

Photo: Showkat Maqbool



61. Chinese Pond-Heron photographed from Wular Lake, Jammu & Kashmir on 06 May 2025.

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Nesting association between 'Eastern' Finn's Weavers *Ploceus megarhynchus salimalii* and Black Drongos *Dicrurus macrocercus*

During the 2025 nesting season, we documented an active breeding colony of the 'Eastern' Finn's Weaver *Ploceus megarhynchus salimalii* in the Kanchanbari grassland of the Bhuyanpara Range, Manas National Park, Assam. Nesting was first observed in early April on a *Premna bengalensis* tree (26.747°N, 91.100°E), at a height of seven m; however, the site was soon abandoned. A larger colony was established shortly after on a nearby *Vitex glabrata* tree (26.746°N, 91.102°E), at a height of five m, and the colony grew to 27 nests by mid-May. Male display, nest weaving, and female nest inspections were observed. The nesting tree was surrounded by *Saccharum narenga*, *Imperata cylindrica*, *Phragmites karka*, and *Alpinia nigra*. [62, 63].

62. Finn's Weaver breeding colony on a *Vitex glabrata* tree in Manas National Park.

63. Screen grab from video footage showing a Black Drongo near the Finn's Weaver colony.

64. Drongo nest on a *Premna bengalensis* tree.

All photos: Jommani Kalita

On 05 May 2025, three Black Drongos *Dicrurus macrocercus* were observed near the weaver colony. Among them was a pair that nested at a height of four m above ground level on the earlier-abandoned *Premna bengalensis* tree, raising three fledglings, while another drongo frequently perched and roosted on the *Vitex* tree holding the active Finn's Weaver colony. No aggression or nest usurpation was observed. Notably, no avian predators were seen during the monitoring period.

This observation supports earlier suggestions (Ali & Crook 1959; Bhargava 2000; Craig 2020) that Finn's Weavers may benefit from nesting near drongo territories, likely a form of commensalism in which weavers gain protection from the drongo's vigilant and territorial behaviour. While Bhargava (2017) provides extensive observations on the breeding biology of the Finn's Weaver and reports associations with drongos in the nominate subspecies, we found no documentation of such nesting associations in the 'Eastern' Finn's Weavers. Our record may therefore represent the first such confirmation for this subspecies, given the limited breeding documentation.

The Finn's Weaver has a disjunct distribution: the western population, occurs in the Terai grasslands of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, whereas the eastern populations occur in Assam (Ali & Ripley 1999; Abdulali 1961; Bhargava 2000; Praveen 2025). The species is threatened by habitat degradation, particularly the loss of seasonally flooded grasslands, and by anthropogenic pressures, including grazing, encroachment, and pet trade. Their relatively short, tubeless nests make them more susceptible to predation (Ali & Crook 1959; Ambedkar 1968), underscoring the potential importance of secure, predator-free nesting environments, such as those near aggressive species, such as the Black Drongo.

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Distasteful butterfly in the diet of the White-capped Redstart *Phoenicurus leucocephalus*

Members of the family Muscicapidae are primarily insectivorous, though some species also feed on spiders, molluscs and sometimes seeds and fruits. The White-capped Redstart *Phoenicurus leucocephalus*, a species belonging to Muscicapidae family, has a wide distributional range, occurring from eastern Uzbekistan, south-western Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan east through Himalayas, to Bangladesh, Myanmar, China, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam (Collar 2020). Its diet usually consists of insects (mayflies, craneflies, beetles, ants), spiders, and molluscs, and occasionally berries and grass seeds (Buckton & Ormerod 2008; Collar 2020).

In nature, birds act as significant predators of butterflies, and several species of birds have been reported to feed on butterflies (Marshall 1909; Orr 2013; Pinheiro & Cintra 2017). Butterflies of the tribe Troidini (family Papilionidae), tribes Acraeini, Danainae, Ithomiinae, and Heliconiinae (Nymphalidae), and some species of genus *Delias* (Pieridae) are generally avoided by birds due to their distastefulness (Rothschild et al. 1970; Bowers 1980; Kunte 2000). Experimental studies show that some birds may eat distasteful butterflies such as the Monarch butterfly *Danaus plexippus* (Petersen 1964), and a few wild observations exist, such as *Dicrurus* spp. feeding on *Euploea midamus* (Dannainae) in Java (Marshall 1909), White-breasted Woodswallow *Artamus leucorhynchus* taking *Tirumala hamata* in Australia (Ford & Ford 1993), and Black-backed Orioles *Icterus abeillei* and Black-headed Grosbeaks *Phaeocephalus melanocephalus* preying the Monarch Butterfly in Mexico (Fink & Brower 1981). However, such records remain scarce especially from tropical Asia.

During a faunal survey in Raimona National Park, Assam, India on 29 December 2024, at 1310 h, a solitary White-capped Redstart was seen along the edge of Pekua River (26.723°N, 90.052°E) [65]. The bird was foraging on the rocks, about 2–3 m from the stream, when it suddenly made a short flight and captured a butterfly. After catching it, the bird tossed the butterfly a few times, dropped it on the ground, then picked it up again and swallowed it whole within two minutes. The whole observation was photographed [66] which allowed the identification of the butterfly as a Blue-Spotted Crow *Euploea cf. midamus*, a member of Dannainae, also known as milkweed butterflies (Kehimkar 2016). The known larval host plants of *Euploea* butterflies are primarily the species of *Strophanthus* and *Nerium* which are well-known for their toxicity (Robinson et al. 2023). The adult butterflies obtain the toxic cardenolides through their larval host plants, which are responsible for the distastefulness and aposematic nature.



65. Site in Raimona National Park, Assam, where a White-capped Redstart was documented swallowing a *Euploea cf. midamus*.