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The Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra* in Spiti, Himachal Pradesh, India

The Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra* is a slim, long-distance migrant chat that breeds across Europe and western Asia and winters in sub-Saharan Africa (Urquhart & Bowley 2010; Clement & Rose 2015). Measuring about 12–14 cm, male Whinchat is notable for its rufous-ochre throat and breast during the breeding season (Collar & Garcia 2020). The species typically uses open habitats with scattered shrubs, low herb cover, and exposed perches for foraging and songposts (Collar & Garcia 2020).

CA led a short faunal survey to the high-altitude landscapes of the Spiti Valley, accompanied by DO and AJ. The team explored key habitats around Kibber, Tashigang, Langza, and the Spiti River valley. The Spiti Valley is a Trans-Himalayan landscape and lies in north-eastern Himachal Pradesh. The region has a cold and semi-arid climate, with winter temperatures dropping below -30°C. Due to these harsh conditions, dwarf shrubs dominate the vegetation in Spiti, with *Caragana versicolor* being the principal species (Iyengar et al. 2017). Along the Spiti River and its tributaries, patches of taller scrub, including Sea Buckthorn *Hippophae* sp., Tamarisk *Tamarix* sp., and trees, mainly *Poplus* sp., Salix sp., support noticeably higher bird density and diversity.

On 13 June 2025, while surveying one such scrub patch near the Spiti River close to Kaza (32.212°N, 78.074°E; *c*.3,595 m asl), we observed a small bird resembling the Siberian Stonechat *S. maurus* but distinguished by a prominent white supercilium. The head was blackish with brownish streaking and the cheeks were brownish-black having a prominent, short, white moustachial stripe. These were bordered above by a broad whitish supercilium and below by broad white bands, which were meeting at chin in front and extending posteriorly to the nape. The throat, breast, and sides of belly were orange-buff, while the centre of belly and vent were much paler. The back was brownish with dark centres to the feathers, which were forming streaks at some places and spotting at others. The primary projection was long, and the wings were black, having white alula and white patch over dark wing coverts. The outer tail feathers were white. By these features, CA identified it as a male Whinchat in typical breeding plumage **[67, 68]**. The next day it was searched extensively in the same patch, but we couldn't find it again.

67. Male Whinchat showing bold white supercilium, orange-buff throat, breast and sides of belly and paler central belly and vent.

68. Whinchat showing long primary projection and a brownish back with dark centres to the feathers.

Both photos: C. Abhinav

The Whinchat is globally widespread but extremely rare in the Indian subcontinent. Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) listed the species as 'hypothetical' for South Asia. It was added to the Indian subcontinent checklist only after a confirmed sighting from Udawalawe National Park, Sri Lanka on 08 February 2015 (Steiof et al. 2017). Records from India remain very few and are summarised in Table 1.

Most birds breeding north of the Tibetan-Himalayan region follow an indirect, westerly migration route through central and south-western Asia to winter in Africa, in preference to the shorter, but more arduous route through the mountain barrier of the Tibetan-Himalayan massif. However, a significant number of migratory birds do pass through or over these mountain ranges (Delany et al. 2017). In the Southampton University Ladakh Expeditions, long-distance passage migrant passerines made up only a small proportion of the total catch (2.1%), yet they represented the widest species diversity among all categories of migrants, comprising 39% of the species trapped (Delany et al. 2014). This group included several rarities and more

Table 1. Records of Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra* from India

S. No.	Date	Location	Comments	Reference
1	03 April 2021	Hudikeri village, Kodagu District, Karnataka	A male in breeding plumage photographed	Chethan & Prakash (2024)
2	12 December 2021	Near Uppar Reservoir, Dharapuram, Tiruppur District, Tamil Nadu	Photographed	Magesh et al. (2022)
3	04 January 2023	Chushot Marshes, Leh District, Ladakh	Photographed	Stanba (2023)
4	10 May 2023	confluence of Hunza and Nagar rivers, Gilgit-Baltistan	Photographed	Kalmthout (2023)
5	28 November–31 December 2023	Ozarim, North Goa District, Goa	Presumed hybrid of the Whinchat and the Siberian Stonechat *S. maurus*	Topo et al. (2025)
6	15 October 2024	Padvane, Sindhudurg District, Maharashtra	Photographed by multiple observers	Magdum (2024)
7	13 June 2025	Kaza, Lahual and Spiti District, Himachal Pradesh	A male in full breeding plumage photographed	Present record
8	13–14 June 2025	Merak, Pangong Tso, Leh District, Ladakh	Photographed	Gyalpo (2025)
9	09 October 2025	Spituk, Leh District, Ladakh	A Female individual photographed	Sonam (2025)

recently several other rarities have been sighted in Ladakh during migration, like Masked Shrike *Lanius nubicus*, Pallas's Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus proregulus*, and Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis* (Delany et al. 2014; Tanveer 2021; Gyalpo et al. 2023; Gyalpo et al. 2024). Several long-distance migrants, which are rare in the India, have also been recorded in the trans-Himalayan landscape of Spiti, like Corn Crake *Crex crex*, Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe Oenanthe*, and Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* (Abhinav et al. 2020, 2021; pers. obs. 2023). The Whinchat is a recent addition to these rare migrants and has also been recorded in Ladakh. Whether such occurrences represent regular but scarce migrants or disoriented vagrants remains unclear (Delany et al. 2017). Whinchat is a long-distance migrant and has the potential to occur far away from its typical migration routes (Steiof et al. 2017). Moreover, the disorientation of migrating birds is thought to increase in mountainous regions (Muheim & Jenni 1999). Based on the above records from India, which occurred in past few years, it seems that a small number of Whinchats pass through the region during migration, which could be the individuals from the eastern-most breeding range of the species.

The Whinchat departs from its wintering grounds between February and mid-April (Collar & Garcia 2020). In Egypt and Middle-east countries, the return migration mainly occurs from late March to early-May and continues till mid-June, although the number decline after early May (Urquhart & Bowley 2010). Arrival on the breeding grounds extends from mid-April to late May (Collar & Garcia 2020). The present individual was seen during mid-June. Although migrants are still expected in the Middle East at that time, the breeding grounds in the Caucasus and north-western Iran lie relatively close to those regions, unlike northern India, which is much farther from the breeding grounds. Thus, our record may represent a slightly delayed migrant. The earlier records of the Whinchat during spring return migration in India, on 03 April and 10 May, are significantly earlier than our observation and the record from Pangong Tso, Ladakh.

For migrating birds that do not typically cover long distances between stopover sites, there must be places in the landscape with sufficient food to allow them to reliably replenish fat reserves (Prins et al. 2017). These few patches of taller scrubs and groves in the cold desert of Spiti provide the essential resources during the long journeys of these migrating birds.

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The Fire-capped Tit *Cephalopyrus flammiceps* from Odisha: An addition to the state's avifauna

The Fire-capped Tit *Cephalopyrus flammiceps* is a small migratory passerine and the sole member of the monotypic genus *Cephalopyrus*. It breeds in the temperate forests along the Himalayas across Pakistan, Nepal, India, Bhutan and around the Myanmar-China border (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). In India, the nominate subspecies breeds between 2,000–3,500 m in the Western Himalayas from Gilgit, Ladakh, Kashmir, Jammu, Himachal, and Uttarakhand (Ali & Ripley 1973; Praveen 2025). During winter, it migrates southwards to the Gangetic plains of Haryana (historical), Uttar Pradesh, Bharatpur (historical), Central Indian highlands of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and north-eastern Maharashtra (Praveen 2025). The *olivaceus* subspecies, found in the Eastern Himalayas, ranges from eastern Nepal through northern Bengal, Sikkim, Arunachal, and Assam at altitudes between 300 and 2,300 m (Ali & Ripley 1973; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Praveen 2025).

On 28 November 2023, at 0700 h, during a birdwatching survey at Soleguda Reserve Forest, Talabhali Beat, Soleguda Section, Sole Range (21.958°N, 84.598°E; 487 m asl), Bonai Forest Division, Odisha, we observed a mixed flock of small passerines, including Small Minivet *Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*, White-bellied Drongo *Dicrurus caerulescens*, and Black-hooded Oriole *Oriolus xanthornus*, foraging on an Indian Ash Tree *Lannea coromandelica* on a hill slope. Photographs of the birds were taken and the observations were uploaded on eBird (Pattnaik & Shukla 2023). Within the mixed flock, there was a small olive-yellow bird that resembled a tit or a warbler and remained visible for 5–6 minutes before disappearing into thick foliage. The species was identified as a female Fire-capped Tit **[69]** from the photographs, showing narrow conical, pointed bill, olive-yellow plumage, and pale wingbars (Burton 1836). Searches through eBird, GBIF, and iNaturalist, along with a literature review confirmed this as the first record of the species from Odisha. The nearest observations from the present location include three records from Chhattisgarh—Raipur (Parmar 2022), Bilaspur (Tripathi 2022), and Kangar Valley National Park, Bastar (Bharos et al. 2019) and one from Sushunia, Bankura, West Bengal (Mukherjee et al. 2024).

Photo: Digvijaya Pattnaik

69. A female Fire-capped Tit photographed from Bonai Forest Division, Odisha on 28 November 2023.

This observation extends the species' migration range further east and suggests that forests of Odisha may serve as potential wintering or stopover habitat for individuals migrating southward. However, much of the Bonai Forest Division lies within a mining-influenced landscape, though the Sole Range itself is not affected. Forest fires, however, remain a recurrent threat to wintering habitat. Prompt enforcement and fire-control efforts by the local forest department help mitigate these risks.

This record represents the first evidence-based occurrence of Fire-capped Tit in Odisha. Further systematic surveys would help clarify the species' status and movement patterns in the state.

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