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An unusual wheatear *Oenanthe sp.* in Rajasthan, India, not identifiable as the Cyprus Wheatear *Oenanthe cyprica*

On 4 January 2026, at 1240 h, we observed and photographed an unusual looking male wheatear *Oenanthe sp.* in the vicinity (26.809°N, 70.492°E) of Godawan Garh homestay near Sam, in the Desert National Park, Rajasthan. At the time, we did not recognize the significance of the bird and the initial photographs did not capture all diagnostic features. Thankfully, a couple of days later (after we had left the area) some excellent close-up photographs were sent to our guide, Raviraj Soman (The Mammoth Project) by Aliyar Rojani.

Aliyar was asking for identification advice and hoped that we might have had previous experience with Cyprus Wheatear *O. cyprica*, a species that is yet to be reported from South Asia. From the photographs [113–115], the bird was primarily black and orange, and strongly recalled a Cyprus Wheatear, a breeding endemic of Cyprus (an island in the eastern Mediterranean Sea) and the entire population winters in north-eastern Africa (Collar & Christie 2020).

Not being familiar with Cyprus Wheatear, we shared the images with a number of other expert birders in the UK and elsewhere. After careful comparison of the features, it was impossible to be sure of the bird's identity, especially due to similarities with other species in the region – Variable Wheatear *O. picata* or Pied Wheatear *O. pleschanka*.

We present some key features why this cannot be positively identified as Cyprus Wheatear and likely rule out Pied Wheatear as well.

1. The bird shows more extensive orange-toned colouration than would be normal in Cyprus Wheatear, in places like the rump, undertail and uppertail coverts; even the black feathers of the mantle are tinged with it [113, 114].
2. The crown and nape are unnaturally dark, even for an adult male Cyprus Wheatear. These would show a broad white forehead and supercilium, with just a dark crown – features which this individual clearly lacks [115].
3. The edges to the sides of the tail feathers of Cyprus Wheatear are normally white (and have never been reported as anything else) but in this bird they are orange [113, 114].
4. The black plumage without any pale feather fringes is unexpected in early January for either Pied or Cyprus Wheatears. Even in fresh plumage the wings and mantle of Pied Wheatear would have pale feather fringing and the cap would not be white, not black [115].
5. The tail pattern is odd, which if Pied Wheatear should have a narrow central black band and thinner black tail tip, mainly near the middle area [113, 114].
6. The primary projection is too short for Pied Wheatear [113, 114].

It would have been hard enough to be sure this was a Cyprus Wheatear even in Cyprus (Colin Richardson, 02 February 2026), the likelihood of one reaching India is very slim and there are other species that are more likely options. The orange colouration



113. Wheatear showing orange-toned colouration on tail sides and shorter primary projection.



114. Wheatear showing orange-toned colouration on rump, upper-tail and mantle.



115. Wheatear showing orange-toned underparts with dark crown and nape.

All photos: Digvijay Singh Rathore

may represent erythrism (a congenital condition of abnormal redness), or could potentially result from external staining (e.g. dye), but this cannot be confirmed. If the orange colouration is disregarded or considered as white, then the bird appears more like a very dark-crowned *capistrata* morph of Variable Wheatear. As in this bird, *capistrata* shows a faint and narrow whitish line from the sides of the forehead/upper lores, almost continually to the sides of the nape. It is the only other black-and-white wheatear of the region that shows this feature, but this still

does not explain why the crown and nape are unnaturally dark. Taken together, the tail pattern, primary projection and plumage structure are inconsistent with Pied Wheatear.

In summary, the bird does not perfectly fit any species, but it would be much less unusual as a Variable Wheatear than anything else, particularly considering the location. And numerically, an aberrant Variable would be far more likely in India than any Cyprus Wheatear, let alone one showing such abnormalities. However, without DNA or in-hand identification, it is not possible to be certain of the identification of this bird. Given the absence of diagnostic features supporting Cyprus Wheatear and the presence of several inconsistencies, this species can be reasonably excluded. Therefore, it would be prudent not to add Cyprus Wheatear to the Indian avifauna based on this record. However, due to the extra attention it generated, it is encouraging to note that several others have been lucky enough to see and photograph this atypical bird.

Our thanks to a number of experts for commenting on the photographs and providing specialist knowledge: Dr Rob Patchett and Professor Will Cresswell at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland; Anders Gray and Colin Richardson from Cyprus; and Peter Clement. An anonymous referee read through our manuscript and provided further expert commentary.

References

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The Sind Woodpecker *Dendrocopos assimilis* from Bhimber, Jammu & Kashmir: An addition to the state avifauna

The Sind Woodpecker *Dendrocopos assimilis* occur primarily in arid and semi-arid landscapes of the northwestern Indian Subcontinent (Ali & Ripley 1987; Grimmett et al. 2008, 2011). It has also been recorded from southern Iran, in Baluchestan and Hormozgan, where it may overlap and hybridize with the Syrian Woodpecker *D. syriacus* (Khaleghizadeh et al. 2017). In India, however, its distribution is localized and fragmented, with present-day records largely confined to areas immediately east of the Pakistan-India border in Rajasthan with historical records of specimens from Punjab (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Pande et al. 2015). Given the ecological continuity of dry scrub and agro-woodland habitats across the Pakistan-India border in this region, the occurrence of the species in adjacent areas of Jammu & Kashmir is biogeographically plausible and consistent with its known habitat preferences, providing important context for the present record. There are no records however till date from Jammu & Kashmir (Mirza 2012; Kichloo et al. 2024). We present the first record of Sind Woodpecker from Jammu & Kashmir.

Bhimber is located at the south-western part of Jammu & Kashmir with elevations ranging from 350–1,350 m asl (Jabeen & Malik 2014). The region features a mosaic of habitats, including dry plains, shrubs, and cultivated agricultural lands interspersed with patches of forest and riverine vegetation. Dominated trees in forested patches include *Butea monosperma*, *Dalbergia sissoo*, *Vachellia nilotica*, and *Ziziphus mauritiana* (Goursi et al. 2017), which should provide potential foraging and nesting sites for

Sind Woodpecker. These fall in the parts of Jammu and Kashmir administered by Pakistan.

During systematic bird surveys conducted by us in Barnala Tehsil between 27 March to 14 April 2024, we encountered the Sind Woodpecker once at Kundpur Village (32.898°N, 74.227°E; 388 m). On 14 April 2024, at 1621 h, a single individual flew from a *Vachellia* tree to a nearby *Ziziphus* tree, after which it was carefully observed while actively foraging on tree trunks and branches. The bird was actively foraging on the trunks of *Vachellia* sp. and *Z. mauritiana*, moving between trees over a period of approximately one hour [116]. It was predominantly black and white, with large white patches on the shoulders and scapulars and unmarked or pale underparts. A distinct black malar stripe extended posteriorly to merge with the black patch on the neck sides. It was a female based on the absence of a crimson crown on the head. During a subsequent visit to the same locality, a male Sind Woodpecker was recorded on 22 February 2026 at 1205 h. It was observed perched and foraging on a *Vachellia* tree within the same habitat. The bird was identified as a male based on the presence of a distinct crimson crown [117].



116. A female Sind Woodpecker *Dendrocopos assimilis* perched on the bark of a *Ziziphus* tree showing black crown and large white patches on shoulders and scapulars.



117. A male Sind Woodpecker *Dendrocopos assimilis* perched on a *Vachellia* tree.

The surrounding habitat comprised agricultural land near human settlement, with low hills dominated by a mixed stand