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A Little Bunting *Emberiza pusilla* from Junagadh, Gujarat

The Little Bunting *Emberiza pusilla* breeds from northern Scandinavia, eastwards through northern Russia and Siberia till the coasts of the Pacific in Russia (Copete 2020). In the non-breeding season, it is found in eastern Nepal, north-eastern India, northern and central Myanmar, northern Thailand, northern Laos, northern Vietnam, southern China, and Taiwan (Copete 2020). Vagrancy of the species has been well documented, and 2024–2025 has been an exceptional season for Little Bunting in India with first records from the states of Tripura, Jharkhand, Haryana, and Rajasthan recorded (Chakrabarti et al. 2025). We add to this list with our record from the state of Gujarat.

On 28 March 2025 at 0645 h, while birding in the premises of our lodge, Aramnesh (21.155°N, 70.557°E) in Junagadh, Gujarat, we saw a small bird that flew in and perched on a lemon tree. We managed to photograph it [282] before it disappeared within less than 15–20 sec. Later, almost every day, till our return on 03 April 2025, we managed to get photographs of this particular bird. Photographs showed a bunting with a black crown with reddish brown head stripe, chestnut ear-coverts, dark eye-stripe behind the eye curving downwards to surround the ear-coverts, dark moustachial stripe connecting to the breast streaking and pale eye-ring. The upperparts showed a grey-brown rump lightly streaked black, and a mantle with heavy black streaking. The median coverts were tipped buff-white, creating a wing-bar. The underparts were buff-white with narrow, distinct black streaking on breast and flank. We compared our photographs with our field guide (Grimmett et al. 2011) and found out that it is a Little Bunting. As this was a lifer for us, we reverified the identification with others and obtained confirmation as to this species (Pravar Mourya, *in litt.* 28 March 2025).



Narendran M. M.

282. Little Bunting showing chestnut ear-coverts, dark eye-stripe behind the eye curving downwards to surround the ear-coverts, dark moustachial stripe, and streaked breast.

Our sighting constituted the first photographic record of Little Bunting for the state of Gujarat, India. A pair of Little Buntings has been reported from Jasdan near Rajkot, Gujarat but further identification details were not documented (Khacher 1996). This has been the evidence used to list the species in Gujarat (Ganpule 2016; Ganpule et al. 2022). Ours will be the first independently verifiable evidence of its occurrence in the state. The habitat of the area where the bird was spotted was an agricultural land, currently used as organic garden of the Aramnesh resort. This habitat contains small stretches of Mango *Mangifera* sp., Lemon *Citrus* sp., Sapota *Malinkara zapota*, Sitafof *Annona squamosa*, Indian Jujube *Ziziphus mauritiana*, and Teak *Tectona grandis* amongst other grasses and shrubs.

We would like to thank Mr. Pravar Mourya for helping us to reconfirm the identification the Little Bunting. We would also like to thank Mr. Jimmy Patel and Mr. Parikshit Rathore for encouraging us continuously and giving permission to do birding inside the lodge premises.

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Wall-making behaviour by a Blue-bearded Bee-eater *Nyctornis athertoni* nestling

The family Meropidae comprises 31 species of bee-eaters, distributed across three genera in the Old World (Winkler et al. 2020). The genus *Nyctornis* is represented by two species; the Red-bearded Bee-eater *N. amictus* and the Blue-bearded Bee-eater *N. athertoni*. The Blue-bearded Bee-eater is the largest of all bee-eaters, characterized by its predominantly green plumage and distinctive beard-like blue throat feathers. It is a resident of secondary evergreen and moist deciduous forests in the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia (Ali & Ripley 1987; Praveen 2025). Blue-bearded Bee-eaters are cavity nesters that excavate nest tunnels in vertical banks (Ali & Ripley 1987). In this note I report a hitherto unrecorded instance of wall-making behaviour by a Blue-bearded Bee-eater's nestling in a nest tunnel, an apparent anti-predatory behavior, observed in Oros, Sindhudurg district, Maharashtra, India. This behaviour occurred daily during the feeding season, with wall construction at dusk and dismantling at dawn, using its bill as the primary tool.

I opportunistically observed a Blue-bearded Bee-eater nesting site in Oros village (16.107°N, 73.697°E), Sindhudurg district, Maharashtra. I made my observations during the period

of February to May 2025, which also coincided with the breeding season of the species (Ali & Ripley 1987). The surrounding habitat consisted of moist deciduous forest (Kulkarni 1988), dominated by trees like Khair *Senegalia catechu*, Charoli *Buchanania lanzan*, and Akashi *Acacia auriculiformis*. The nest (or the nesting tunnel) had an oval entrance and was found dug into a vertical exposed red soil bank alongside a road. The nest tunnel was c. 115 cm above ground level, with an oval entrance measuring 8 cm wide and 10 cm high and extended c. 115 cm in depth. I repeatedly observed birds on their lookout perch, which was 15 m away from the nest and 4 m above ground level on a tree. The nest was 8 m away from the road. I took all these measurements post-fledging to avoid disturbance to the nest.

I followed recommended practices and guidelines in Barve et al. (2020) for documentation of the nest observations. I observed the nest from a safe distance of 12 m, using 10x42 binoculars. I occasionally observed the nest twice a day, early in the morning (0530–0630 h) and late in the evening (1730–1930 h), when the activities at the nest were at its peak. I photographed the nest tunnel using a small low-beam torch, a DSLR camera with a 200–500 mm lens, and a mobile phone. Nest interior shots were taken at night to avoid disturbance to parent birds.

From late February, I observed a pair of Blue-bearded Bee-eaters near the nesting site. By 25 March 2025, the pair had already occupied the previous year's nest tunnel, which I have observed being reused for the past three years. One of the individuals had a damaged bill with a broken tip on the upper mandible [283]. This individual also had worn tail feathers. These features enabled me to separate the individuals during my observations. Based on the fact that the other individual [284] took up all incubation duties, I presumed the bird with the broken bill to be the male. The presumed male guarded the nest from a nearby lookout perch, responding to intruders, including other birds and humans, with loud, harsh, and repeated territorial calls.

Table 1. Observations at the nest of the Blue-bearded Bee-eater during February–May 2025

Date	Observation	Wall observed
2 nd half of February	Pair occupied the nest.	NA
14 April	Single recently hatched nestling at the nest.	NA
22 April (evening)	The wall in the nest observed for the first time.	Yes
23 April (morning)	The wall was dismantled.	No
23 April (evening)	Nestling constructed the wall.	Yes
24 April (morning)	The wall was dismantled.	No
22 April to 14 May	Wall constructed at dusk and dismantled at dawn.	Yes
14 May	Nestling fledged.	No

On 14 April 2025, I observed a single freshly hatched nestling in the nest. The nestling had eyes closed, was featherless, and had a dark pinkish colouration, with a notably well-developed bill [285]. I was certain there was only one nestling, but I could not confirm how many eggs were laid due to limitations in observation during the incubation period. Both parents took turns feeding the nestling, perching at the tunnel entrance and making a distinctive low-frequency *tak-tak* call to signal the nestling to approach. Interestingly, the parents did



283. The presumed male Blue-bearded Bee-eater with a broken bill.



284. The presumed female Blue-bearded Bee-eater on the nest hole.

Both photos: Sachin Shrikishna Prabhu

not enter the nest while feeding; instead, the nestling would actively walk towards the entrance, emitting screaming calls, and after feeding, walk back to the nest chamber. This behavior was observed even on the first day after hatching, when it appeared to be blind. Based on the feed brought by the adults, it appeared that the nestling's diet consisted mainly of insects, including cicadas, bees, and wasps.



All photos: Sachin Shrikishna Prabhu

285. First day of the nestling with eyes-closed, pinkish body, unfeathered but with a prominent bill.

On 22 April 2025, at 1800 h, the presumed male parent visited the nest with a cicada kill for the nestling. It perched at the entrance of the nest and made the usual *tak-tak* feeding call, presumably expecting the nestling to respond and accept the food. When the nestling failed to respond, the male parent flew out to the lookout perch and continued calling, still holding its prey in its bill. It approached the nest again, attempting to feed the nestling, but was unsuccessful. Ultimately, after a couple of more attempts and waiting for about four to five minutes, the male swallowed this prey. I now got curious as to why the nestling did not respond.

I checked the nest tunnel after sunset to minimize any disturbance to the parent birds. I used a low-beam torch to examine the nest tunnel. On inspection, I saw a wall in the middle of the tunnel, c.50 cm from the entrance, constructed with a mixture of mud and debris (Fig. 1). Initially, I wondered if termites had invaded the nest; however, observations from the next morning (0600 h) revealed it not to be the case. Normal feeding cycles by the parents resumed throughout the day, and by evening (1800 h), I again observed a similar wall constructed in the middle of the tunnel.

The next day, after the evening feeding session concluded and the parent birds left for roosting, I sat by the nest to investigate the mystery of the wall. I took all the care to avoid disturbing the nest and nestling. I used a low-beam torch to peek inside the nest tunnel. I observed the nestling constructing the wall with its beak in the middle of the tunnel. However, as the torch beam fell on the nestling, it stopped the wall-making process and retreated into the tunnel chamber. When I checked after 30 min, the wall was completely constructed. I avoided taking photos or videos during the wall construction process to prevent disturbance and

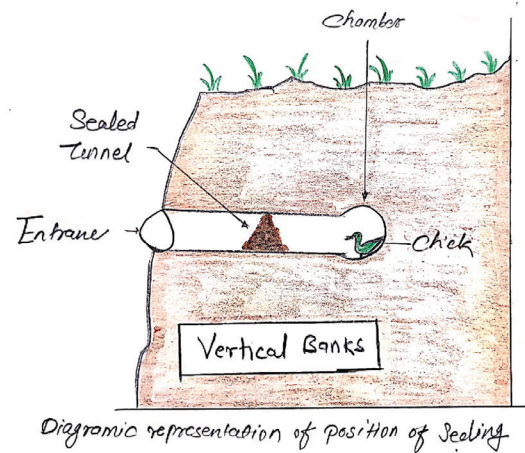


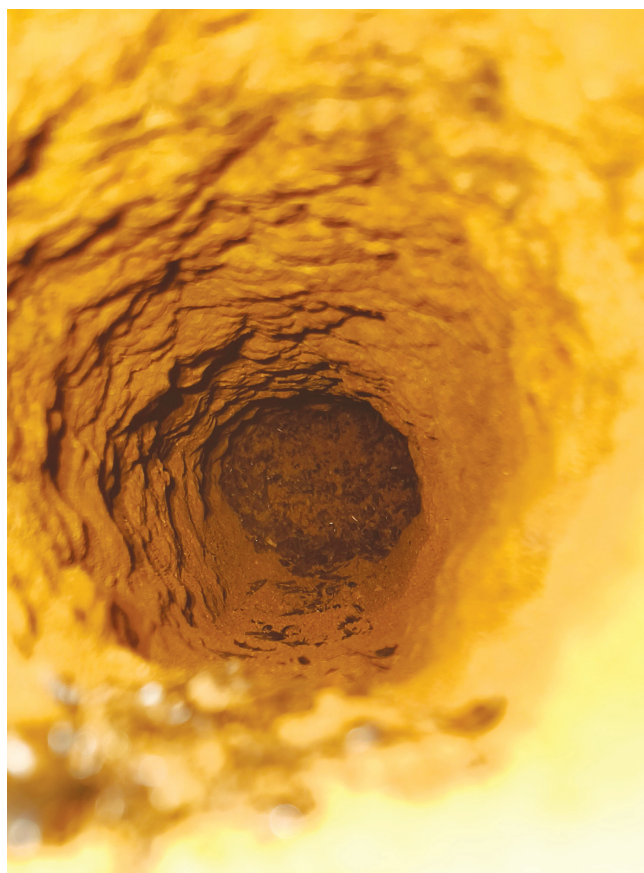
Fig. 1. Diagram of the nest of Blue-bearded Bee-eater showing the chamber and the position of the wall.

captured images only after the wall was completed. The next morning the wall was dismantled before 0600h.

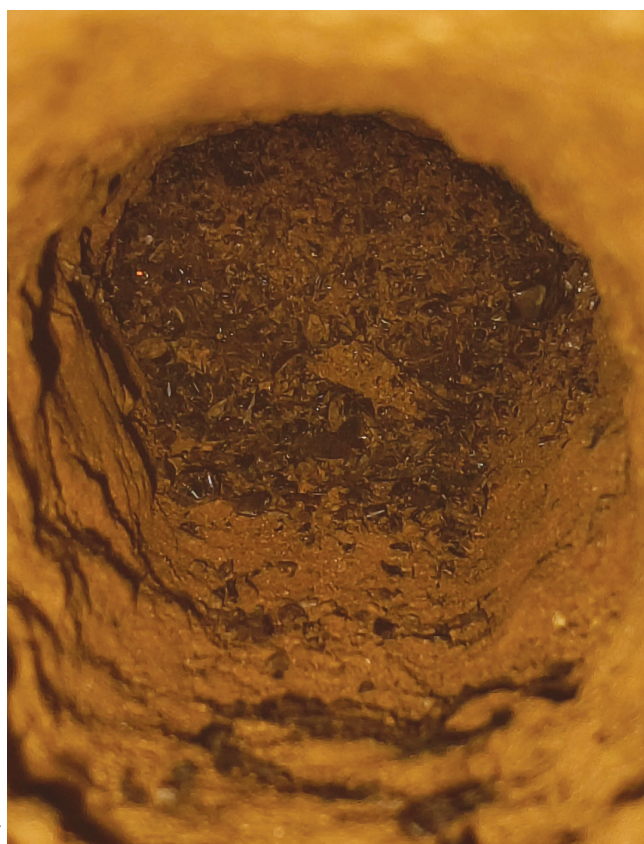
Regular observations revealed that the nestling constructs the wall between 1730 to 1800 h at dusk, taking about 15–20 min, and dismantles it at dawn before around 0600 h (Table 1). Upon examining the photographs and observing the dismantled wall, I found that the wall was composed of mud and prey remains, including wings and debris [286]. As the nestling grew, its wall-building materials shifted from predominantly prey remains to more mud, with a corresponding decrease in debris



286. The wall on 22 April consisted mainly of prey remains and mud.



287. The wall on 27 April consisted mainly of mud and some debris.



288. The Wall on 13 May consisted mainly of mud and some debris.

use [287, 288]. The nestling apparently moved the dismantled material into the tunnel chamber, preventing any obstruction within the nest tunnel.

The presumed female stayed with the nestling at night during the initial days after hatching, when the nestling's eyes were closed. Although irregular observations after hatching prevented me from determining the exact start date of wall-making behaviour, my observations indicate that the presumed female stayed at the nest until the nestling becomes capable of building the wall. It is not known whether the female was also building a wall at dusk. On 22 April 2025, the ninth day after hatching, I observed the nestling constructing the wall for the first time, and this behaviour continued until fledging on 14 May 2025 (Table 1).

On 14 May 2025, I observed the nestling fledged out. It received food from both parents while perching on an Acacia tree. By evening 1900 h, I checked the nest and found it empty, with no signs of wall-making or presence of the nestling. These observations, combined with earlier ones, confirmed that the nestling must have fledged after 30 days (14 April to 14 May 2025).

The nest sealing behaviour has been documented only in hornbills (Family: Bucerotidae, Order: Bucerotiformes), where females, sometimes assisted by males, seal the nest cavity entrance with a wall made of mud and droppings, leaving only a narrow aperture for the male to transfer food (Kemp 1995). This behavior likely serves to protect nesting sites from predators and rival hornbills. However, bee-eaters have not been reported to exhibit any kind of nest-sealing behavior, making this observation noteworthy, especially because the wall was constructed by the nestling.

I assume that the wall likely acted as a protection for the nestling against intruders and predators. As this behaviour occurred daily during the nestling period, specifically from dusk to dawn, this seems to be an innate protection strategy. It also highlights the need for more nocturnal studies in understanding nest protection strategies, particularly against nocturnal predators. This can provide valuable insights into the adaptive behaviors employed by birds and to safeguard their nests. Do other cavity nesting birds also employ a similar strategy? We would need more studies on the same.

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