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Correspondence

A Menetries's Warbler *Curruca mystacea* from Hanley, Ladakh: An addition to the Indian avifauna

On 05 July 2025, I was birding in the Khaldo Bagh Plantations in Hanley village (32.773°N, 78.984°E), eastern Ladakh, when a medium-sized moth caught my attention as it flew just a meter ahead of me. As I followed the moth in the hope of photographing it, I noticed a sparrow-sized bird perched in front of me in the *Salix* tree. While looking through the binoculars, the jizz was that of a *Curruca* species. As I was unsure of the identification, I took some photographs [179, 180] which revealed many characteristics not seen in any *Curruca* sp. recorded in Ladakh (Gyalpo 2025). Photographs showed the bird with a reddish orbital eye ring, pale iris, white moustachial stripe, and orangish throat becoming pale towards the belly. The forehead, crown and ear-coverts blackish, grading into pale grey of upperparts; tertials dark grey with broad, ill-defined pale grey fringes. Pale legs and brick-red orbital ring separate from invariably dark-legged Lesser Whitethroat *C. curruca*. Smaller size and daintier shape, shorter tail, lack of rufous wing panel and presence of a brick-red orbital ring separated it from Greater Whitethroat *C. communis* (Shirihai & Svensson 2018). The images were forwarded to eBird India Editors group where the bird was suspected to be either an Eastern Subalpine Warbler *C. cantillans* or a Menetries's Warbler *C. mystacea*.



179. Menetries's Warbler showing black hood, crown and ear coverts with reddish orbital ring, pale iris, white moustachial stripe and paler legs on 05 July 2025.



180. Menetries's Warbler showing white moustachial stripe, orangish throat grading paler towards belly on 05 July 2025.

The major pitfall is the similar looking Eastern Subalpine Warbler, from which it differs in having pale fringes of tertials distinctly less sharply demarcated, more contrastingly blackish tail and presence of prominent blackish hood (Aymí & Gargallo 2021). Blackish hood was visible in all photographs [179, 180]. The identification was narrowed down to a breeding plumage of a male Menetries's Warbler *turcménica* subspecies based on intermediate plumage compared to the darkest *mystacea* and palest *rubescens* and being the easternmost form in the species overall distribution range. Menetries's Warbler is a Middle Eastern and Central Asian breeding endemic whose subspecies-specific migratory ranges are poorly understood and has a few cases of vagrancies outside the known range.

The presence of the warbler has been reported multiple times by different observers in the same plantation area till 05 September 2025. It is safe to conclude that all of the records are of the same individual based on the photographic evidence in eBird. By 16 August 2025, the otherwise prominent black hood has partially turned pale brown alongside mantle with nape and uppertail coverts still remaining greyish, and the orangish throat also slightly becoming dull [181]. By 28 August, its upperparts from the hood till the upper tail-coverts is completely uniform pale brownish with only a slight hint of grey. The tertial edges have also turned brownish while retaining the dark centers and the white moustachial stripe becoming inconspicuous to the otherwise orangish throat patch [182]. However, the black

tail is retained. Compared to spring, grey of upperparts tinged pale sandy-brown, and blackish crown duller and less clearly demarcated; pale salmon-pink throat and breast generally less intense, being tipped whitish (Shirihai & Svensson 2018) can be observed in autumn birds.

The occurrence of this bird in Ladakh is the south-easternmost record for the species. The first subcontinental record was reported from the Surkhab Valley, Pakistan, by T. J. Roberts in March 1974 (Roberts 1975), and subsequently he found several pairs breeding in west-central Baluchistan (Roberts 1980). More recently, it was reported by M. Akram Awan from Chaghi District, Baluchistan, where the species is considered localized (Azan Karam, pers. comm. September 2025). The closest report of Menetries's Warbler in eBird is from Tajikistan (Gregory 2025) but the nearest published record is from Kotla Habib [=Kotla Habeeb], Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan on 21 September 1993 (Kylänpää 200), which would be the closest (c.800km) to Ladakh. The bird is not recorded in the latest *India Checklist* (Praveen & Jayapal 2025), hence marking this record from Hanley region in Ladakh as the first for India.

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– Padma Gyalpo

Shey Choldan House, Leh, 194101, Union Territory of Ladakh, India.
E-mail: gyalpo4086@gmail.com. [PG] [Corresponding author]



181. Menetries's Warbler showing pale brown hood, mantle, nape and duller orangish throat on 16 August 2025.



182. Menetries's Warbler showing uniform pale-brown upperparts with dark centers to brownish tertials on 28 August 2025.

Both photos: Padma Gyalpo

The Banded Bay Cuckoo *Cacomantis sonneratii* at Bhoj Nagar, Solan District, Himachal Pradesh, India, and its status in the state

On 16 February 2025, during the Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) of 2025, VS, MK, SN & SN were birding in the Chakki Mod area in Solan District, Himachal Pradesh, India. Concurrently, another event, the annual dawn-to-dusk Chandigarh Bird Race, was also in progress. Moving along the road from Chakki Mod to Bhojnagar, a good number of bird species were observed, especially near Bhojnagar (30.836°N, 77.062°E; 1,385 m asl), where a garbage dump and a nearby pine tree usually attract 5–7 species. At 1130 h, a bird was seen flying and then perched on a tree. It certainly felt like a cuckoo, but could not be identified to the species level immediately. The bird also did not vocalize, so identification by sound was not possible. Nevertheless, some photographs were taken, and it was later identified as a Banded Bay Cuckoo *Cacomantis sonneratii* [183, 184], based on the