

Prakash 2024; Magdum 2024) making this species an expected vagrant, the individual from Goa is the first presumed case of a hybrid between a Whinchat and Siberian Stonechat from India.

Hybridization between Whinchat and Siberian Stonechat is globally not well-documented, with the only known record from Finland, which was reported as an apparent hybrid between female Siberian Stonechat and male Whinchat in Siilinjärvi, Central Finland, in 1997 that had produced four young (Carter et al. 1999). However, no further information about this case, either with respect to the identification features of the young upon fledging or their survival, is available in literature. Hence, our record appears to be the first record which documents the some of the identification features shown in the Whinchat and Siberian Stonechat hybrid.

The breeding range of Whinchat stretches from Europe to the Middle East (Clement & Rose 2015; Collar & Garcia 2020), on the other hand, the Siberian Stonechat breeds throughout the Himalayas, Central Asia, eastern Europe, and parts of China (Opaev et al. 2018; Clements et al. 2024). The breeding ranges and seasons of these two species are known to overlap from northern to Eastern Europe, north of Asia and the Middle East (Fig. 1). Given that these areas are where both species co-occur during breeding seasons, it is possible that the hybrid individual found in Goa may have originated from these areas.

Recent studies have clarified that two subspecies of the Siberian Stonechat regularly winter in the Indian Peninsula: *S. m. maurus*, which breeds across eastern Russia and Central Asia, migrates south to winter in northern India, Iran, and Iraq; and, *S. m. indicus*, a resident breeder in the Himalayas, also winters widely across the Indian Subcontinent. Additionally, populations breeding in central Mongolia and the Himalayas have been confirmed to contribute significantly to wintering individuals in South Asia (Clements et al. 2024). While the precise origin of the presumed Whinchat × Siberian Stonechat hybrid individual observed in Goa cannot be confirmed without genetic data, its occurrence highlights the need for further research on migratory connectivity and population structure in Siberian Stonechats. Hypotheses on the origin of an individual and its species lineage can only be authoritatively established through genetic and molecular analysis, especially in cases of suspected hybridization, and by comparing their genetic data with samples from breeding ranges.

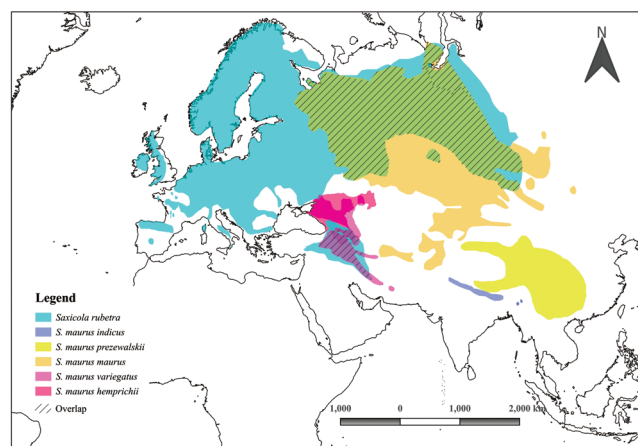


Fig. 1. Breeding distribution of *S. rubetra* (Clement & Rose 2015) and *S. maurus* (Opaev et al. 2018; Clements et al. 2024) showing zones of overlap, which are potential zones from which the observed hybrid of Whinchat × Siberian Stonechat in Goa could have possibly originated. Note: *S. m. armenicus* is treated as a junior synonym of *S. m. variegatus* (Svensson et al. 2012; Clements et al. 2024).

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## Status of Indian Nuthatch *Sitta castanea*, Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch *S. cinnamoventris*, and Velvet-fronted Nuthatch *S. frontalis* in Himachal Pradesh, India

Himachal Pradesh is a northern Indian state, located in the western Himalayan region. Four nuthatches are found in the state, White-tailed Nuthatch *Sitta himalayensis*, White-cheeked Nuthatch *S. leucopsis*, Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch *S. cinnamoventris*, and Velvet-fronted Nuthatch *S. frontalis* (Grimmett et al. 2011; Dhadwal 2019). First two are found at relatively higher altitude near treeline, reaching up to 3,300 m during summer, while the latter are usually found from plains to 1,800 m (the last one may reach up to 2,200 m locally) (Kazmierczak 2000). Historically, Indian Nuthatch *S. castanea* was treated as conspecific with Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch and Burmese Nuthatch *S. neglecta* (Grimmett

et al. 1998; Praveen et al. 2016); but now it is considered a separate species as it differs morphologically from both (Harrap 2020a; Clements et al. 2023; Praveen & Jayapal 2024). Indian Nuthatch can be differentiated from similar looking Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch, as it is smaller in size with shorter slender bill, the scalloping on undertail coverts is grey vs white, the crown and nape are paler than the mantle and the underparts of the male are fractionally darker (Grimmett et al. 2011; Harrap 2020a). Both species are supposed to have parapatric distribution; Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch is found in the Himalayan foothills while Indian Nuthatch is found in lowland habitats (Harrap 2020b). In this note, we report two records of Indian Nuthatch, which are first for the state and we discuss the range of Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch and Velvet-fronted Nuthatch in Himachal Pradesh.

### Indian Nuthatch *Sitta castanea*

On 17 April 2016 evening, AV was birding in Villa Round, Nahan (30.558°N, 77.305°E; c.900 m asl), located in the Sirmaur District in the southern Himachal Pradesh. A single nuthatch, which called with rapid single notes caught AV's attention. The calls were unlike those of the Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch which is abundant and regular in the area. It was a female nuthatch with dark scalloping on the vent and a visibly lighter nape compared to the mantle. It was photographed and identified as Indian Nuthatch based on these features and call (Vikrant 2016).

On 08 January 2018, while returning to Kangra from a birding trip to Sirmaur, CA stopped at a place near Jawar, Una District, close to the border of Kangra District (31.738°N, 76.183°E; c.690 m asl). The road was surrounded by a patch of forest dominated by *Sal Shorea robusta* and Pine *Pinus* sp. trees, bordered by villages and cultivation. CA saw an active male nuthatch feeding high up in the trees [158]. No prominent white was seen in the undertail coverts. CA took few photographs, keeping the possibility of Indian Nuthatch. The difference in size of bill and white patch on the cheeks, between Indian and Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch, was not appreciated in the field. Another male was seen on a nearby tree. Later, the photos were analyzed and it was noted that the crown and head are slightly lighter than mantle. The undertail coverts were grey, concolorous with the upperparts. As the difference in the plumage between these two species is slight, these photographs were sent to Harkirat Singh Sangha, Manoj Sharma, and Prasad Ganpule, all confirmed it as Indian Nuthatch (in litt. email dated 05 October 2018, 27 May 2020, and 29 May 2020, respectively).



C. Abhinav

158. Indian Nuthatch photographed near Jawar, Una, Himachal Pradesh on 08 January 2018.

In India the species is a resident in Gangetic Plains and terai belt from south-central Punjab and eastern Rajasthan, east to Bihar and West Bengal, and from northern Maharashtra and southern Madhya Pradesh, east to Odisha and south to northern Andhra Pradesh, also in foothills of southern Western Ghats (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Harrap 2020a). Its breeding was confirmed in the neighbouring state of Uttarakhand relatively recently (Sharma 2020). It is seen in deciduous forest, village groves, roadside trees and gardens, in plains and hills up to 1,000 m (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Harrap 2020a). Further north from Himachal Pradesh, there are no records from Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh (Pfister 2004; Grimmett et al. 2011; Kichloo et al. 2024). Dhadwal (2019) mentioned that the species is a common and widespread winter visitor in Himachal Pradesh and was photographed near Nahan, Sirmaur District in the spring of 2018. Perhaps some confusion regarding identification was involved, as in Himachal Pradesh, most of the region comes under Shivaliks and Himalaya, which is not the preferred habitat of the species. Moreover, the similar looking Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch, a more common species, has been recorded only once in the state by the author. Thus, the two records of Indian Nuthatch by us are the first confirmed records for Himachal Pradesh.

### Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch *Sitta cinnamoventris*

Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch is thought to consist of four subspecies and the north Indian birds belong to *almorae* subspecies (Harrap 2020b). This subspecies is considered to be a resident in the foothills of western and central Himalaya, in Murree Hills, Pakistan and from Uttarakhand to eastern part of central Nepal (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Harrap 2020b). A large gap in its distribution range is shown over Himachal Pradesh in the distribution map given by all the major works (Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Harrap 2020b). This gap is incorrect as the species has been recorded from several districts of Himachal Pradesh.

We have recorded the species in Sirmaur, Mandi, Solan, and Kangra Districts on multiple occasions. We found it to be common in Sirmaur District where it was mostly recorded at Nahan, Jamta, and Col. Sher Jung National Park, throughout the year by us. In Solan District, we found it to be common at Chakki Mod and along the road leading to Bhojnagar from Chakki Mod. In Kangra District, CA mainly recorded it in the tea gardens around Dharamsala, where a pair was also observed building a nest in a tree hole using mud on 11 March 2012 (32.195°N, 76.308°E) [159], providing evidence of its breeding in the area. During early April, they were seen feeding the young birds. den Besten (2004) has mentioned it as a resident and found four birds around Dharamsala and eight birds around Pong Lake, at 400–1,400 m asl, during his avian surveys between 1997 and 2003. However, the possibility of India Nuthatch for the birds seen at lower altitudes, could not be ruled out, as these records occurred before the species were split. In the same district, CA also recorded it at Garli (31.809°N, 76.244°E) on multiple occasions, between November to March. In Mandi District, CA recorded it twice in the hills near the Mandi Town (31.665°N, 76.946°E) in January. Perreau (1911) found it to be fairly common between 1,676 and 2,438 m around Bakloh, Chamba District. However, some confusion might be involved as it is usually seen below 1,500 m and to a maximum altitude of 2,000 m; and the given range matches with White-tailed Nuthatch.



Both: C. Abhinav



159. Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch making nest in Dharamsala outskirts, Himachal Pradesh on 11 March 2012.

eBird (2024a) shows multiple observations of Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch from the aforementioned districts and Chamba and Shimla, with many of these records substantiated by photographs. Most of the records are from Solan and Sirmaur Districts. In Fig. 1, we use eBird (2024b) data from Himachal Pradesh to plot the percentage reporting frequency of Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch across different months. We excluded the data from Shimla, Kullu, Kinnaur, and Lahaul & Spiti Districts owing to possible misidentification of the species with White-tailed Nuthatch which is also more likely to be found at higher elevations.

The eBird (2024a) also reveals that there are many records of Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch from Jammu & Kashmir too and its distribution range is continuous till Murre hills and surrounding regions in Pakistan. Assessing the above-mentioned records, we can say that the species is common in southern Himachal Pradesh, mainly in Solan and Sirmaur Districts while it is uncommon to rare or absent in other districts of Himachal Pradesh. We suggest a correction in the range statement of Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch in northern India.

### Velvet-fronted Nuthatch *Sitta frontalis*

In the Indian subcontinent, Velvet-fronted Nuthatch *Sitta frontalis* is a resident of Himalayan foothills from Uttarakhand to Arunachal

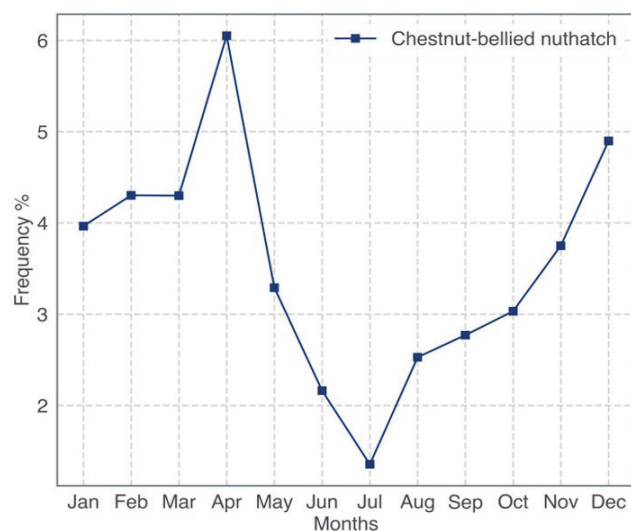


Fig. 1: The plot shows the frequency percentage of monthly total eBird checklists (1900-2024) from Himachal Pradesh (excluding Shimla, Kullu, Kinnaur, and Lahaul & Spiti Districts) that report the Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch.



160. Velvet-fronted Nuthatch photographed in Col. Sher Jung National Park, Himachal Pradesh on 16 February 2019.

Pradesh, hills south and east of Brahmaputra, Bangladesh, and patchily throughout hill tracts of peninsular India to Sri Lanka (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).

AV has observed Velvet-fronted Nuthatch on several occasions at Villa Round, Nahan, Sirmaur District (30.558°N, 77.303°E), which was visited frequently between 2013 and 2017. CA and Piyush Dogra recorded it almost on every visit to Col. Sher Jung National Park (30.432°N, 77.483°E), in Sirmaur District. The National Park was visited about 1–5 times per year since 2016 and up to six birds were seen during each visit [160]. CA and Piyush Dogra once observed it near Dadahu (30.600°N, 77.446°E), and on one occasion at different locations along the route from Paonta Sahib to Dadahu (30.544°N, 77.480°E). The species is missing from the list of Birds of Col. Sher Jung National

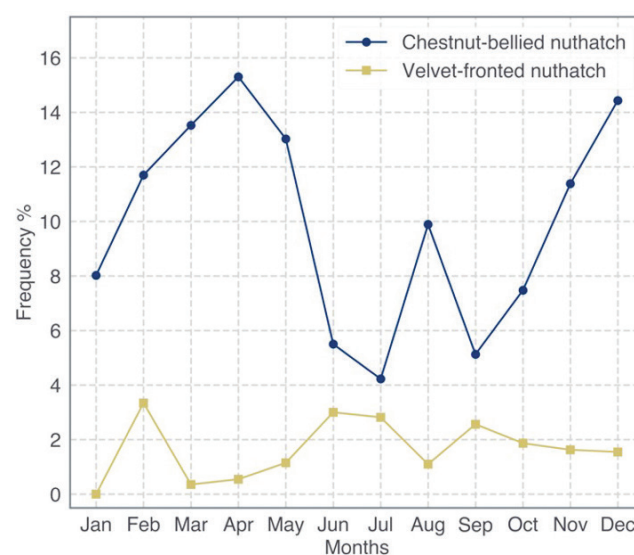


Fig. 2: Plot comparing the percentage of monthly total eBird checklists (1900-2024) that report the Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch and Velvet-fronted Nuthatch from Sirmaur District.

Park by Bhargav et al. (2007), but listed in Ghosh et al. (2007). Dhadwal (2019) has recorded it once near Paonta Sahib in the same district. Our sightings along with records by other observers (eBird 2024c), indicate that it is a common resident in Sirmaur District. Thus, the distribution range of Velvet-fronted Nuthatch extends up to the southern parts of Sirmaur District in southern Himachal Pradesh.

In Fig. 2, we compare the monthly reporting frequency percentage of Velvet-fronted Nuthatch and Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch from Sirmaur District based on eBird (2024d) data. While the Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch has a much higher reporting frequency, the Velvet-fronted Nuthatch has also been recorded almost throughout the year.

To conclude, we have provided two records of Indian Nuthatch from Himachal Pradesh, which are probably the first records of the species from the state and we urge correction in the range statement of Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch and Velvet-fronted Nuthatch in Himachal Pradesh.

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## A Blue Whistling-Thrush *Myophonus caeruleus* from New Delhi, India

On the morning of 02 November 2023, we were birding from our balcony (28.552° N, 77.198° E; 227 m asl) in Hauz Khas, New Delhi, India. We spotted a bird that was unlike those seen on regular days. It was a Blue Whistling-Thrush *Myophonus caeruleus*. Key diagnostic features included a bright yellow bill, a dark blue-black head with tiny silvery spots, and bright blue tail feathers [161]. A notable behavioural characteristic was its distinctive hopping movement and frequent tail-fanning. The identification was confirmed using a field guide (Kazmierczak 2008) and the Merlin Bird ID app. The species is found in hilly regions of India and is a resident of the Himalaya and north-eastern India (Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). During winters, it descends to the foothills and has been rarely recorded as a vagrant further south in the northern Indian plains, with only a few records from locations such as Alwar, Bharatpur, and Lucknow (eBird 2024).



Bhramini Pandey

161. Blue Whistling-Thrush photographed from Hauz Khas, New Delhi.

The species is frequently observed along streams in forested hills and mountainous regions (eBird 2024). Here, it remained next to the drain flowing through Rose Garden, which likely resembled its natural habitat. Calls were heard during dawn and dusk, with whistling calls being more prominent during the early morning hours, especially in the later winter months of February and March. Calls were recorded, and the following spectrograms were produced (Figs. 2, 3). The individual remained in the area until 24 March 2024.

According to eBird records, there has been only one prior record from the National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi. The