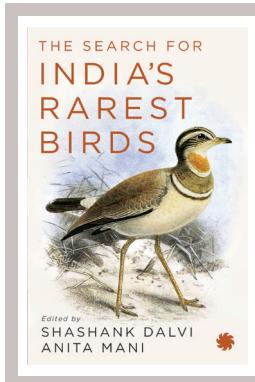


## Book review



*The Search for India's Rarest Birds*  
Shashank Dalvi & Anita Mani (Eds.)  
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This is a delightful book with tales of rare birds in India. There are 12 chapters by different authors covering the whole spectrum of searching for rare and poorly-known birds in India and surrounding countries.

James Eaton notes that 'birders generally are a bunch that enjoy treading the well-trodden path, rarely straying to explore areas, leaving the less-explored areas open for those with a sense of adventure'. I hope this book will encourage birders to step off these paths where the avifauna is already pretty well known and search for birds that are poorly known, or even entirely unknown.

Frank Rheindt writes about 'Finding the next rare bird for India' mentioning that only three bird species new to science have been described from India since 2000. He suggests three areas or strategies that could turn up new birds for India: pelagic species, Eastern Palearctic migrants and resident birds from Myanmar that could be found on the Indian side of the border. However, there are no suggestions as to where to look for undescribed birds. The Bugun Liocichla *Liocichla bugunorum* was described in 2006 from West Kameng district in Arunachal Pradesh. This district (area 7,422 sq. km) was home to a large majority (c.3,400) of recent eBird checklists from the state, with records of 597 species. In contrast two nearby districts, Kra Daadi and Kurung Kumey (combined area 8,183 sq. km) together generated only 19 checklists with a combined total of 85 species. If coverage had been equal to that of West Kameng who knows what might have been discovered!

I know from personal experience that there are birds waiting to be discovered in the Indian Subcontinent. In November 1970 I, accompanied by two fellow British birders, was following a trail in Helambu, Nepal, using a basic tourist map. The map showed the trail climbing up a ridge from Tharepati at 3,500 m asl but, after ascending about 500 m asl with increasing difficulty the 'trail' petered out. Whilst discussing what to do a small bird landed beside me. It resembled a Black-winged Snowfinch *Montifringilla adamsi* but had a sharply demarcated black head (and much white in the wing), a character which I subsequently realised is not shown by any known snowfinch, or the inappropriately named Black-headed Mountain Finch *Leucosticte brandti*, which has, at best, a rather diffuse sooty-coloured head. It was only there briefly so I was not able to get a complete description. I doubt whether any birders have been there since so this mystery remains to be resolved.

The remaining 11 accounts encompass a fascinating eclectic mix of different aspects of encountering rare birds in India. Aasheesh Pittie discusses the history of the Pink-headed Duck *Rhodonessa caryophyllacea*, which was last seen in the wild in 1935 in Bihar. Despite the lack of records for 90 years Aasheesh

hopes that it might be rediscovered.

Three of the accounts relate to rediscovery of 'lost' species. Bharat Bhushan writes about Jerdon's Courser *Rhinoptilus bitorquatus*, which had not been seen since 1900; he refound it thanks to a local bird trapper in Andhra Pradesh. Pamela Rasmussen was instrumental in rediscovering the Forest Owlet *Athene blewitti* in Maharashtra, after it had been missing for 113 years. Puja Sharma and Andrew Spencer went to Phawngpui in Mizoram to search for Mount Victoria Babax *Pterorhinus woodi*. This species was first found there in 1953 but then, apart from two little-known sightings in 1977 and 2016, it was considered one of the 'hardest species to find' in India. After several days searching to no avail they were packing up to leave when a singing Babax stopped them in their tracks. Several accounts involve species that are poorly known because the areas they inhabit are relatively hard to access. One account details a newly-described species. Shashank Dalvi recounts the story of the finding and description of the Nicobar Scops-Owl *Otus alius* from Great Nicobar Island, a species that has been found to be common in its limited range but overlooked because of the difficulty of accessing its habitat. Radhika Raj also writes about Great Nicobar Island but a quite different bird, the extraordinary mound-building Nicobar Megapode *Megapodius nicobariensis*. Radhika spent three weeks trying to see the megapodes, building eight hides in different areas and finally had brief views of one. Praveen J. describes his efforts to find and study the Banasura Laughingthrush (Chilappan) *Montecinclajerdoni* in the high altitudes of a very restricted area in the Western Ghats of northern Kerala. His team found the species to be fairly common once they got high enough up and gathered important information on vocalizations and breeding behaviour.

Sayam U. Chowdhury recounts his experiences with Masked Finfoot *Heliopais personatus* in the Bangladesh Sundarbans. He learnt a lot about the breeding biology but the survival of the species in Bangladesh is not assured. Anita Mani and Shashank Dalvi write about Mrs. Hume's Pheasant *Syrmaticus humiae*, a bird that was rarely seen in the wild until local hunters turned conservationists in Manipur showed that it could be found in night roosts. James Eaton followed up on a handful of the only recent sightings of the Long-billed Bush Warbler *Locustella major*, the most recent being from the Gilgit-Baltistan area of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir; he succeeded in finding several singing birds. Finally, Atul Jain, one of the foremost 'twitchers' in India writes about seven memorable trips chasing rare residents: Temminck's Tragopan *Tragopan temminckii* and Hodgson's Frogmouth *Batrachostomus hodgsoni* in Arunachal Pradesh, Mrs. Hume's Pheasant in Manipur, Chin Hills Wren-Babbler *Spelaeornis oatesi* in Mizoram, and Narcondam Hornbill *Rhyticeros narcondami* on Narcondam Island. Also two vagrant species: Mandarin Duck *Aix galericulata* on Little Andaman Island and Yellow-rumped Flycatcher *Ficedula zanthopygia* in Kerala.

In conclusion I thoroughly recommend this book to anyone who wishes to learn about poorly-known birds in India, or indeed in surrounding countries. The techniques used to find the birds in these accounts could usefully be employed elsewhere to hopefully lead to discoveries of unknown birds, rediscoveries of other lost birds, or more generally to fill in gaps in distribution. Perusal of a map showing eBird records from India shows areas with few or no records, not just in expected areas such as deserts in the north-west or upland areas of the north-east, but also in central areas like Jharkhand.

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