# Correspondence

## Addition of the White-throated Rock Thrush *Monticola gularis* to the avifauna of India and South Asia

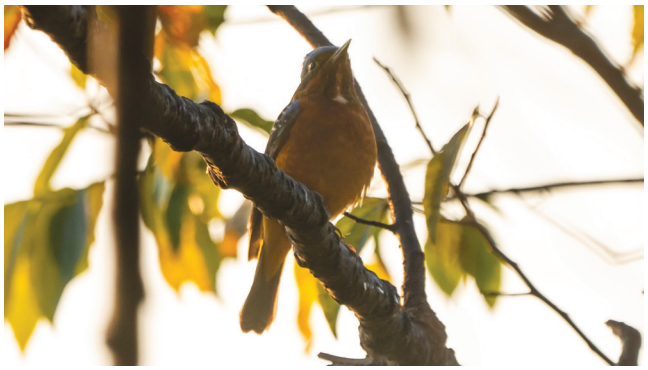
During a birdwatching excursion to Phawngpui National Park (NP), Mizoram, India, we observed an adult male White-throated Rock Thrush *Monticola gularis*, a new species for the country and South Asia.

On 10 March 2025, we (DK, CL, JRZT & PJ) reached the Thaltlang forest gate at 0530 h to enter the Phawngpui (Blue Mountain) National Park. While JRZT was working on the permits and transferring our luggage to a different vehicle, the rest of us decided to hike up through the Thaltlang community forests towards Far Pak. Birding was slow, with not much happening as the morning sunlight had not hit the forests yet. About a kilometre from the Thaltlang gate (22.692°N, 93.049°E; *c.*1,650m), at 0550 h, DK noticed a mid-sized bird in the canopy of the open forests, which he could not identify. The bird was first seen against the light and had blue upper parts and chestnut underparts, evoking some confusion as we discussed whether this could be a thrush, a robin, a niltava, or even a flycatcher. However, when we put the bird, which was facing us, on our spotting scope, it immediately became apparent that it was a Rock Thrush *Monticola sp.* with blue on upperparts and chestnut on underparts, with Blue-capped Rock Thrush *M. cinclorhyncha* being a contender. However, the bird had an obvious white stripe through the throat that widened a bit towards the breast. A quick look at Merlin indicated this to be a male White-throated Rock Thrush, as a Blue-capped male does not have this throat patch in any plumage. DK's notes recorded from the field while watching through the scope details the bird with chestnut underparts, deep chestnut or orangish cheeks, some dark stripes on the mesial area with a pale whitish streak between the mesial region that thickens towards the breast like a white spot; blue cap, blue sides of the wings with scaling as expected on a rock thrush. Excitement was evident, and DK digiscoped the bird **[49]** and CL photographed it **[50]**. Given the rarity of the species, we acknowledged the possibility that certain key features might have been overlooked, and so to confirm, we played a recording of its song to observe any behavioural response. The bird appeared to respond by flying slightly closer, though it remained on a high perch, *c.*20 m above us. This change in position allowed CL to capture additional photographs, revealing the scaly pattern on the wings and the pale legs, the latter being another feature that differentiates it from the Blue-capped Rock Thrush **[51]**.

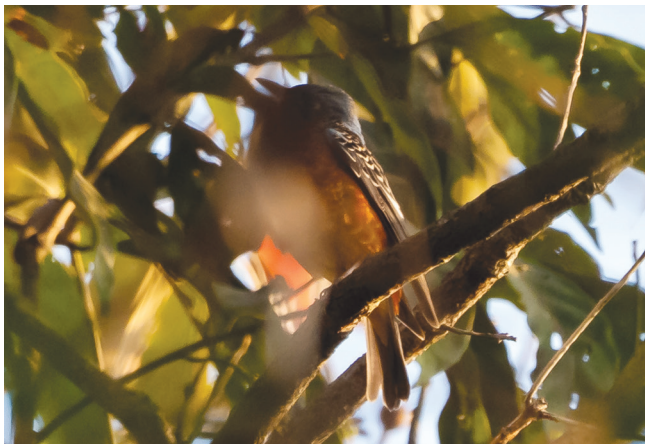
By then, another group of five birders, including Chandramouli Ganguly, Abhijeet Mhaskar, and Kiddy Vanchhawng, were driving up in their vehicle towards Far Pak. We stopped them and informed about the sighting, and with a bit of effort, they were also able to get reasonably good photographs of the bird confirming all the features visible in our photo set – white on throat, pale legs, blue cap, a white patch on the wings, light orange vent, black stripe through the eye which turns paler in loral region, a pale eye-ring that is more prominent towards the rear and absent directly above the eye, black bill, small blue patch on alula, blue-black primaries and a bluish tail, all confirming this bird to be an adult male. Overall, we were at the spot for about an hour until JRZT came up with our vehicle, but by then the bird seemed to have gone higher up on the ridge. Subsequent visits to the site during the week, by Chandramouli's team and ours, could not relocate the bird.

Dipu Karuthedathu

**49.** White-throated Rock Thrush, Phawngpui National Park, Mizoram.



**50.** White-throated Rock Thrush showing white throat stripe.



Both: Christopher J.Z. Lawlor

**51.** White-throated Rock Thrush showing pale legs and scaly pattern on the wing.

The White-throated Rock Thrush breeds in temperate forests across north-eastern China, south-eastern Russia, and North Korea, typically between May and July. It winters in subtropical or tropical moist lowland forests across Southeast Asia, including countries like Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and parts of southern China. The species was not totally unexpected here, as Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) specifically mentioned the Mizo hills where it might possibly occur during passage migration. It is

listed as a scarce to uncommon winter visitor to eastern Myanmar (Robson 2000). The nearest known record is from Mount Popa in central Myanmar (Keaveney 2010), *c.*300 km southeast of our sighting. It is probably a passage or winter migrant through the eastern parts of Myanmar, but is typically unreported due to the region being under-birded.

## References

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## Frog in diet of the Black-bellied Tern *Sterna acuticauda* from the National Chambal Sanctuary, India

The Black-bellied Tern *Sterna acuticauda* is a small (33 cm), Endangered tern with a deeply forked tail, long orange bill, and in breeding plumage showing a black cap, distinctive black belly and vent, and long outer tail feathers in breeding plumage (Rahmani 2012; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; BirdLife International 2025). The species, like some other riverine bird species in South and Southeast Asia, was once widespread and abundant along large rivers, but its population and range has undergone a drastic decline in recent times. It is now principally confined to India, where the vast majority (>90%) of the population resides (BirdLife International 2025).

The Black-bellied Tern (BBTE) is resident from the Indus River in Pakistan, along major river systems of India, eastwards to the Assam Valley and central Bangladesh (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Gochfeld et al. 2020). It is found on large rivers with extensive sandbanks, occasionally on smaller pools and ditches, in lowlands (BirdLife International 2025). It breeds between February and May on bare sandy islands on large rivers (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). The National Chambal Sanctuary (hereinafter, NCS) on the Chambal River in India is well-known for hosting a significant population of BBTE (Rahmani 2012). The species forages predominantly in shallow, slow moving stretches of the river as it provides an abundance of prey items, including small fish and invertebrates. It feeds by flying low over water and plucking food from the water surface; it also plunge-dives for fish or aerial dips for insects over water and land (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Gochfeld et al. 2020). It feeds mainly on small fishes, also insects (including dragonflies) and crustaceans (Rahmani 2012; Gochfeld et al. 2020). We reviewed 1,376 images of BBTE archived at the Macaulay Library database and found 33 images of the species with prey items. After accounting for duplicate images, we finally used 26 images (= 26 records) to ascertain the prey preference of the species. 69% (18) records had small fish as prey, 4% (1) records had small shrimp as prey; however, the prey item in the remaining 27% (7) records was unidentifiable due to the poor quality of images. In all images, the fish species could not be identified but the images indicate that the prey items were small fish, 5–7 cm in length, and forming the major part of the diet of the species.

During our long-term nest monitoring study of riverine birds at NCS from 2017–2023, with fieldwork during March–July, we regularly observed BBTE feeding on small fish. During the same period, we also identified some of the food-items brought by adults for nestlings as small shrimp. On one occasion, we found a small, completely dried frog in an active nest in May 2023. On 01 June 2023, we observed a BBTE actively foraging at edges of the river and catching a Common Skittering Frog *Euphlyctis cyanophlyctis* on the river bank **[52]**. Based on our two observations of BBTE preying on frogs, it can probably be considered as an opportunistic prey item in the diet of the species, especially during the nesting season when the species is provisioning nestlings. Given the absence of prior research on the dietary habits of the BBTE, this record presents an opportunity for further investigation.

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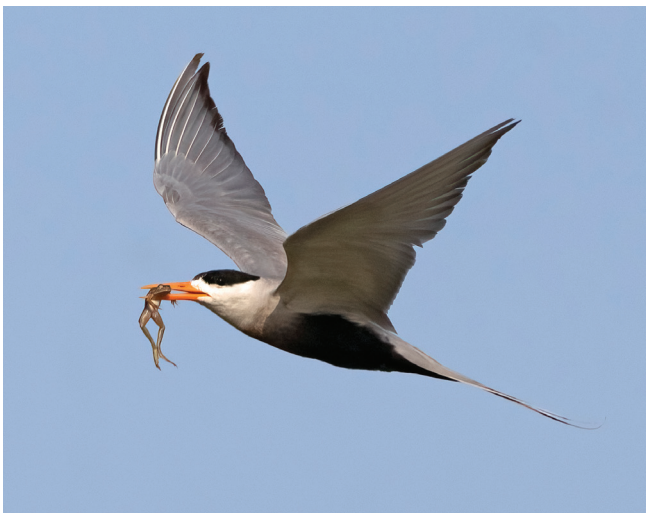

Viraj Athalye

**52.** Black-bellied Tern (breeding adult) with a Common Skittering Frog as prey, dated 01 June 2023.

## References

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