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– Satya Prakash Pandey, Kanchan Pandey & Pratik Thakur

Satya Prakash Pandey, Ex Editor, Bhaskar TV, Bilaspur-495001, Chhattisgarh, India.

Email: satyaprakashpandey134@gmail.com [SPP]

Kanchan Pandey, Wildlife photographer, B/61 Sagar homes, Usalapur, Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, India. Email: kanchan.pandey3@gmail.com [KP]

Pratik Thakur, Prakriti Shodh Evam Sanrakshan Welfare Society,

Dongargarh, Rajnandgaon-491445, Chhattisgarh, India. Email: pratik5959@gmail.com [PT]

[Corresponding Author]

The Turkestan Short-toed Lark *Alaudala heinei*: An addition to the avifauna of Jammu & Kashmir, India

The Pargwal Wetland (32.803°N, 74.604°E; c.267 m asl), located on the flood plains of Chenab River, near Akhnoor, Jammu District, Jammu & Kashmir, is an important habitat for migratory birds. The wetland supports a mix of aquatic vegetation, grasslands, and sandy terrain attracting a variety of waterbirds, shorebirds and passerines.

On 02 November 2025, SKB, Vishal Kapur, and Shevait Khajuria were birding at Pargwal Wetland. At 0900 h, their car got stuck in a sandy flat. While looking around for a way out of the situation, SKB saw a flock of larks nearby (32.799°N, 74.594°E). Among them, one individual appeared distinctly different. He clicked some photographs, and shared them with GPS who tentatively identified the bird as a Turkestan Short-toed Lark *Alaudala heinei* based on a relatively short bill, distinctly streaked breast and upperparts, and fairly indistinct buffish to whitish supercilium (Alström & Donald 2023).

For a better documentation, SKB revisited the location on 05 November 2025, accompanied by Vishal Kapur, Shevait Khajuria, and Ajay Kumar. At about 1450 h, they spotted nine Sand Larks *A. raytal* along with two individuals of presumed Turkestan Short-toed Larks which showed distinctly streaked breast and upper parts. SKB clicked some photographs [109] and shared them again with GPS, who confirmed the identification of the individuals as Turkestan Short-toed Larks. Comparatively, the Sand Lark [110] looked more “dumpy”, is greyer and less contrastingly patterned above and, on the wings, with a more finely streaked mantle, and scapulars (Alström & Donald 2023). The images were also shared on Facebook group, “Ask IDS of Indian Birds,” where the identification of the birds as Turkestan Short-toed Lark was agreed upon.

For additional confirmation of the identification, we shared the photographs with Per Alström, who noted that the wings clearly indicate *A. heinei*, which is also the most plausible species given that it is the only long-distance migrant among the candidates. In particular, the 5th primary (counted from either the outer or inner side) appears considerably shorter relative to the wing tip than in the Asian Short-toed Lark *A. cheleensis*. Sriram Reddy also agreed that this individual was a Turkestan Short-toed Lark (Per Alström, in e-mail dated 14 November 2025).

The Turkestan Short-toed Lark breeds from west-central



109. Turkestan Short-toed Lark showing streaked breast and upper parts, photographed at Pargwal Wetland, Jammu on 05 November 2025.



110. Sand Lark photographed at Pargwal Wetland, Jammu on 05 November 2025.

Both photos: Sachin Kumar Bhagat

Turkey through southeastern Ukraine, southwestern Russia, most of central and southern Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan east to Kyrgyzstan and southern Mongolia; and in Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan (Alström & Donald 2023). During winter, some Turkestan Short-toed Larks of the subspecies *persica* or *heinei* move into Pakistan and northwestern India, where they may occur alongside the similar looking Sand Lark of the subspecies *adamsi*. Turkestan Short-toed Lark was previously treated as conspecific with the Mediterranean Short-toed Lark *A. rufescens* and often, wholly or partly with the Asian Short-toed Lark *A. cheleensis*, under the name Lesser Short-toed Lark *A. rufescens* (Alström & Donald 2023). Therefore, to put the present sighting in context, we reviewed the historical status of Asian/Lesser Short-toed Lark from the erstwhile state of Jammu & Kashmir (including Ladakh). Christian (2019) listed two specimen records of Asian/Lesser Short-toed Lark *sensu lato* from erstwhile Jammu & Kashmir. A specimen from Rupshu, now in the Union Territory of Ladakh (Stoliczka 1868), was later questioned by Hume (1870). Another specimen record exists from Gilgit (Scully 1881), however the location now again falls in Ladakh.

The checklist of the birds of Jammu & Kashmir (Kichloo et al. 2024; Kichloo 2025) does not include Turkestan Short-toed Lark. This sighting, therefore, marks the addition of the Turkestan Short-

toed Lark to the avifauna of UT of Jammu & Kashmir, contributing to the region's growing avifaunal diversity.

We wish to thank Per Alström and Sriram Reddy for confirming the identification.

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– Sachin Kumar Bhagat & Gurpartap Singh

- Sachin Kumar Bhagat, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Government Degree College, Marh 181206, Jammu and Kashmir, India.
E-mail: sachinbhagat_skb@yahoo.com. [SKB]
Gurpartap Singh, 1969, Sector 64, Mohali 160062, District Sahibzada Ajit Singh Nagar, Punjab, India. E-mail: prof.gurpartap.singh@gmail.com. [GPS] [Corresponding author]

An escapee Narcondam Hornbill *Rhyticeros narcondami* from Chidiyatapu, South Andaman, Andaman & Nicobar Islands, India

The Narcondam Hornbill *Rhyticeros narcondami* is a rather small hornbill with a black body and entirely white tail, yellowish-white bill with a dark crimson base. It is a point endemic species restricted to the Narcondam Island (6.8 sq. km) in the Andaman Sea (Kinnaird & O'Brien 2007) and classified as Vulnerable by the IUCN (BirdLife International 2020). Though the Asian hornbills *Rhyticeros* spp. are generally strong fliers, enabling them to roam large parts of the forest landscape and even migrate long distances (Kemp 1995), the Narcondam Hornbill is non-migratory and movements of the endemic species are restricted to the tiny and isolated volcanic island (Naniwadekar 2020), lying c. 135 km from the northern-most tip of the Andaman group of islands.

While we were birding with Prodip Sarder, our sighting of a female Narcondam Hornbill at Chidiyatapu (11.512°N, 92.698°E), south of Port Blair, South Andaman, on 23 October 2025 at 1615h, came as a complete surprise [111]. After hearing its raucous call, we were able to locate it moving from bough to bough in the higher canopy of a fruiting Golden Rumph's Fig tree (Mock Bodh Tree) *Ficus rumphii*. The bird was observed for c. 5–6 minutes before it flew off in a south-eastern direction. We visited the site the following morning on 24 October 2025 and found it there again [112]. On both the days of our sighting, the bird was seen foraging in the higher canopy of a Golden Rumph's Fig tree in a wooded area situated adjacent to the road.

The occurrence of a straggling Narcondam Hornbill in the Andaman group of islands would be noteworthy. However, following discussion with local birders, it was apparent that the individual (and possibly another bird) was an escapee from Chidiyatapu Biological Park in South Andaman; a facility setup to also support captive breeding of Andaman & Nicobar endemics including Narcondam Hornbill (Anonymous 2017:3, 2019:5). The circumstances leading to its escape are unknown. Since our sightings, the bird was reported on at least three subsequent



111. The female Narcondam Hornbill photographed on 23 October 2025.



112. The female Narcondam Hornbill photographed at the same site on 24 October 2025.

Both photos: Sahil Zutshi

occasions in the same general area, all in November 2025, on 02 November (Singh 2025), on 05 November (Shaktivel 2025), and on 07 November (Mani 2025). Hence, its most unexpected presence in Chidiyatapu, is obviously through anthropogenic means having been captured and transported to the South Andaman. The bird has not been seen since then and most likely would have died or been killed.

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