1927; Holmes 1986; Mishra & Humbert-Droz 1998; Pfister 2001; Namgail 2005; Hussain et al. 2008; Bhat & Bhat 2012; Ahmed et al. 2015; Malik 2017; Sharma et al. 2021), but none have reported the occurrence of this species. Moreover, to the best of our knowledge, we could not find any other records of the species from Ladakh on citizen science portals such as eBird. Prior to our observations, records of only four starling species have been known from Ladakh that are supported with photographic evidence: Brahminy Starling, Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*, Rosy Starling *Pastor roseus*, and Chestnut-tailed Starling *S. malabarica* (eBird 2024b). This note documents the first two records of Daurian Starling in the Ladakh (Trans-Himalayan) region, with both sightings occurring in June but at different elevations and locations. The June 2022 sighting at Hanle (4,302 m asl) represents the highest elevation record for this species in India, while the June 2024 sighting from Leh (3,219 m asl) provides an additional insight of the occurrence of the species in the region at this time of year. The linear distance between these two records is c.200 km.

Both our June records are particularly interesting as they occurred during the typical breeding season of the species in its native range (eastern Mongolia, Trans-Baikal region, and Amur Valley), suggesting possible range expansion or changes in migration pattern of the species. The nearest record of the species to our Ladakh records is from Chamoli, Uttarakhand, India in the Western Himalaya, c.440 km and c.220 km away respectively, and was also reported in the month of May (Kumar et al. 2024). The occurrence of the species so far west of its usual range during this period (May–June) in consecutive years is noteworthy. More observations would help to understand any potential seasonal patterns of the species or changes in its movements in the region. As the species is considered a rare straggler to India, particularly in northern India, more bird surveys would help in better understanding its true status in this region, and to establish whether it is a regular migrant or just a vagrant.

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The Himalayan Rubythroat *Calliope pectoralis* in Jharkhand, India

On 7 January 2024, at 0835 h, while birdwatching in Massanjore, Dumka District, Jharkhand, India (24.073°N, 87.332°E), the