An update of the non-breeding distribution of the Asian House-Martin *Delichon dasypus* in South Asia

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The Asian House-Martin *Delichon dasypus* (AHMA, hereinafter) is a long-distance migrant that breeds in the high Himalaya and eastern Asia and is broadly considered to winter in South and Southeast Asia. Within South Asia, however, its non-breeding distribution has been an enigma. Turner (2020) states that it winters in "N India", while the map in that account, derived from BirdLife International (2024), shows it wintering across the Terai and the Himalayan foothills, north-eastern India, and the northern Eastern Ghats of India. Rasmussen and Anderton (2012a) show a similar distribution, extending into western India, and state that it winters rarely in east-central India, evidently as far south as Andhra (sight record), and in the Duars, Assam Valley, and commonly in the "South Assam hills" at least to Manipur, along with well-documented sight records from north-eastern and south-eastern Bangladesh. They further state that it is absent in southern India, but that its range has long been confounded with that of the Western House-Martin *D. urbicum* (WHMA, hereinafter). Grimmett et al. (2011), on the other hand, depict a sedentary population in the Central and Eastern Himalaya and scattered records in north-eastern India, with single records each in the Western Ghats and the northern Eastern Ghats. The sight records mentioned in these references from the northern Eastern Ghats could not be traced. Perhaps reflecting this uncertainty, Praveen (2025) does not specify breeding or non-breeding distributions for the species, and instead states that it is a "straggler to EC India, NE Andhra, and the hills of Kodagu in the Western Ghats."

This uncertainty may stem from several underlying reasons, including challenges in identification. In general, *Delichon* House-Martins can be difficult to detect because they tend to fly high and fast and often occur in large mixed groups with other Hirundinidae and even Apodidae. Obtaining specimens may have been difficult historically, and obtaining photos even today is difficult without some effort. In the areas of uncertainty such as east-central India, the Himalayan terai and the higher elevations of the Western Ghats, birdwatcher presence has historically been low. But perhaps most importantly, AHMA is one of three species of similar-looking House-Martins (*Delichon* sp.) that regularly occur in South Asia, the other two being WHMA and the Nepal House-Martin *D. nipalense* (NHMA, hereinafter). The fourth *Delichon* in Asia, the Siberian House-Martin *D. lagopodum*, is only a vagrant for north-eastern India (Praveen 2025). Separating AHMA from WHMA and NHMA has always been a challenge and remains a challenge even today. In the Indian peninsula and Sri Lanka, WHMA is a regular winter visitor and AHMA can easily be overlooked because the differences are subtle: AHMA has a shallower tail fork, dirty white vs. pure white underparts, and darker and more contrasting underwing coverts (Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen and Anderton 2012b). In the Himalaya and north-eastern India, the opposite tends to happen. Across its range, NHMA is often misidentified as AHMA because NHMA sometimes has a white throat, as seen in photographs from Uttarakhand (Johnson 2019; Konda 2020), Sikkim (Bonpo 2023), and Mizoram (Shah 2024), a feature that birdwatchers have historically used to identify an AHMA. This probably stems from the fact that illustrations in popular field guides tend to miss depicting this plumage of NHMA (Kazmiercak 2009; Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen and Anderton 2012a). Such misidentified "white-throated" NHMA (many with photographs) include over 100 observations (only 6 correctly identified observations with photos now remain) from Uttarakhand, *c.*80 (only 15 with photos now remain) from Sikkim and over 400 (none remain) from Mizoram. Comments by eBirders also indicate that the "white throat/chin" is a feature that they use to separate AHMA and NHMA; for example, see Hicks (2019) – "Distinct from Nepal HM re: white chin. Resident in the area. Rare only due to lack of sightings at this time of year?", and Sharma (2025) – "Nesting. Pics taken. White throat to differentiate from Nepal house martin". But the difference in fact lies in the colour of the vent and shape of the tail – NHMA has a black vent and undertail coverts (vs. white in AHMA) and a square-ended tail. While NHMA appears to show a white throat at times across the Himalaya and north-eastern India, the extent of white on the throat and chin may vary with sex, age, geography, and season. An analysis and discussion of this variation, however, is outside the scope of this article.

In recent years, the rapid progression of birdwatching in South Asia and the rise of high-quality photography equipment and skill have provided an opportunity to resolve the uncertainty in the species' non-breeding distribution. With improved resources for birdwatchers, networks/forums for discussion, and citizen science platforms like eBird (Sullivan et al. 2014) for documentation, our collective understanding of the region's birds has rapidly advanced. In 2020, Nayakkan et al. (2021) documented four AHMA in the high Western Ghats of Kannur, Kerala, the first confirmed report of AHMA from southern India. Since then, as is sometimes the case nowadays with challenging cryptic species (Thrikkadeeri et al. 2024), certain birdwatchers have taken a particular interest in AHMA, leading to key insights about its non-breeding (winter) distribution, particularly within the Indian Peninsula and Sri Lanka. In the following four sections, we summarize new learnings about the species' non-breeding distribution in different parts of the Indian Subcontinent, with the help of confirmed observations in the eBird public data (eBird 2025).

Distribution

Western Ghats and Sri Lanka

Since AHMA was photographed in southern India for the first time in 2020, SC (in particular) and the team of Nayakkan et al. (2021) have gone on to regularly find multiple individuals of the species (a maximum of eight) in the same area during every subsequent winter (Table 1). Observations are spread throughout the winter, with the earliest seasonal report on 08 October and the latest on 21 March. Similarly, after Biswas (2021) documented the species from a Western Ghats hilltop in Kodagu, Karnataka, in January 2022, more birdwatchers have found multiple individuals from Western Ghats hilltops in Chikkamagaluru, Karnataka (Krishna 2022; Adavanne 2024; Viswanathan 2024). In this region, most observations of AHMA were in mixed flocks, often large, with other Hirundinidae and Apodidae including, but not always, Eastern Red-rumped Swallow *Cecropis daurica*, Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*, Eurasian Crag-Martin *Ptyonoprogne rupestris*, White-rumped Spinetail *Zoonavena sylvatica*, Little Swift *Apus affinis*, and Asian Palm Swift *Cypsiurus balasiensis*. AV found the species in Chikkamagaluru only by deliberately scanning rapidly moving, large flocks of swallows and swifts. Meanwhile, two individual AHMAs were also documented during consecutive winters in Sri Lanka following Gonagala (2021), a first report for the country. AHMA therefore appears to winter in small flocks in parts of the Western Ghats in southern Karnataka and northern Kerala, and potentially in Sri Lanka as well (Table 1, Fig. 1).

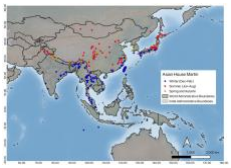
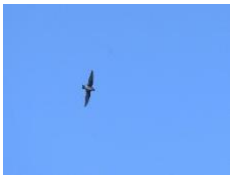


Fig. 1. Current distribution of Asian House-Martin in winter and summer from eBird data (eBird 2025), showing clear north-south movement to South and Southeast Asia. Data from Nepal and Bhutan are excluded from the map due to widespread misidentification of Nepal House-Martins as Asian.

Table 1: Observations on eBird of Asian House-Martin from the Western Ghats and Sri Lanka. Many observations have multiple observers but only the single most frequent AHMA observer from among them is mentioned for each observation. Ordered geographically from north to south.

S. No.	Range of Counts	No of Reports	Observers	State	Country	District	Site(s)	Months	Years
1	2–4	3	Prashantha Krishna MC, Shivaprakash Adavanne, & AV	Karnataka	India	Chikkamagaluru	Gangadikallu **[1]**	November–December	2022, 2024
2	4	1	Debankur Biswas	Karnataka	India	Kodagu	Tadiandamol	January	2022
3	1–8	23	Twenty observers including SC.	Kerala	India	Kannur	Paithalmala **[2]**	October–March	2020–25
4	1–2	4	Four observers including KG.	Sabaragamuwa	Sri Lanka	Ratnapura	Kolonna **[3]**	December–January	2021–22



[1] Asian House Martin from Gangadikallu, Chikkamagaluru, Karnataka, India on 19 November 2022. Photo: Prashantha Krishna M C

[2] Asian House Martin from Paithalmala Gen Area, Kannur, Kerala, India on 27 January 2024 Year. Photo: Sreekanth C

[3] Asian House Martin from Kolonna, Ratnapura, Sri Lanka on 13 December 2022. Photo: Kasun Gonagala

Eastern Ghats

On 19 December 2022, AM found five AHMA (confirmed later from photographs) in a flock of swallows and swifts at a pond in a busy part of Madanpur Rampur town (Mishra 2022) in Kalahandi, Odisha (Table 1). Since this report, AM has gone on to find AHMAs (a maximum of 15 in a flock) in many parts of Kalahandi district during every subsequent winter. During a single trip to Satkosia Tiger Reserve, Angul, Odisha, in January 2023, SD found the species to be widespread in the landscape, so much so that a later checklist had the comment "extremely common everywhere" (Das 2022a). But interestingly, he found AHMA to be noticeably absent in forests where White-rumped Spinetail and Brown-backed Needletail *Hirundapus giganteus* were abundant. Instead, he found AHMA to be abundant along roads, especially near waterbodies, in the company of Wire-tailed Swallow *Cecropis daurica* and Asian Palm Swift, with up to 60 individuals in one flock (Das 2022b). AHMAs have now been documented in Dhenkanal (Nair 2023) and Mayurbhanj (Sarkar 2023) districts of Odisha as well. In the northern Andhra Pradesh Eastern Ghats, AV found multiple birds on multiple occasions (up to 20 in a flock) during a single visit in January 2023 (Viswanathan 2023). These were followed up by more reports from Visakhapatnam district, East Godavari, and Alluri Sitarama Raju districts (Bandi 2023a, b; Das 2023; Table 2). AHMA therefore appears to winter in the Eastern Ghats of Odisha and northern Andhra Pradesh in moderate to large flocks (Table 2, Figure 1).

Table 2: Observations on eBird of Asian House-Martin from the Eastern Ghats. Many observations have multiple observers but only the single most frequent AHMA observer from among them is mentioned for each observation. Ordered geographically from north to south.

S. No.	Range of Counts	No of Reports	Observers	State	District	Site(s)	Months	Years
1	4–6	4	Anshuman Sarkar, Sourav Das, Siddhanta Kumar Mohanta	Odisha	Mayurbhanj	Simplipal	October, December, February	2023–24
2	2–60	9	Nine observers including SD	Odisha	Angul	Tikarpada	January	2023
3	4	1	Manoj Nair	Odisha	Dhenkanal	Talaganda	February	2023
4	1–15	9	AM	Odisha	Kalahandi	Karlapat, Kuten, Kerketa Dam, Tikirapara, Palsipada, Goipita, Rabandhara, M Rampur **[4]**	November–March	2022–25
5	2–20	3	Raja Bandi, AV	Andhra Pradesh	Visakhapatnam	Mattam Bhimavaram**[5]**	January–February	2023
6	2	1	Sangeeta Das	Andhra Pradesh	East Godavari	Rajamahendravarman Railway Station	December	2023
7	1	1	Raja Bandi	Andhra Pradesh	Alluri Sitarama Raju	Chintur	February	2023

[4] Asian House Martin from Tikirapara, Kalahandi, Odisha, India on 27 November 2024. Photo: Anurag Mishra

[5] Asian House Martin from East Godavari, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, India on 04 January 2023. Photo: Ashwin Vishwanathan

Western and Central Himalaya

Currently, there is no verifiable evidence of AHMA wintering in the Western Himalaya, either in eBird (Fig. 1) or in other sources. But recent records in December and January from the foothills of the Central Himalaya in India (Sharma 2024) and in Nepal (Shrestha 2024) may indicate that the species winters in the Central Himalayan foothills as well, as mentioned in previous works (Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012b). More evidence is required, however, to reach this conclusion. With more birding in the region, and more birdwatchers now familiar with the species, its status in the Central Himalayan foothills should also be resolved soon.

North-eastern India

As most references indicated, AHMA is indeed a regular winter visitor to north-eastern India (Fig. 1). A large majority of confirmed records are from lowlands – the forested edges of the Brahmaputra floodplains, the foothills of the Eastern Himalaya, and the Manipur Valley – but it also winters in the Garo and Naga Hills. In October/November and March/April, AHMA appears to be a regular passage migrant through all the hill states of north-eastern India.

[6] Nepal House Martin from Far Pak, Lawngtlai, Mizoram, India on 16 April 2024. Photo: Yogish Holla

[7] Asian House Martin from Kerketa Dam , Kalahandi, Odisha, India on 14 December 2024. Photo: Anurag Mishra

Conclusion

In summary, AHMA is a regular non-breeding visitor to north-eastern India but also appears to potentially be a regular visitor to Sri Lanka, the central Western Ghats (much like the Eurasian Crag Martin), and the northern Eastern Ghats (Fig. 1). Do regular recent observations over multiple years indicate that AHMAs were always wintering in peninsular India and Sri Lanka, but were previously overlooked? While it is certainly possible that the wintering distribution of this species has shifted in recent years to include these areas, we believe that the species may have been overlooked, especially in the northern Eastern Ghats, given the inclusion of this region in historical distribution maps (BirdLife International 2024). For example, the Satkosia birds were initially documented as WHMA by SD, and later changed to AHMA after discussion with AV. A common factor to the spurt of recent sightings is the individual observer identity – a vast majority of observations are contributed by observer teams who associated with us, who have become familiar with the species and then gone on to look for AHMAs and document them at every opportunity. AHMA may therefore have always been present, but undocumented without individual birdwatcher interest, familiarity, and focus.

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