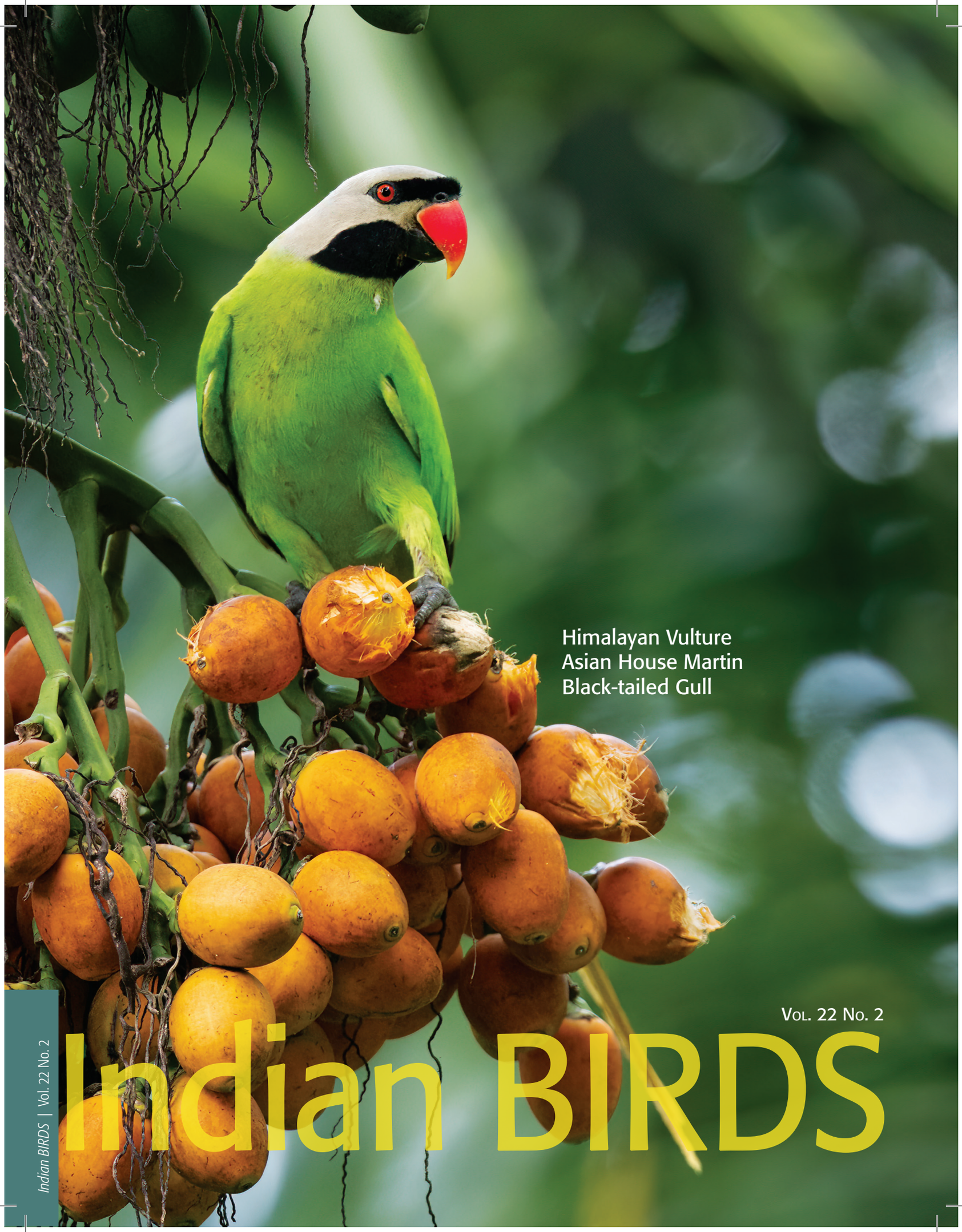

Himalayan Vulture
Asian House Martin
Black-tailed Gull

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Photographer: Samanvitha Rao

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An assessment of the breeding population of the Himalayan Vulture *Gyps himalayensis* in the Shimla Forest Division (Rural), Himachal Pradesh, India

Archi Sehgal, Rohit Chaudhary & Shivani Devi

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Abstract

The Himalayan Vulture *Gyps himalayensis*, a Near Threatened species under the IUCN Red list, is a cliff-nester in the Himalaya and is one of the lesser impacted vultures from the Asian *Gyps* population crash. In this study, we mapped nesting sites of the Himalayan Vulture in the Shimla Forest Division (Rural) from May to September 2024 to arrive at an estimate of the breeding population in the division. We recorded 69 nests across 21 nesting sites, of which 53 nests had juveniles. The mean nests per nesting site was 3.29±0.47 SE; the largest site held eight active nests. The estimated breeding population in this division was 138 individuals. Qualitative threats recorded during the surveys included changes in the burial practice of livestock and decline in livestock rearing. Regular monitoring of nest sites can act as a good metric to detect population decline of this species.

Introduction

The Himalayan Vulture *Gyps himalayensis* is a Near Threatened (BirdLife International 2021) bird of prey that occurs in the mountainous regions of the Himalaya, spanning across northern Pakistan and India through Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibet, extending to parts of western China, the Pamir and Tian Shan ranges and possibly also into the Tarbagatai and Altai mountainous regions (Lu et al. 2009; Clark et al. 2020). It is the largest vulture among the eight vultures found in Himachal Pradesh (India), which also include: White-rumped Vulture *G. bengalensis*, Slender-billed Vulture *G. tenuirostris*, Griffon Vulture *G. fulvus*, Bearded Vulture *Gypaetus barbatus*, Red-headed Vulture *Sarcogyps calvus*, Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*, and Cinerous Vulture *Aegypius monachus* (Sharma 2022). All these vultures have been reported in the Shimla District except for the White-rumped- and Slender-billed Vulture. Their preferred habitat features rugged, high-altitude terrain, including cliffs, rocky outcrops, and open areas above the tree line (Botha et al. 2017; Karmacharya et al. 2025). While the species is not as threatened as other Asian *Gyps* vultures, it still faces significant threats that could impact its long-term survival, with the primary threats being poisoning from the ingestion of carcasses contaminated with veterinary drugs like diclofenac (Acharya et al. 2009; Botha et al. 2017). Other documented threat includes collision with high voltage transmission lines, scavenging upon unintentionally poisoned carcasses that are dumped near forest areas or open grounds, and road kills (Botha et al. 2017).

Long-term nest monitoring provides key insight into population dynamics and their drivers, especially for species that may be undergoing a decline (Srinivasan et al. 2024; Hussain et al. 2025). The Himalayan Vulture breeds between November and May, coinciding with the dry season in the Himalaya when weather conditions are more stable (Bhusal et al. 2021). They are colonial breeders and make nests on steep north-facing with low direct sunshine areas, close to suitable water sources and human settlements (Thakur 2014; Wagley et al. 2020).

Here, we assess the status and distribution of the breeding sites of Himalayan Vulture in the Shimla Forest Division (Rural) of Himachal Pradesh.

Study Area

The Shimla Forest Division (Rural) (30.948°N–31.297°N, 77.003°E–77.035°E) lies between Karsog Forest Division in the north, Theog Forest Division in the east, Kunihar Forest Division in the west, and the forest divisions of Rajgarh and Solan in the south. It is administratively divided into five forest ranges: Taradevi, Dhami, Koti, Bhajji, and Mashobra, covering a total geographical area of 683 sq.km with a forest area of 325 sq. km. The forest is mainly classified as dry tropical, montane subtropical, and montane temperate, with Chir Pine *Pinus roxburghii*, Deodar *Cedrus deodara*, Kail *P. wallichiana*, and Bank Oak *Quercus leucotrichophora* being the common tree species. The altitude ranges from 500–2,867 m asl and the climate vary with elevation; temperate at higher altitudes and subtropical at lower altitudes. Monsoon starts from July and remains till the end of September, receiving an annual average rainfall of 90 mm. This division has moderate to steep slopes, particularly in the northern portion, dominated by Jutog, Shalli, Junsar, and Shimla group of rocks. The main ridges that fall within the division are Kufri, Sanjuali, Jakhu, and Taradevi. Most of the soil is clayey and sandy loam. Ridges and spurs have numerous outcrops of bare rocks and denuded slopes (Guleria & Thakur 2026).

Methodology

It is difficult to estimate the population of raptors like vultures that have large home ranges. However, breeding raptors offers a rare opportunity to study and monitor their population once their nests have been discovered. This is particularly true for raptors

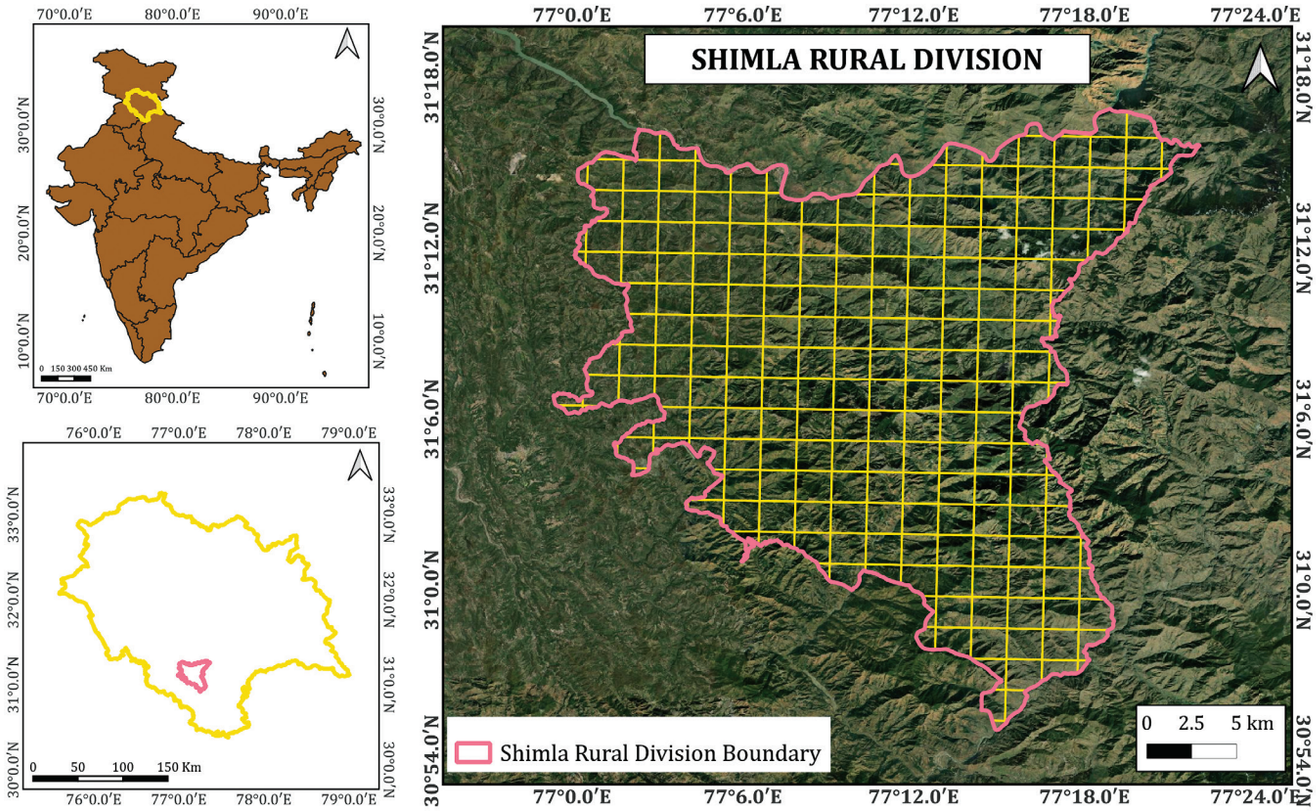

Fig. 1. Map showing the location of Shimla Forest Division (Rural)

where nests are easy to locate, and watch. In addition, if the birds demonstrate a high nest-site fidelity, year-round monitoring of breeding adults at these nests offers an easy monitoring protocol to calculate population trends. Hence, the intent of this study was to create such a baseline methodology that can be repeated after a few years to understand the population trends of Himalayan Vulture in the Shimla Forest Division (Rural); a replicable mechanism for Himalaya regions, if found successful.

Himalayan Vultures have the longest nesting period amongst all *Gyps* vultures. Eggs are usually laid in January with an incubation period lasting up to 50–55 days. The fledglings stay at the nest until it turns six to seven months old (Bhusal et al. 2021). Thus, we selected the period of May to September period to record nesting-sites and growing fledglings **[77]** and assess the population status (Bhusal et al. 2021; Ranade et al. 2023). Within this species, the adult and juvenile vultures can be easily distinguished by their plumage: adults have a pale, creamy-white body, which sharply contrasts with darker flight feathers, while juveniles are dark with light brown streaks (Alström 1997), thus clearly distinguishing a breeding pair at nest. Further, no other vulture species is known to breed within the study area, and hence the likelihood of confusing a Himalayan Vulture nest or fledgling with another vulture species nest, a real practical problem in its winter quarters, is minimal.

Our prime objective was to identify breeding pairs rather than estimate the full age-structure of the population. Thus, the survey was conducted during the period when the fledglings were clearly observable, allowing us to distinguish active and inactive nesting sites. When opportunity presented, we also attempted to assess human-related threats by discussing with locals as well as noting any physical threats we observed to the nesting sites. This was not a formal threat assessment, but were qualitative in nature, and hence subject to bias.

Field visits: The geographical area of Shimla Forest division (Rural) of 683 sq. km was divided into 183 grids, each measuring 2 km x 2 km (4 sq. km). We discussed the boundaries of our grids with forest staff and local community and geo-referenced nest coordinates from past literature into these grids. We also worked upon access paths within these grids and identified those that were completely inaccessible due to steep cliffs. We selected 75 grids that have a reasonable access and there is high

Photo: Archi Sehgal

77. A young Himalayan Vulture with an adults at its nest.

likelihood of finding nesting sites of vultures. Some of them had well-known nesting sites, either documented in the literature or known to our local contacts, while others had potential cliffs that could be occupied as nesting sites. Each of the accessible grids were visited by a three-member survey team. The survey team composition and size were constant throughout the surveys. AS led all the field surveys and was assisted by one field assistant and one forest guard, the latter two members changed based on the sites. All the grids were visited between May and September in 2024. In each grid, the team walked a trail of *c.*4–5 km for the survey specifically looking out for cliffs that may host nesting sites of vultures. Every trail was visited only once. The presence of whitewash marks on steep cliffs due to excreta deposition was treated as an indication of a nesting or a roosting site (Thakur 2014). We waited long enough at a site, to confirm signs of breeding like a brooding adult at nest, or juveniles. A nest site is classified as active if we find juveniles or a brooding adult. Sites with two or more adults perched on cliff edges with no nesting activity like juveniles or brooding adults were classified as a roosting site. Cliffs with obvious signs of excreta whitewash but no birds were deemed to be inactive sites. Each nesting site was observed using Hawke binoculars (8x42) and GPS Coordinates were recorded with the help of handheld GPS (Garmin eTrex 30). At each active nesting or roosting site, we noted down the number of nests, number of adults and juveniles. Though the intention was also to assign individuals to specific nests, we were unable to accurately do this due to crowding of birds and hence we focused on nesting sites as a whole. No nesting site was visited a second time during this study. As the distance from the nests and the observers were at least 300m and there was little opportunity to get closer, the breeding adults or young were not disturbed due to the presence of observers. Hence, the guidelines of *Indian BIRDS* nesting biology guidelines (Barve et al. 2020) were met.

Analyses: We obtain the total number of nests in the forest division as the sum total of all active nests we recorded during the survey. We also summed the number of adults and juveniles across sites to get total number vultures encountered. The total breeding population is assumed to be double the number of nests, with each nest being occupied by a pair. This assumes that some of the adults of pairs we are counting were not at the nest while the survey was carried out. We discuss the caveats and limitations of our approach.

Results

We identified a total of 24 sites, comprising three roosting site and 21 active nesting sites (Table 1). We did not record any inactive sites. The total number of nests recorded in the study area was 69. The mean number of nests per nesting site was

Table 1. List of Himalayan Vulture nesting sites with details of nest locations and nest numbers

Sl No.	Nesting site	Latitude	Longitude	Nest	Date	Total	Adult	Juvenile	Site activity
1	Kamyana 1	31.142°N	77.164°E	3	20 June 2024	8	5	3	Active
2	Malyana 2	31.086°N	77.186°E	1	11 May 2024	4	3	1	Active
3	Malyana 1	31.089°N	77.193°E	2	11 May 2024	3	2	1	Active
4	Mehli	31.080°N	77.185°E	1	20 May 2024	1	0	1	Active
5	Shogi 2	31.057°N	77.133°E	1	07 June 2024	3	2	1	Active
6	Shogi 1	31.054°N	77.135°E	3	07 June 2024	3	3	0	Roosting
7	Anandpur 1	31.050°N	77.153°E	2	18 June 2024	2	1	1	Active
8	Anandpur 2	31.046°N	77.158°E	3	18 June 2024	8	5	3	Active
9	Kamyana 2	31.148°N	77.165°E	2	20 June 2024	5	3	2	Active
10	Seri Dhank	31.023°N	77.284°E	4	14 July 2024	10	6	4	Active
11	Khatnol 1	31.181°N	77.280°E	4	21 July 2024	11	7	4	Active
12	Khatnol 2	31.184°N	77.265°E	3	21 July 2024	8	5	3	Active
13	Thailla	31.150°N	77.283°E	3	22 July 2024	9	6	3	Active
14	Lambi Dhar	31.221°N	77.217°E	3	03 Aug 2024	7	4	3	Active
15	Bagh Sandoha	31.235°N	77.319°E	2	04 Aug 2024	6	4	2	Active
16	Lodhi ki Dhak	31.237°N	77.274°E	3	04 Aug 2024	4	1	3	Active
17	Palia Dhank	31.243°N	77.308°E	1	07 Aug 2024	1	0	1	Active
18	Jajjedh	31.189°N	77.220°E	1	07 Aug 2024	1	0	1	Active
19	Kanadaghat (Koti)	31.153°N	77.286°E	8	12 Aug 2024	15	9	6	Active
20	Kandii	31.174°N	77.303°E	8	17 Aug 2024	12	5	7	Active
21	Tikkar (Ghannati)	31.167°N	77.101°E	0	08 Sept 2024	2	2	0	Roosting
22	Ghannti	31.146°N	77.077°E	0	14 Sept 2024	9	9	0	Roosting
23	Kallihatti	31.182°N	77.029°E	6	16 Sept 2024	2	0	2	Active
24	Cheolva	31.167°N	77.115°E	5	16 Sept 2024	1	0	1	Active
	Total			69		131	82	53	

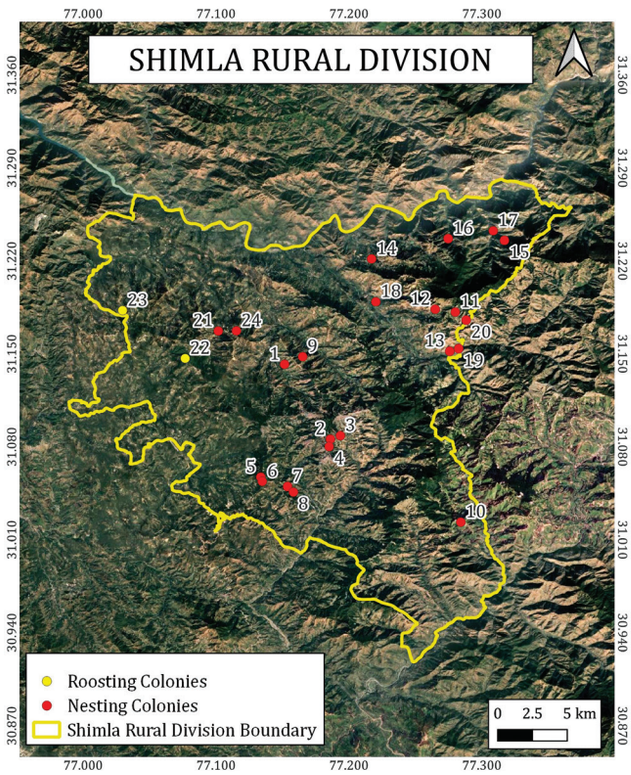

Fig. 2. Location of Vulture nesting sites within the Shimla Forest Division (Rural).

3.29±0.47 (SE), with a range of 1 to 8 nests per site (Table 1). Out of 69 nests, 53 nests had juveniles. The average number of juveniles per nest was 0.77. The mean number of juveniles per nesting site was 2.52±0.36 (SE), ranging from one to seven juveniles (Table 2). The total number of adult vultures recorded across all nesting sites was 82. The mean number of adults per nesting site was 3.90±0.60 (S.E.) (Table 2). Hence, we estimate the breeding population of Himalayan Vultures in the Shimla Forest Division (Rural) to be 138 as twice the nest count though we only detected 121 adults at the active nest sites.

Discussion

This represents the first systematic baseline survey covering nesting sites of most parts of the forest division, and consequently our estimate of 138 breeding individuals is higher than previous efforts that partially covered this landscape. For example, road surveys by Thakur (2014) reported five nesting sites (Khatnol, Shogi 1/Taradevi, Thailla, Kalihatti, and Nagjubber). Of these, the first four sites were included in our study, while Nagjubber fell outside our study boundary. In comparison, we documented 21 nesting sites and 69 nests, including 53 nests with fledglings. Thakur (2014) found large nesting sites in Shimla (Khatnol and Tradevi) with eight nests each at both sites. We report three larger nesting sites, each comprising of six to eight nests. Similar large nesting sites have been reported from Nepal by Wagley et al. (2020), where they reported a total of 78 Himalayan Vulture across 13 nesting sites, having 2–15 nests per site. The higher number of nesting sites in the present study likely reflects increased survey coverage and systematic search effort.

Our breeding population estimates of Himalayan Vulture for the Shimla Forest Division (Rural) are conservative. The caveats and limitations of this estimate are listed below.

(a) We did not survey 59% of the grid cells, often due to inaccessibility of terrain, where some additional nesting sites could occur. Our estimates therefore likely represent a minimum count.
(b) Population size was inferred by doubling the number of active nests, which assumes that the Himalayan Vulture is largely monogamous. While this assumption is reasonable, it was not explicitly tested in the present study. We did not establish the association between individual birds and specific nests, and it is possible that one member of a pair was absent during counts. If the assumption of strict monogamy is violated in some cases, population size may have been slightly overestimated.
(c) Although the breeding season of Himalayan Vultures is well documented, some early or late breeders may have been missed due to the survey window, and additional nests could have gone undetected.
(d) Counts of adult individuals at nest sites were lower than expected based on nest numbers. It may also have included non-breeding individuals (floaters). Therefore, direct counts of adults do not provide a reliable estimate of breeding population size.
(e) The number of juveniles recorded has limited interpretive value, as some nests may not yet have hatched during surveys, and the study duration was insufficient to estimate hatching or fledging success. The number of juveniles recruited into the regional population (recruitment rate) therefore remain unknown.
(f) The number of juveniles should also be interpreted cautiously. While most juveniles likely represent recruits from the current breeding season—given that fledglings remain at nests for six to seven months—it is possible that a small proportion may belong to the previous breeding cycle. Such individuals are difficult to distinguish in the field and have been documented elsewhere (Ming et al. 2013).

During informal interactions with local residents, an anecdotal decline in the number of nests per colony over the past few decades was frequently reported. While such observations are not systematically verified, they may reflect broader ecological changes in the region. One possible factor is the decline in livestock populations in Himachal Pradesh, as indicated by livestock census data. Total livestock numbers decreased by 7.17% between 2007 and 2012, and further by 8.94% by 2019 (Dinesh et al. 2023). The same study also documented a decline in traditional livestock herding practices over this period, a trend similarly reported from Nepal (Wagley et al. 2020).

The Himalayan Vulture is an obligate scavenger that rely heavily on livestock carcasses and are known to preferentially forage around livestock grazing areas (Hussain et al. 2025). A reduction in livestock numbers and changes in herding practices may therefore reduce carrion availability, potentially affecting food resources for vultures over the long term.

During the study, we also gathered information from local residents on livestock carcass disposal practices. Most respondents indicated that deep burial of livestock carcasses is now commonly followed, primarily to reduce odour and to prevent attracting carnivores and stray dogs. While this practice has clear sanitary benefits, it likely reduces the availability of carrion accessible to scavengers. Reduced carcass availability may force vultures to travel greater distances to locate food, increasing

energy expenditure and potentially lowering reproductive success (Houston 1978; García-Jiménez et al. 2018; García-Macía et al. 2023). Separately, exposure to veterinary drugs such a diclofenac through contaminated carcass has been linked to renal failure and visceral gout (Styles & Phalen 1998). Vultures travelling greater distances in search of food may also face an increased likelihood of encountering carcasses contaminated with veterinary drugs.

Similar patterns have been reported elsewhere. In Europe, Griffon Vulture populations have experienced food shortages linked to stricter sanitary regulations and carcass disposal practices (Oliva-Vidal et al. 2022). In Pakistan, changing socioeconomic conditions have also been associated with reduced carcass availability for vultures, potentially leading to starvation (Abbas et al. 2013).

These observations suggest that evolving livestock management practices may have important implications for the long-term food security of the Himalayan Vulture in the region. Understanding the balance between sanitary practices and scavenger conservation will be critical for vulture management in human-dominated landscapes.

The present survey, limited to a single forest division, represents only a small portion of the breeding range of the Himalayan Vulture. Expanding monitoring efforts across a broader landscape, and integrating studies on nest-site selection, livestock dependence, and other ecological drivers, will be essential for improving our understanding of population dynamics. Effective mapping of nesting sites in rugged and forested terrain will require close collaboration with local communities and state forest departments.

Long-term monitoring of nesting sites should be prioritised, as nest-based approaches provide a robust framework for estimating population size, detecting trends, and informing conservation planning for this species.

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

Anurag Mishra, Sandip Das, Sreekanth C., Kasun Gonagala & Ashwin Viswanathan

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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 enigmatic. Turner (2020) stated 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) showed a similar distribution, extending into western India, and state that it winters rarely in east-central India, evidently as far south as Andhra Pradesh (sight record), and in the Duars, the Assam Valley, and commonly in the "South Assam hills" at least up 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) did not specify breeding or non-breeding distributions for the species, and instead stated 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. 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 to north-eastern India (Praveen 2025). Separating AHMA from WHMA and NHMA in the field 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 (Kazmierczak 2009; Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen and Anderton 2012a). Such misidentified "white-throated" NHMA (many with photographs) include over 100 observations (only six 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 photographic 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).

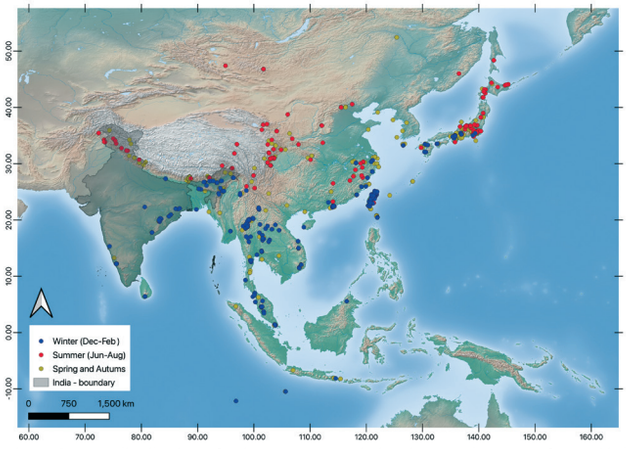

Fig. 1. Current distribution of Asian House-Martin in winter and summer from eBird data (eBird 2025), showing clear north-south movement to South and Southeast Asia. Data from Nepal and Bhutan are excluded from the map due to widespread misidentification of Nepal House-Martins as Asian.

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 *Hirundo smithii* 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 Eastern Ghats of northern Andhra Pradesh, 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).

Photo: Prashantha Krishna M C

78. Asian House Martin from Gangadikallu, Chikkamagaluru, Karnataka, India on 19 November 2022.

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 **[78]**	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 **[79]**	October–March	2020–25
4	1–2	4	Four observers including KG.	Sabaragamuwa	Sri Lanka	Ratnapura	Kolonna **[80]**	December–January	2021–22

Photo: Sreekanth C

79. Asian House Martin from Paithalmala Gen Area, Kannur, Kerala, India on 27 January 2024 Year.

Photo: Anurag Mishra

81. Asian House Martin from Tikirapara, Kalahandi, Odisha, India on 27 November 2024.

Photo: Kasun Gonagala

80. Asian House Martin from Kolonna, Ratnapura, Sri Lanka on 13 December 2022.

Photo: Ashwin Vishwanathan

82. Asian House Martin from East Godavari, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, India on 04 January 2023.

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	Similipal	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 **[81]**	November–March	2022–25
5	2–20	3	Raja Bandi, AV	Andhra Pradesh	Visakhapatnam	Mattam Bhimavaram **[82]**	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

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. [See 83, 84 for differences from NHMA].

Photo: Yogish Holla

83. Nepal House Martin from Far Pak, Lawngtlai, Mizoram, India on 16 April 2024 showing black undertail coverts, square-ended tail, and white throat.

Photo: Anurag Mishra

84. Asian House Martin from Kerketa Dam , Kalahandi, Odisha, India on 14 December 2024 showing dusky white undertail coverts, notched tail, and white throat.

Conclusion

In summary, AHMA is a regular non-breeding visitor to north-eastern India but also appears to 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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The Black-tailed Gull *Larus crassirostris* from Frasergunj, West Bengal: A new species for India

On the morning of 18 April 2026, three of us (SG, PP, and RG) visited the westernmost end of Frasergunj village in southern West Bengal, popularly known as Kargil Sea Beach (21.575°N, 88.238°E). Situated at the confluence of Edward Creek, the site comprises of a sandy beach along the Bay of Bengal coast and is a well-known hotspot for waders and seabirds during autumn, winter, and spring. Notable shorebirds recorded include Red-necked Stint *Calidris ruficollis*, Red Knot *C. canutus*, Great Knot *C. tenuirostris*, Broad-billed Sandpiper *C. falcinellus*, Curlew Sandpiper *C. ferruginea*, and Dunlin *C. alpina*. This site also hosted the Critically Endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper *C. pygmaea* in 2018. At the time of this visit, a couple of Spoon-billed Sandpipers were present at Susni Island (21.600°N, 88.243°E), across the Edward Creek (Ghosh 2026).

We reached the beach at 0900 h. On that day, high tide was expected at 0950 h, with water levels rising to 4.7 m. At 0930 h, we noticed a large solitary gull *Larus sp.* with dark upperparts that was not associating with the nearby Brown-headed Gulls *Chroicocephalus brunnicephalus*. We photographed this gull at rest and in flight, though its identity remained uncertain at the time.

Later that evening, SG shared the photographs in a *Nature Enthusiasts of WB* Whatsapp group seeking identification. SB considered this gull as a potential rarity and issued an alert in *West Bengal Rare Bird Alert* Facebook group, that ensued a discussion. The perched bird showed dark upperparts, long wings, a pale iris with a red orbital ring, bright yellow legs, and a yellow bill with dark band around gonys and reddish tip **[85]**. Flight photograph revealed entirely black flight feathers with worn tips lacking white and a worn white tail with broad black terminal band **[86]**. These field marks conclusively pointed the ID to an adult Black-tailed Gull *L. crassirostris*, a species known to winter in the South China Sea and recorded as vagrant in the Gulf of Thailand. The ragged appearance was possibly due to feather wear and perhaps combined with some oil staining.

Although superficially similar to an adult Heuglin's Gull *Larus fuscus heuglini*, a regular winter visitor to this area, an adult Black-tailed Gull differs in brighter yellow legs, proportionately longer wings and bill, as well as in bill colouration—brighter yellow bill with red tip and black sub-terminal band as seen in this bird, compared to paler yellow bill with red spot at gonys of Heuglin's. In addition, an adult Heuglin's Gull shows an entirely white tail and larger white mirrors on the outer primaries, both absent in our individual.

The Black-tailed Gull breeds in south-eastern Russia, Japan, Korea and eastern China, wintering south to the South China Sea and occurring as a vagrant as far south as Malaysia and as far west as the Gulf of Thailand (Burger et al. 2020). Over the last decade, the species has been reported almost annually from the west coast of Thailand (eBird 2026). Our observation represents by far the most distant occurrence of this species west of its usual range, and the first for India.

Birdwatching activity in the Frasergunj region has increased considerably in recent years following several significant discoveries like the Nordmann's Greenshank *Tringa guttifer* (Das et al. 2024). Since 29 March 2026, many birdwatchers have visited this region daily to see the Spoon-billed Sandpipers and recorded up to 3000 waders in a day. The increasing number of waders using the East Asian-Australasian Flyway at this site highlight the need for conservation of fragile coastal ecosystems of West Bengal.

We are indebted to Chris Kehoe for his help with the identification process.

85. Black-tailed Gull at Kargil Sea Beach, Frasergunj, West Bengal. Note the reddish tipped yellow bill with black sub-terminal band.

86. Black-tailed Gull at Kargil Sea Beach, Frasergunj, West Bengal. Note dark wings with no mirrors and black band in its tail.

Both photo: Shantanu Ghosh

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A Mandarin Duck *Aix galericulata* in western Assam

On 18 December 2024, (26.759°N, 91.232°E) at approximately 1545 h, we were scanning for Long-billed Plovers *Charadrius placidus* at Pota Dwilam, a scenic riverine picnic spot **[87]** on the outskirts of Manas National Park and Tiger Reserve in Assam, when a small duck flew by against the sunlight. It exhibited a maroon-coloured head and a white eye patch. Although initially unidentifiable due to backlighting, the bird landed *c.*500 m away in a pond. We approached carefully to minimize disturbance, and at the pond we spotted a mixed flock comprising Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*, Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*, and notably, a Mandarin Duck *Aix galericulata*, a species extremely rare in this region **[88]**.

87. Habitat at Pota Dwilam, Manas National Park.

Both photos: Tomal Gogoi

88. Mandarin Duck from Pota Dwilam, Manas National Park.

The Mandarin Duck is native to eastern Asia and is admired for its ornate plumage and rarity outside its core range. Its presence in the Indian subcontinent, where most sightings are from north-eastern India and Bhutan, is rare and is usually attributed to winter vagrancy. In Assam, the earliest records date to Baker (1902) from the Dibru and Subansiri rivers, and the species was recorded again 112 years later in the Baksa district, near Manas National Park, in February 2014 (Das et al. 2015). Modern records from the state are from Sadiya and Maguri-Motapung Beel (Ahmed & Rajpoot 2021; eBird 2025). Sightings have also occurred in neighbouring Manipur (Gimson 1934; Choudhury 2009; Kasambe & Singh 2014), Arunachal Pradesh, and Tripura (Ahmed & Rajpoot 2021; eBird 2025). The present sighting from Pota Dwilam represents the second confirmed record of Mandarin Duck from western Assam, adding to the growing evidence that the Brahmaputra valley and adjoining Himalayan foothills form part of the species' occasional wintering range.

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Interspecific feeding: Red-whiskered Bulbul *Pycnonotus jocosus* feeding Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius* nestlings

On 13 January 2024, I observed a Red-whiskered Bulbul *Pycnonotus jocosus* feeding nestlings of Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius* in the nest of the latter species at my home in Kozhikode, Kerala, India (11.256°N, 75.806°E). The nest was built on an indoor ornamental plant, *Dracaena surculosa*. The Common Tailorbirds constructed the nest **[89, 90]** in December 2023 and subsequently laid eggs. These hatched successfully, and the nest contained four nestlings. On 03 January 2024, a pair of Red-whiskered Bulbuls began constructing a nest **[91, 92]** at a distance of 39 cm below the nest of the Common Tailorbird. This was measured after both nests were vacated. Initially, the tailorbirds responded aggressively to the bulbuls' presence, giving alarm calls and frequently chasing them away.

Keeping in mind the guidelines laid out for studying and observing nesting birds in Barve et al. (2020), I noted that by 04 January 2024, the nest construction of Red-whiskered Bulbul was complete. That evening, I observed the presumed male Common Tailorbird aggressively attack one of the nesting bulbuls near its nest, forcing the bulbuls to temporarily leave the site. The sex of this Common Tailorbird individual was inferred by its nocturnal roosting behaviour; while the female remained in the nest for roosting and incubation, this individual roosted outside the nest during the night. This behaviour is consistent with males in this species. In addition to display of aggressive territorial behaviour, this individual also showed a partly missing tail with only a single long feather remaining and was, thus, easily recognized and distinguished physically. Despite this incident, the bulbuls continued to frequent the area. Based on my observations of afternoon nest visits, I noted that two eggs were laid in the bulbul's nest on 07 and 09 January 2024, respectively. Interestingly, once the bulbul commenced incubation, the tailorbirds ceased their aggressive responses.

89. Close-up of the nest of Common Tailorbird.

90. Nests of Common Tailorbird (top) and Red-whiskered Bulbul (bottom) in close proximity.

All photos: Nigin Babu

91. Nests of Common Tailorbird (top, encircled) and Red-whiskered Bulbul (bottom).

92. Red-whiskered Bulbul sitting on its nest.

On 08 January 2024, I observed a Red-whiskered Bulbul enter the tailorbird's nest. Concerned that it might harm the nestlings, I instinctively intervened to divert its attention. Though in hindsight, I realised I should have refrained from doing so, and let nature take its own course. However, my actions did not seem to deter the bulbul from doing what it may have initially intended to do; and shortly afterwards, I observed the bulbul return with a medium-sized black spider in its beak, and attempted to feed it to the tailorbird nestlings. I noted one tailorbird nestling struggling to swallow a relatively large prey item brought by the bulbul, but it managed to ingest it eventually. This was the first instance of interspecific feeding I witnessed during my observations of the nesting of the two species. I continued observing the nests from inside my room through a transparent glass window at a distance of 2.65 m from the site, ensuring minimal disturbance as recommended in various works (Götmark 1992; Mayer-Gross et al. 1997; Barve et al. 2020). I noticed that the presumed male Common Tailorbird began tolerating my occasional presence, possibly interpreting it as a deterrent to predators or intruders like the bulbul (Ibáñez-Álamo et al. 2012). The Red-whiskered Bulbul continued to feed the tailorbird nestlings with small insects, though much less frequently than the parent birds. The feeding behaviour continued until 10 January 2024, when the last nestling fledged. I also noted that the bulbul consumed faecal sacs after feeding the tailorbird nestlings, a behaviour typical of avian parental care.

The bulbul's eggs disappeared on 11 January 2024, likely due to predation. Interestingly, I observed that the tailorbirds sometimes delayed feeding their nestlings until after the bulbul had finished its turn **[93, 94]**, suggesting a temporary adaptation to the unexpected helper at nest. The parent tailorbirds would also encourage the nestlings to fledge through feeding manoeuvres, a behaviour the parents usually exhibited by holding food and flying to a nearby perch encouraging the young to follow them. However, the bulbuls were not observed doing this and were only observed directly feeding the nestlings at nest.

There appear to be no documented cases of interspecific feeding between Red-whiskered Bulbul and Common Tailorbird (Harmáčková 2021); however, a recent video on YouTube documents a Common Tailorbird feeding nestlings of Red-whiskered Bulbul at the latter's nest from Kerala, India (Life Unscripted by Mahesh 2025). Interspecific feeding in birds is rare behaviour, with often proximate and/or speculative reasoning (Shy 1982). The proximate reasons for this case may likely be, first, the proximity of the two nests, and second, predation of eggs of one of the involved species.

93. Red-whiskered Bulbul feeding the Common Tailorbird nestlings, while the presumed male Common Tailorbird (perched below) waits with food in its bill.

Both photos: Nigin Babu

94. Red-whiskered Bulbul feeding the Common Tailorbird nestlings, while the presumed male Common Tailorbird (perched below) waits with food in its bill.

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The White-bellied Minivet *Pericrocotus erythropygius* from Ferozepur District, Punjab, India and its status in the state

The White-bellied Minivet *Pericrocotus erythropygius* is an Indian breeding endemic that has a widespread distribution but is very local and uncommon throughout its range (Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Suryawanshi 2020). Though somewhat nomadic post-breeding, it is mainly found in the north and central region; inhabiting grassy deciduous and thorn forest, rocky scrub-covered slopes, and dry open scrub (Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Here, we report a sighting of the White-bellied Minivet from Ferozepur district, Punjab and discuss its status in the state.

Biṛ Chak Sarkar is a small (438 ha) notified reserve forest (Punjab Forest Department 2025) in Dona Jaimalwala (30.891°N, 74.410°E; *c.*192 m asl), Mamdot Block, Ferozepur District, Punjab, India. This forest is located right along the Indo-Pakistan International Border. This forest is a patch of tropical dry deciduous and thorn forest with some scattered trees.

On 24 January 2020, MA and TS were out for birding in the said forest on a foggy winter morning. At 0835 h, MA saw and photographed a small bird which he thought could be a White Wagtail *Motacilla alba* and didn't pay much attention. At 0955 h, they noticed a similar bird with pied plumage on the top of a small bushy tree. MA thought that wagtails seldom perch on trees in that manner, so it could be something different. TS thought that it could be a Pied Bushchat *Saxicola caprata*. Looking carefully, they noticed more birds and counted *c.*15 of them, virtually hidden in lower branches of the same tree. A few of them kept flying to the other nearby vegetation to catch insects, but kept returning back. Within 5–7 minutes, all of them flew away and settled elsewhere. Nevertheless, they had already clicked some photographs and decided not to pursue the birds further. A couple of Small Minivets *P. cinnamomeus* were also spotted a few meters away from the place where this flock of birds with pied plumage was basking in the sun on that cold morning.

MA shared photos with GPS to discuss the identity. Structurally, the bird was a minivet, and from the photographs **[95, 96],** it was identified as the White-bellied Minivet based on the white wing-slash, belly, vent and tail-sides as well as lack of any yellow or cinnamon plumage anywhere on its underparts. The individual in the photographs could be identified as a female from brownish-grey upperparts with whitish forehead and brow, with sullied brownish across breast (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).

Photo: Manish Ahuja

95. A female White-bellied Minivet showing brownish-grey upperparts and white wing slash.

Table 1. Previous reports of White-bellied Minivet from Punjab

Location	Date	Reference	Remarks
Chabbewal, Hoshiarpur District	31 January 1983	Dhindsa et al. (1991)	A flock is mentioned but no other details provided. Perhaps, confused with race *pallidus* of the Small Minivet. Hence, not considered reliable.
Japanese Garden, P.A.U. Campus, Ludhiana	NA	Dhindsa et al. (1991)	No details provided. Perhaps, confused with race *pallidus* of the Small Minivet. Hence, not considered reliable.
Santokhgarh, Rupnagar District	NA	Kumar et al. (2006)	Reported as a resident with no details of sightings. Diagnostic details reproduced from standard references. Hence, not considered reliable.
Keshopur Chhambh Community Reserve, Gurdaspur District	July 2018 to May 2019	Jangral (2020)	Presence of the species in their study area continuously for eleven months is highly unlikely based on the present understanding of the species' nomadic habits.
Keshopur Chhamb Community Reserve, Gurdaspur District	July 2019 to June 2020	Jangral & Vashishat (2023)	Included in a list but no details or evidence provided. Checked with the corresponding author, but there is no photograph of the bird (Nisha Vashishat in message dated 09 April 2026).

Photo: Tushant Sachdeva

96. A female White-bellied Minivet showing white breast, sullied brownish; pure white belly and vent.

The site was not visited again as it is in a remote area right on the sensitive international border for which permission is required from the authorities. On 26 January 2025, however, a specific visit was made by MA to search for White-bellied Minivets, but he could not find any.

As per Mukherjee (1995), the White-bellied Minivet occupies the greater parts of the Indian Peninsula including the drier parts of Punjab, Rajasthan, Kachchh, Saurashtra, and northern Gujarat. However, Ali & Ripley (1996) don't mention Punjab but mention that this species is locally distributed in peninsular India southeast of a line from Ambala (Haryana), Jodhpur (Rajasthan), and Kachchh (Gujarat), to further south and east. Grimmett et al. (2011) indicate the status of this species as uncertain with two question marks in northern Punjab in the distribution map. Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) include its range as from "Indian Punjab (Hisar) and Gujarat to Bihar, south to Andhra and Tamil Nadu, with scattered records from S Pakistan and Haryana to W Bengal and south to Kerala." However, the Punjab State from India is mentioned erroneously, as Hisar is a town in Haryana and not in the present-day Punjab, though historically it was, pre-1966. Suryawanshi (2020) describes the northern distribution as "south of Ambala in Punjab"; but it may be noted that Ambala is also in Haryana and not in Punjab.

We also checked other ornithological literature and unpublished sources like social media and citizen science platforms. We found no previous photographic evidence of this species from Punjab but there are a few published reports. However, none of them had sufficient evidence to corroborate their records, particularly considering this being the edge of the range for such an uncommon and local species (Table 1).

It can be seen that none of the previous reports of White-billed Minivet is reliable. There is a strong possibility of confusion with race *pallidus* of Small Minivet known from Punjab which has white underparts (Ali & Ripley 1996) Thus, it can be concluded that the presence of White-bellied Minivet in the present-day Punjab has not been reliably established, prior to our present sighting. However, there are still pockets of suitable habitat, especially in southern districts of Punjab, surviving amid intensive agriculture and increasing pressure on land due to development. Therefore, the birdwatchers from Punjab or those visiting from other places, should try to look for this species especially during the winter.

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The Daurian Starling *Agropsar sturninus* from Himachal Pradesh, India

The Daurian Starling *Agropsar sturninus* is a small, short-tailed, sexually dimorphic, and gregarious species of starling (Feare & Craig 1998). It breeds in eastern Mongolia, south-eastern Russia, north-eastern and central China and North Korea; and winters in Southeast Asia and Greater Sundas (Craig & Feare 2020). This note reports the first sighting of the Daurian Starling from Rakchham Chitkul Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) in Himachal Pradesh, India.

In May 2025, HC, PM, BS, and PV visited Kinnaur District for birding. On the afternoon of 19 May 2025, they began scanning a patch of Sea-buckthorn *Hippophae rhamnoides* trees along the bank of Baspa River at Rakchham. The patch was *c.*800 m long and up to 70 m wide (31.388°N, 78.354°E; *c.* 3,120 m asl) **[97]**. This site marks the boundary of Rakchham Chitkul WLS and is surrounded by coniferous trees, village fields, and scattered houses. HC first spotted an unfamiliar bird on the branches, which was slightly smaller than Brahminy Starling *Sturnia pagodarum*, with creamy white underparts and glossy upperparts **[98]**. The lower mantle and back were glossy purple and there was a distinct glossy purple nape patch. The wings were a mix of glossy green and brown, featuring a prominent white scapular band. Based on its distinctive appearance, HC immediately identified the bird as an adult male Daurian Starling. It was photographed for about an hour before the group left the site. The following morning, the bird was again observed in the same area by the same group, and later that evening by AB. CA arrived at the site on the morning of 21 May 2025 and observed the bird until the afternoon **[99]**. The starling occasionally flushed into nearby tall conifer trees when disturbed by a helicopter or by the close approach of people, but otherwise remained bold and allowed close-up photography. The bird was actively feeding on the apetalous flowers of *Hippophae rhamnoides*, while ignoring the berries. It was frequently feeding on thin branches, holding two different branches with its feet for balancing itself while feeding **[100]**. Upon finding an insect, it was eagerly devouring it. Throughout the three days, it was observed within a 200 m stretch in this larger patch of *Hippophae* sp. After that, it was not seen again in the locality.

Until recently, the Daurian Starling was considered a vagrant in the Indian Subcontinent (Hume 1874; Abdulali 1965; Ali & Ripley 1987; Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), with only a handful of records from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Sharma & Sangha 2012) and one from Tamil

Photo: C. Abhinav

97. Habitat shot at Rakchham, Kinnaur District, Himachal Pradesh.

Photo: Himanshu C

98. Daurian Starling at Rakchham on 19 May 2025.

99. Daurian Starling at Rakchham on 21 May 2025.

Both photo: C. Abhinav

100. Daurian Starling at Rakchham on 21 May 2025.

Nadu (Robson 1996). However, following numerous records since 2012, it is now considered as a regular winter visitor to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Sharma & Sangha 2012; Kumar et al. 2024; Praveen 2025; Rawat et al. 2025), and as a sporadic visitor to Kerala and Tamil Nadu (Dilip K. G & Arun 2016; Praveen 2025). Outside these regions, the species remains a vagrant, with scattered records from Goa (Baidya & Bhagat 2018), West Bengal (Dutta 2017; Patra 2024, 2025), Sikkim (Bhutia 2018), and Arunachal Pradesh (Hussain 2019; Ganeshan 2022). The species has also been recorded in the Western Himalaya. It has been recorded on 17 June 2022 near Hanle at 4,302 m asl, in eastern Ladakh (Rawat et al. 2025). Another individual was sighted at Chuchot, Leh District, Ladakh at 3,219 m asl, from 06 June 2024 to at least 16 June 2024 (Mish 2024; Rawat et al. 2025). In Uttarakhand, a pair was observed in Chamoli District at 1,451 m asl on 16 May 2021, and a female was seen on 20 May 2022 (Kumar et al. 2024). The latter is the closest known record to the present sighting. Further north-west, in the Indian Subcontinent, the species has been reported from the Turikho Valley, Chitral, Pakistan, (probably the earliest known record of the species from the region) where a male was collected from a flock of 17 birds at 3,350 m asl on 16 July 1902 (Fulton 1904).

Although our record from Himachal Pradesh lies significantly west of the typical range of the species, it is not unexpected considering prior records from the northern regions of the Indian Subcontinent. All records from this part of the subcontinent occurred between mid-May to mid-July, and above 3,000 m asl, except for records from Chamoli (1,451 m asl). We found no previous records of the Daurian Starling from Himachal Pradesh in the literature, on social media, or in citizen science platforms. This appears to be the first documented record from Himachal Pradesh, and thus part of the limited number of observations from the Western Himalaya.

The Daurian Starling arrives at its northern breeding grounds in May, and departs from Russia in late July, and from Korea between September and October (Craig & Feare 2020). The individual observed in Rakchham Chitkul WLS was likely a migrant; however, its presence in the far west of the known breeding range raises interesting questions. It is intriguing that the latest five records have been reported from the Western Himalaya over the past five years, following a gap of more than a century. Whether these sightings represent vagrant individuals or indicate that some birds from the southern parts of the Indian Subcontinent might migrate through the Western Himalaya remains uncertain.

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A case of possible cloacal protuberance in a Pale-billed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum erythrorhynchos*

The Pale-billed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum erythrorhynchos* occurs in India, southern Nepal, extreme western Bhutan, Bangladesh, western and central Myanmar, and also in Sri Lanka (Cheke & Mann 2020). It is a common and widespread resident in India (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). It is a small bird, with a pale, pinkish bill, grey-olive upperparts and pale underparts, showing no sexual dimorphism. The breeding period of the species is variable: In northern India and Nepal, its egg-laying period is from January–June, and in southern India it is from February–May (Cheke & Mann 2020), with a possibility of the species being double-brooded, laying a second clutch of eggs in August–September (Ali & Ripley 1999).

On 06 June 2017, we were birding in Aranmula (9.323°N, 76.699°E), Kerala. While documenting birds on our eBird Checklist (Chirukandoth 2017), it was observed that there was high activity of Pale-billed Flowerpeckers, with four birds continuously vocalizing and actively chasing each other through the canopies, possibly in a courtship display. An individual was observed perched on the lower branches of a shrub in the open and was photographed. It was noticed that there was a pinkish

protrusion from the cloacal region of the bird, with a drop of fluid at the distal end **[101]**. The bird, however, showed apparently normal activity and flew off immediately.

Cloacal prolapse is one of the common complications encountered in birds. Some of the common reasons could be calcium deficiency, neoplasia, infections, and obstructions (Chitty & Lierz 2008). However, the present case did not appear to be a pathological condition, as the bird was evidently not in any distress and showed normal behaviour. Since it was breeding season of the species (Ali 1931; Ali & Ripley 1999), it is probable that this bird had recently mated. Cloacal protuberance in birds can also be caused by natural reproductive activity, mostly in males (Schut et al. 2012). Cloacal protuberances have been previously documented in males of Superb Fairywren *Malurus cyaneus* (Mulder & Cockburn 1993), and in males of Stitchbird *Notiomystis cincta* from New Zealand which has been suggested to improve copulation efficiency (Low et al. 2005). It is also possible that the individual we observed was a female showing the cloacal protuberance in order to attract or display to the males that it is ready for mating. This has been previously documented in females of Alpine Accentor *Prunella collaris* (Chiba & Nakamura 2002).

Our observations appear to be the first documentation of prominent cloacal protuberance in Pale-billed Flowerpecker during breeding season.

Photo: Yash Mayekar

101. Pale-billed Flowerpecker with cloacal protuberance of c. 0.5 cm length (inset).

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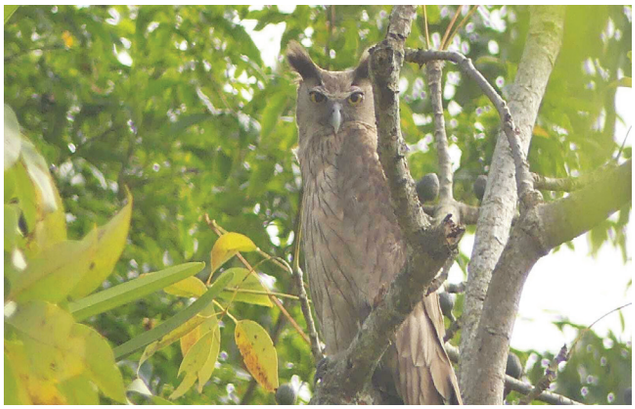
A case of predation of nestling of the Dusky Eagle-Owl *Ketupa coromanda* by monitor lizard *Varanus* sp. from Assam, India

The Dusky Eagle-Owl *Ketupa coromanda* is a large owl distributed widely across South Asia and parts of Southeast Asia (Holt et al. 2023). It is resident from Pakistan (mainly Indus River basin) and most of sub-Himalayan region in India, Nepal, and east to western Assam and hills of north-eastern India in Meghalaya, Cachar district in Assam, Manipur, and parts of Bangladesh, south to central India (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). The breeding season of the species overall occurs between November and April; primarily December to January in northern India, but somewhat later in the southern parts of its range (Ali & Ripley 1981).

During the 2025 breeding season in Singioni village (27.189°N, 94.678°E; 98 m asl), Sivasagar District, Assam, a Dusky Eagle-Owl pair was observed nesting for the fifth consecutive year on a Silk Cotton *Bombax ceiba* (Simulu tree) **[102]**. The nest was located on a primary lateral branch *c.* 10 m above ground level, positioned close to the main trunk and supported by epiphytic growth that provided structural stability as well as effective concealment **[102]**. The nesting tree, with an estimated height of 18–20 m, was situated adjacent to agricultural cropland and in close proximity (*c.* 70 m) to a large wetland bordered by patches of dense vegetation near rural human settlements. Such a habitat likely offers abundant prey resources, including rodents and small reptiles, making it suitable for a large nocturnal predator like the Dusky Eagle-Owl. The first observation of the adult sitting in the nest was recorded on 17 January 2025; the species is known to reuse nesting sites and this nest had been consistently occupied for five consecutive years. We followed recommended practices and guidelines in Barve et al. (2020) for documentation of the nest observations.

On 25 January 2025, we saw one adult owl with a nestling on nest **[104]**. The nestling was covered in white natal down and appeared to be *c.* 10–12 days old. On the same day, at 1425 h, a monitor lizard *Varanus* sp. was observed climbing the nesting tree. The monitor lizard could not be identified to species level conclusively from our photographs **[105]**. Despite defensive efforts by one adult owl, with another adult perched on a nearby tree, by 1515 h, the monitor lizard successfully preyed on the nestling at nest **[105]**. Following this event, the nest was abandoned; however, adults remained present nearby for at least ten days but were not sighted thereafter. This incident underscores the vulnerability of even well-concealed nests to predation by large, climbing reptiles. Most monitor lizards are



102. An Adult Dusky Eagle-Owl with prominent ear tufts roosting at the day time, dated 17 January 2025.

103. Nest site on Silk Cotton Bombax ceiba tree.

All photos: Sthitapragyan Mallick

104. Adult and nestling on nest prior to the predation event on 25 January 2025.

105. The monitor lizard Varanus sp. (encircled) on the nest on 25 January 2025 during the predation event.

almost entirely carnivorous, opportunistic foragers with a varied diet which includes insects, fish, amphibians, smaller reptiles, birds, eggs, and small mammals (Pianka et al. 2004).

Despite its wide distribution, the Dusky Eagle-Owl remains one of the least-studied owl species globally, with many aspects of its breeding biology poorly known or unknown, including the lack of information on its nest predation (Ali & Ripley 1981; Holt et al. 2023; BirdLife International 2025; Ranade 2020; Reddy & Ramachandran 2023). Information on the kind of predators of the species, the manner of predation and response to predators is also lacking. While nestlings and eggs may face predators such as reptiles like monitor lizards or other raptors at nest, fledglings of the species may face additional predators on the ground, such as, smaller mammals or other larger raptors. Other closely related owl species have known to be predated by other raptors, such as, the Eurasian Eagle-owl *Bubo bubo* is known to be predated by the Bonelli's Eagle *Aquila fasciata* (López-López et al. 2016). Similarly, the Tawny Owl *Strix aluco* is known to be predated by the Northern Goshawk *Astur gentilis*, Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*, Ural Owl *Strix uralensis*; and by mammal predators like the Pine Marten *Martes martes* and the Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* (Marks et al. 1999; Scherzinger & Mebs 2024). In North America, the Great Horned Owl *Bubo virginianus* experiences predation from various raptors, reflecting complex intraguild interactions in owl communities (Artuso et al. 2022). Adults of the Great Horned Owl are safe from most predators and competitors; however, fledglings are susceptible to predation by the Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* and the Coyote *Canis latrans* on the ground, and eggs and nestlings can be predated by the Racoon *Procyon lotor* (Artuso et al. 2022).

The Dusky Eagle-Owl is an opportunistic nocturnal predator itself, feeding on mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, fishes and large insects, and employs both patrol and sit-and-wait hunting strategies. However, its own breeding success is impacted by natural predators, such as, reptiles like monitor lizards, small mammals, and other raptors, in addition to the threats from habitat loss. This case from Assam highlights the importance of understanding prey-predator dynamics and the need of systematically studying bird behaviour and documenting any interspecific interactions.

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The Bearded Vulture *Gypaetus barbatus* from the plains of north-western India

On the evening of 26 February 2025, I observed a group of ~30 scavenging raptors near a carcass of a cow close to the Gadeli Nadi enclosure, Desert National Park in Jaisalmer, Rajasthan, India (26.764°N, 70.631°E). Most of them were winter migrants, including the Eurasian Griffon *Gyps fulvus,* Himalayan Griffon *G. himalayensis,* Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus*, and Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis.* Among them, one individual looked significantly different, prompting me to take a few photographs. It was a large raptor, comparable in size to the Cinereous Vulture, and had a black face and neck with a uniform brown torso. Later, the individual moved to perch on a Bare Caper *Capparis decidua*, where its characteristic "beard" became clearly visible. Based on these features, and subsequent comparison with standard field guides and online resources (Grimmett et al. 2011; Orta et al. 2020) the bird was identified as a juvenile Bearded Vulture *Gypaetus barbatus* **[106]**. The individual was sighted at 240 m asl (26.764°N, 70.634°E) within the vast flat terrain of the Thar Desert, with the nearest mountain range *c.*300 km away in the Suleiman and Kirthar Ranges of Sindh and Balochistan Provinces in Pakistan, where the species is a known winter visitor (Roberts 1991; Iqbal et al. 2023).

In India, the species is largely restricted to the Himalayan region (Grimmett et al. 2011) (Fig. 1). However, two vagrant individuals have previously been recorded in Gujarat, Western India: a juvenile from the Girnar Wildlife Sanctuary (Vadher 2019) and an unconfirmed sighting in Kachchh (Ganpule 2016; Thakker 2005).

Bearded Vultures have vast home ranges and often cover large distances in search of carrion (Orta et al. 2020). Additionally, juveniles are known to be more wide-ranging and exploratory and have been recorded moving more than 500 km in a single day (Margalida et al. 2013). Likely, a few individuals like this bird occasionally drift into Gujarat and Rajasthan from neighbouring distribution areas in Pakistan (Vadher 2019). During the last week of February, a cyclonic circulation and western disturbance were reported over southern Pakistan & adjoining southwestern Rajasthan, which further moved over the northwestern Rajasthan plains (National Disaster Management Authority 2025). This unusual regional weather may have pushed this bird to the plains. This might be the first photographic record of a Bearded Vulture in Rajasthan State, and only the third record from the western arid plains of India.

The bird was sighted while conducting fieldwork under the "Thar Scavenger Ecology" project of the Wildlife Institute of India, funded by the Raptor Research and Conservation Foundation, Mumbai.

Photo: David Phinehas N

106. Juvenile Bearded Vulture sighted at Desert National Park, Jaisalmer on 26 February 2025.

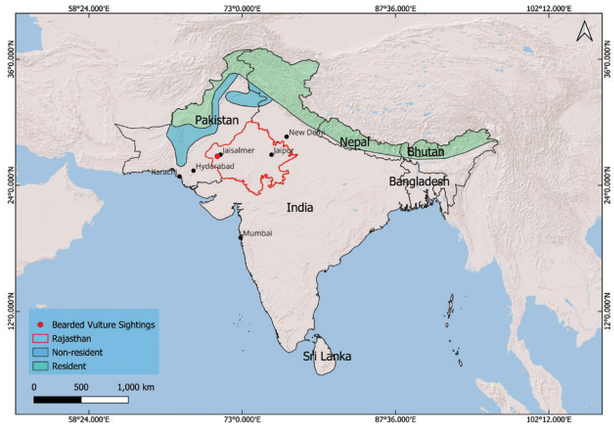

Fig. 1: Map showing the current sighting of Bearded Vulture outside of its known range.

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The Caspian Plover *Anarhynchus asiaticus* from Bilaspur: An addition to the avifauna of Chhattisgarh, India

The Caspian Plover *Anarhynchus asiaticus* breeds across Central Asia, including regions around the Caspian Sea, and spends its non-breeding period primarily in eastern and southern Africa, with additional records from Mauritania, Mali, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Cameroon, Gabon, and Congo in West Africa, as well as islands of the western Indian Ocean including Madagascar, Mauritius, Réunion, Rodrigues, Seychelles, and Comoros (Sinclair & Langrand 2004; Message & Taylor 2024). Historically, the Caspian Plover has been regarded as a vagrant in the Indian Subcontinent (Ali & Ripley 1980; Grimmett et al. 1998; Kazmierczak 2000; Rasmussen & Anderton 2005). However, subsequent assessments suggest that it may occur more regularly than previously assumed, with small numbers likely wintering in the region (Sangha et al. 2010). In India, it has been recorded sporadically from Rajasthan (Sangha et al. 2010), Delhi (Vyas 1996), Gujarat (Robson 2007; Sørensen & Tiwari 2009), Goa (Lainer 2004), Maharashtra (Prasad 2006), Puducherry (Balachandran 1994), Tamil Nadu (Kazmierczak et al. 1993; Robson 1996), Haryana, and Kerela (Sangha 2021).

On 04 September 2025, SPP and KP observed a single Caspian Plover during a bird walk at Mohanbhata (22.246°N, 82.020°E) in Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh. The site is a typical *bhata* habitat—open grassland exposed to cattle grazing, interspersed with small seasonal ponds. The presence of muddy flats and shallow water provides favorable conditions for waterbirds and serves an important stopover site for migratory waders during the monsoon. Several plovers including Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva*, Little Ringed Plover *Thinornis dubius*, and Kentish Plover *A. alexandrinus* were recorded during the bird walk. Among them, one individual appeared distinct while foraging alongside three Little Ringed Plovers, exhibiting typical 'stop-and-run' feeding behavior. The bird was identified as a Caspian Plover based on sandy-brown upperparts, contrasting whitish lower tail-coverts, clean white forehead, lores, cheeks, supercilium, and throat with brown ear coverts, and a continuous grey-brown breast band lacking any rufous or black tones. The bill was slender and black, legs relatively long and greyish-green, and iris dark brown. Compared to Greater- *A. leschenaultii* and Tibetan Sand-Plovers *A. atrifrons*, the bird showed a slenderer structure, longer legs, finer bill, and clean white face, and a continuous grey-brown breast band (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). The scaled upperparts with pale fringes, diffuse brownish breast wash, broad whitish supercilium, and absence of adult breeding characters indicate that the individual was a juvenile (first-winter) **[107, 108]** (Sangha 2021).

107. Juvenile (first winter) Caspian Plover showing narrow rufous scalloping on the upperparts.

108. Caspian Plover showing sand adhering to the bill after foraging. Photographed at Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, India on 04 September 2025.

Both photos: Satya Prakash Pandey

There are no previous records of Caspian Plover from Central India including Chhattisgarh and neighbouring Madhya Pradesh. This sighting therefore, constitutes the first documented occurrence of Caspian Plover in Chhattisgarh. The sighting underscores the importance of seasonal grassland–wetland habitats in central India for supporting migratory waders, and suggests that this species may be more widely distributed than previously recognized.

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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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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 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.

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

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

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. cypriaca*, 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 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

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

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.

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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.

Both photos: Touseef Ahmed

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

of *V. modesta*, *Z. mauritiana*, and *V. nilotica* **[118]**, providing potential foraging and nesting substrates for Sind Woodpecker. These details would potentially help other birders to search for this species elsewhere in this landscape.

Photo: Touseef Ahmed

118. Habitat of the locality showing dominant Vachellia sp. And Ziziphus mauritiana at Kundpur Village.

These observations, representing both male and female individuals, constitutes the first confirmed record of Sind Woodpecker from Jammu & Kashmir. This is not unexpected as there are several records in Punjab, Pakistan, which are *c.*50 km west of our site (eBird 2026). Nearest records of Sind Woodpecker from India are of specimens collected from Arniwala and Fazilka, both in Fazilka (formerly part of Firozpur) district, Punjab, India (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Praveen 2024). Our site is *c.*240km north of these sites in India, indicating a notable gap in formally documented records in this region. Our finding emphasizes the need for focused bird surveys in low elevation and human-modified landscapes of the district to improve knowledge of local avifaunal diversity and broad distribution patterns.

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The Critically Endangered Great Indian Bustard *Ardeotis nigriceps* at Tulshi Reservoir, Kolhapur District, Maharashtra, India

The Great Indian Bustard *Ardeotis nigriceps* (GIBU, hereinafter) is one of the most threatened bird species globally and is currently classified as Critically Endangered by the IUCN due to its extremely small and rapidly declining population (BirdLife International 2018). Once widely distributed across the grasslands and semi-arid regions of the Indian subcontinent, the species has suffered severe range contraction over the past century, primarily as a result of habitat loss, agricultural intensification, infrastructure development, and increased human disturbance (Dutta et al. 2011). This note describes the sighting of a GIBU from Tulshi Reservoir (Fig. 1) of Kolhapur District of Maharashtra, from the northern Western Ghats landscape, and outside its known stronghold in the state of Maharashtra.

An adult GIBU was seen for the first time at Tulshi Reservoir, Kolhapur District, Maharashtra, India on 12 January 2025, at 1015 h, near the reservoir margins at Kumbharwadi (16.526°N, 74.010°E) **[119]**. This individual, a female, was foraging in an open landscape adjoining the reservoir. Identification was straightforward as no other species has such a large body, long legs, erect posture, brownish upperparts, contrasting black crown, and pale neck and underparts. The bustard was observed for approximately a minute. During this period, it moved slowly across ground, foraging intermittently. It remained vigilant and avoided us despite being far, eventually walking away and disappearing from our view. It later took to wing and flew towards west. No additional individuals were observed in the vicinity despite a thorough search. We kept visiting the site since then but have not come across any GIBU.

Tulshi Reservoir, created Tulshi earthen dam, has an area of 135 ha, and was built mainly for irrigation. Most of its catchment area lies in the adjoining Western Ghats. Around the water-spread area, the landscape consisted predominantly of open grassland,

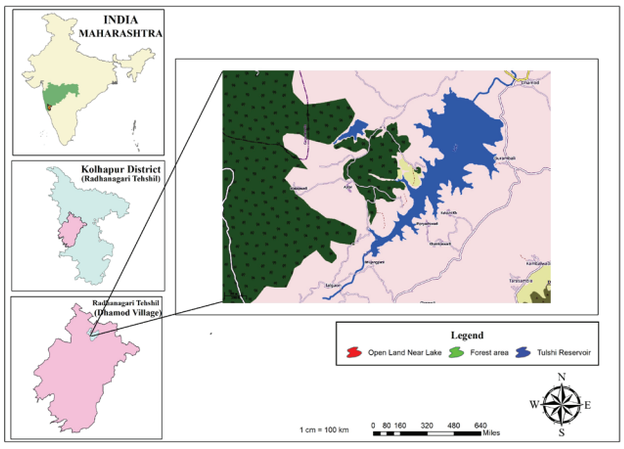

Fig. 1. Tulshi reservoir, Kolhapur district, Maharashtra, India

Photo: Rahul S Kamble

119. Female Great Indian Bustard foraging on a grassy open landscape at Tulshi Reservoir, Kolhapur district, Maharashtra.

fallow agricultural land, and seasonally exposed reservoir margins, with sparse shrub cover and tree growth. Our observation site consisted of open grass-dominated terrain interspersed with uncultivated agricultural fields right along the margin of the reservoir. Vegetation cover was sparse, with scattered grasses and herbs, and the area lacked dense woody growth. Human presence was minimal during the time of observation and the habitat structure allowed unobstructed visibility across the landscape.

Historically, GIBU occurred across large parts of western, central, and peninsular India, including several districts of Maharashtra (Burgess 1855; Dangre 1966). Early ornithological records and subsequent field observations indicate that the species was formerly widespread and abundant in open grasslands and dry agricultural landscapes in the state (Ali et al. 1984). However, sustained declines led to its disappearance from much of this range, with remnant populations now largely restricted to a few fragmented landscapes, most notably in Rajasthan and parts of Gujarat and Maharashtra (BirdLife International 2018). Early records indicate the occurrence of the species in districts such as Ahmednagar, Nagpur, and other parts of the Deccan Plateau in Maharashtra (Dangre 1966; Garde 1993). However, large-scale habitat transformation and changes in land-use patterns here have led to a severe contraction of its distribution in the state by 2010 (Dutta et al. 2011). At present, the Great Indian Bustard Sanctuary located in Solapur and Ahmednagar districts represents the principal stronghold for the species in Maharashtra; particularly the grasslands surrounding Nannaj and adjacent areas (Narwade & Rahmani 2020). Recent surveys from the south-western Deccan Plateau have emphasized the ecological importance of these grassland landscapes for the persistence of the remaining bustard population in the state (Narwade & Rahmani 2020). Nevertheless, the population within this landscape has also declined considerably in recent decades, reflecting the precarious conservation status of the species in Maharashtra.

Our sighting, from the Western Ghats landscape, is clearly outside its known stronghold, *c.*290 km away from its stronghold. Such movements may represent exploratory or nomadic behaviour, especially when solitary birds occur. Recent observations from the Solapur region have reported the presence of a single female Great Indian Bustard between 2019 and 2024, which subsequently went missing. The hypothesis that it's the same individual that wandered to Tulshi Reservoir needs a serious consideration, though this speculation would remain unconfirmed due to lack of satellite telemetry.

Such occasional sightings outside established strongholds have been interpreted as evidence of dispersal or transient habitat use, underscoring the ecological relevance of marginal and non-protected landscapes (Dutta et al. 2011). Satellite telemetry studies conducted in Maharashtra have demonstrated that individuals may move across extensive grassland and agricultural mosaics and frequently occupy sites outside protected areas, sometimes up to 100km (Habib et al. 2016). Similar observations from arid regions of Rajasthan further illustrate the species' continued dependence on open habitats, and its tendency to make large-scale movements in a landscape with fragmented habitats (Gehlot et al. 2021).

Hence, this underscores the importance of landscape-level conservation strategies for the Great Indian Bustard in Maharashtra. Although the Solapur-Ahmednagar region remains the primary stronghold for the species, individuals may occasionally disperse into other suitable habitats across the Deccan Plateau, even into the Western Ghats landscape.

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An aberrant Small Pratincole *Glareola lactea* in a pratincole breeding colony

Atypical plumage variants among sympatrically breeding waders are rare and often go unnoticed without sustained field observation. During systematic avifaunal monitoring of pratincole *Glareola sp.* colonies at Bembla Reservoir (20.480°N, 78.070°E) in Yavatmal District, Maharashtra, India from April to June 2025, an aberrant individual **[120]** of Small Pratincole *G. lactea* was documented amongst regularly plumaged Small Pratincoles and Oriental Pratincoles *G. maldivarum* that were breeding together.

By size, the aberrant individual appeared to be a Small Pratincole. However, the observed individual deviated from the standard phenotype. The focal bird displayed the following unusual features: reddish-brown pigmentation on the crown and

120. Small Pratincole showing reddish-brown pigmentation in crown and nape.

Both photos: Praveen Joshi

121. Small Pratincole showing its slightly elongated and decurved bill.

nape (vs grey), a broad and flattened cranial profile (vs rounded crown), a complete and conspicuous white eye-ring (vs faint or absent), and a slightly elongated and decurved bill (vs stubbier bill). No vocalizations or unusual behavioural traits were observed.

The bird was observed quite briefly when a small series of photographs were obtained. Despite five follow-up searches between 16 and 25 June 2025, this bird or no additional individuals with similar morphology were detected.

To confirm that this was not a case of individual variation within the natural spectrum, over 500 photographic records and field images of both Small and Oriental Pratincoles from regional and national monitoring and citizen science platforms (e.g., eBird India) were reviewed. No comparable individuals were found, reinforcing the uniqueness of this observation.

Several reasons could be hypothesized for this atypical individual but confirmation or elimination would require capturing the individual. I list some of the possible reasons. Environmental plumage staining—usually from iron-oxide-rich soils—has been documented in some species like vultures (Arlettaz et al. 2002; van Overveld et al. 2017) and cranes (Nesbitt 1975). This colour also seems to be present around the bird's heels where the bare parts touch the feathers, perhaps stained while wading through contaminated water. Alternatively, the individual could be a hybrid between Small and Oriental Pratincole but no such hybrids are known (McCarthy 2006) and the reddish-brown tint is not present in either of the species, and hence unlikely. The last possibility, stemming from the precise pattern and consistency of pigmentation in the focal bird may be a melanin-related anomaly. Melanin, the dominant pigments in bird plumage, occur as eumelanin (black, grey, dark brown) and phaeomelanin (reddish-brown to buff). Birds typically regulate which pigment is produced, but a genetic mutation may induce exclusive production of phaeomelanin. This phenomenalism can lead to warm reddish-brown coloration, as possibly exhibited by this pratincole (van Grouw 2021). Notably, such anomalies need not reflect an increased pigment load, but rather an abnormal distribution of melanin, altering patterns and hues within the natural feather structure (van Grouw 2021).

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Breeding of the Malayan Night Heron *Gorsachius melanolophus* from Andaman Group of Islands, India

The Malayan Night Heron *Gorsachius melanolophus* is a chestnut-colored, medium sized nocturnal heron with a distinctive long black crest (Grimmett et al. 2011). The species occurs patchily in north-eastern India, Western Ghats, Nicobar group of islands, and South China (He et al. 2016). It is resident in Taiwan and migratory in parts of its range, wintering in Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, Philippines, and the Great Sundas. Breeding has been reported mainly during the monsoon period in the north-eastern India (May–June), Philippines (June–October), and Taiwan and other Southeast Asian regions (April–September) (Martínez-Vilalta et al. 2020). In the Andaman Islands, the Malayan Night Heron is considered a migrant from Southeast Asia or north-eastern India, with no confirmed breeding records (Praveen 2025).

The species is primarily nocturnal, though it occasionally feeds during day time also (Kawakami et al.2011). Its preference for dense forest habitats and its habit of nesting high under the canopy, typically 9–14 m above ground, make it difficult to detect during surveys.

In August 2024, calls of two Malayan Night Herons were heard in a forest patch at Brookshabad, Sri Vijaya Puram, South Andaman (11.627°N, 92.745°E). The site is a dense forest, bordered by quarries to the west, a tsunami camp to the north, the Brookshabad dump yard to the northeast, and the sea to the east. On 09 October 2024, their nest was located approximately 9–10 m above ground under the canopy in the same forest patch **[122a]**. Observations were done using binoculars (Solognac 8x42) from a distance of *c.*20 m to minimize disturbance (Barve et al. 2020). The attending adult remained vigilant during observations, responding to nearby movements and sounds. Hatchlings were not visible due to the height and canopy cover of the nest **[122b]**. The adult remained on the nest for approximately two weeks before disappearing, suggesting possible nest abandonment. In

January 2025, a juvenile was observed within the same forest patch between 1715 and 1730 h.

On 11 May 2025, calls of Malayan Night Herons were again recorded at the same site. On 12 July 2025, a nest was observed on the same tree but on a different branch at a similar height **[122c]**. Nesting in close proximity to the previous site suggests strong nest-site fidelity, a behaviour reported for the species (Kushlan & Hancock 2005). The nest was monitored during subsequent visits in July **[122d]**. However, from the first week of August 2025 onwards, no adults were observed attending the nest, indicating a second probable nest abandonment.

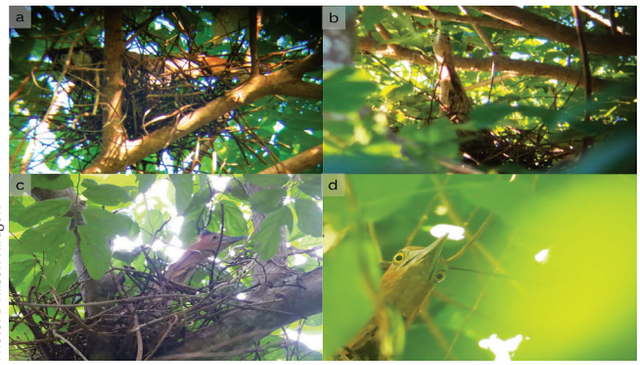

Photo: B Kilson Kiragori

122a. First photograph of the nesting of Malayan Night Heron on 09 October 2024. 122**b:** Early morning picture while observing the nest on 10 October 2024. 122**c:** Nesting on same tree but on a different branch, photograph taken on 12 July 2025. **122d:** Last sighting of the bird on the nest on 26 July 2025.

All observations and call recordings were uploaded to eBird by the author. Additionally, an independent record of nest building on 05 May 2025 was reported from Diglipur, North Andaman (Rajan 2025). Repeated nesting attempts in the same tree across consecutive seasons at Brookshabad, together with the record from North Andaman, suggest that the Malayan Night Heron may have a breeding population in the Andaman Islands. The apparent variation in breeding timing between northern and southern Andaman could reflect differences in climatic conditions or population origins. The population in the Nicobar group of islands is taxonomically distinct, as the subspecies *G. m. minor*, while the breeding population in Andamans have not been sampled and may represent another taxonomically valid unit (Praveen 2025).

Continued monitoring of known locations like Brookshabad forest patch and nearby habitats may provide further insights into the breeding ecology and population status of this species in the Andaman Islands.

I extend my gratitude to my friends Sarah Drego, Pritam, and Hosang who supported this fieldwork, especially Adharsh Unni for mapping the study area, Dr. Heera for guiding me to write this manuscript and Subramania Siva for sharing one photograph for documentation. Thanks to Selvaganesh and Shakthivel as their encouragement was instrumental in shaping this manuscript.

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A Red-footed Booby *Sula sula* on the Kalpeni Island, Lakshadweep, India

During a coastal walk on the Kalpeni Island in the Lakshadweep archipelago (10.071°N, 73.648°E) on 02 June 2025, MJKK encountered an unfamiliar seabird resting quietly on a mooring buoy near the shore of the leeward side of the atoll. The bird appeared calm and alert, showing no signs of distress or exhaustion. He observed it for approximately two hours as it occasionally preened and balanced itself against the light breeze, before eventually taking flight toward the southwest over the lagoon. Based on visual assessment and subsequent photographic confirmation, the bird was identified as an immature Red-footed Booby *Sula sula* a rarely recorded seabird in Indian waters **[123]**. Notable identification features included a pale blue bill with a darker base, bare blue facial skin with a blackish throat patch, vivid red webbed feet, and predominantly dirty white plumage with contrasting dark brown primaries. which aligned with field descriptions by Harrison et al. (2021).

Photo: Mohammed Jabir. K. K

123. Red-footed Booby ***Sula sula*** observed in Kalpeni Island, Lakshadweep, India, in June 2025.

The Red-footed Booby is a widely distributed seabird that breeds on remote tropical islands across the world's oceans (Schreiber et al. 2020). Within Indian waters, however, sightings are rare. Reports are generally of at-sea observations or of individuals that have been driven ashore during storms. Until 2013, there was only one confirmed record of the Red-footed Booby from India, of a grounded individual from New Digha, West Bengal (Praveen et al. 2013). By 2020, there were six records from India, five of them being from the west coast, and four of them being beached birds (Rodrigues & Roshnath 2020). Since then, there have been four more reports from the west coast, of which three of them were rescued birds from land while

one was at sea (eBird 2026). In the Lakshadweep Sea, the Red-footed Booby has previously been reported between Bangaram Island and Minicoy Island, with a flying encounter recorded near Bangaram Island (Vishnulal et al. 2025). That constituted the first record for the archipelago (Raju et al. 2021) though there have been historical claims without adequate documentation (see Praveen et al. 2013). Also, our observation documents the first confirmed record of a Red-footed Booby spotted on land in the Lakshadweep Archipelago. The individual, a healthy bird, was observed walking and resting on the island rather than flying over nearby waters. In fact, this would be the first report a healthy Red-footed Booby from the land, from anywhere in India – all previous reports were of beached or exhausted birds (seven) or at-sea observations (four).

Remote islands such as Kalpeni may serve as occasional resting or stopover sites for such species traversing the Arabian Sea, considering its proximity to the breeding colonies in the Chagos Archipelago (Votier et al. 2024), located *c.*1,825 km south of Kalpeni Island.

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Observations on predation of Indian Courser *Cursorius coromandelicus* chicks by a Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor*

At a grassland patch, near the village Kumbhari (17.666°N, 75.975°E; 480 m asl), in the Akkalkot Tehsil of Solapur district, Maharashtra, we documented previously unreported prey by Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor,* a raptorial songbird. While observing a pair of Indian Coursers *Cursorius coromandelicus,* during the breeding season of the species, which lasts from late February to August (Sangha et al. 2025), we witnessed a predation event involving the Great Grey Shrike and Indian Courser chicks.

The Great Grey Shrike is highly opportunistic and flexible in the use of different food spectra and hunting tactics (Yosef et al. 2025). Its diet mainly consists of invertebrates, small vertebrates, as well as, occasionally, carrion and plants (Yosef et al. 2025). Shrikes are also known to target young, ailing, wounded or exhausted migratory passerines (Ali & Ripley 1987; Lefranc 1997; Yosef et al. 2025).

On 20 March 2016, at 1800 h, a pair of breeding Indian Coursers, accompanied by two chicks, was being observed. The coursers were observed displaying an alarmed stance, which is likely indicative of the presence of predators. One adult Indian Courser was then observed initiating a protective posture by sitting on the ground with its neck lowered, which was suggestive of the presence of either a nest or young ones nearby **[124]**. Shortly thereafter, the Great Grey Shrike landed on the ground at a distance of a meter away from the courser, triggering defensive responses from the courser pair, such as giving alarm vocalisations, and performing threat displays, such as stretching the wings wide open and fanning the tail. The adults started giving specific threat calls, similarly documented by Sureja et al. (2021), which likely alerted any nearby chicks or nestlings, and would make the young ones hunker down and remain completely still. At this point, one of the adult coursers was also observed to perform the broken-wing display **[125]**. Such strategic movements used by birds to distract or avoid detection by predators are known as paratrepsis; these behaviours of distraction displays are closely related to the broader concepts of camouflage and predator-prey interactions, used to lure predators away, and is generally associated with protecting nests or young (Caro 2005). A flock of around 10–12 adult coursers joined them to distract the predator away from the chicks. Despite these defensive efforts, the shrike successfully preyed upon one chick located a meter away from one of the adult coursers. At the time of the attack, the adult courser was positioned directly between the chick and the shrike, with the shrike having landed a meter away on the opposite side. Although the chick relied on its camouflage for protection, the shrike successfully seized it and flew away **[126]**.

Due to the low-light conditions and the distance between the observers and the bird, we could not locate where the shrike flew away with its prey. In European studies, wintering shrikes typically moved every 8.6 min and used 5.6 perches per km to travel 11.8 km daily (Olsson 1984). The Great Grey Shrike generally searches the ground for hours on end, perched on a number of quite high vantage spots, ideally at a height of 3–10 m (with extremes of 1–18 m). After 20 min, the shrike reappeared; this time, the shrike used the surprise attack strategy. It attacked the other adult courser, which was perched on the ground covering the second chick, and swiftly picked up the vulnerable chick **[127]**, and then flew to a nearby *Acacia* spp. tree, *c.*50 m away. Shrikes are known to frequently carry their prey to a nearby perch offering a commanding view of the surroundings (Probst et al. 2003). In this species, larders can be found across the area at any time of year, sometimes up to 1,500 m from an occupied nest, there is typically at least one nearby, preferably within 15–20 m, especially if there are nestlings older than a week (Antczak et al. 2005).

Contrary to the usual distracting display of the Indian Courser, in this case, the courser was sitting in a protective manner, covering the chick, and was likely unaware of the shrike's presence, leading to an ambush. Following this predation event, we observed the Great Grey Shrike's characteristic behaviour of butchering and impaling its prey **[128]**. This intentional and systematic impaling is recorded exclusively in the true shrikes and has not been documented in non-Laniidae bird species (Yosef & Pinshow 2005). The shrike was later observed decapitating the chick **[129]** and then impaling that decapitated head on

124. Adult Indian Courser was then observed initiating a protective posture.

125. One adult Indian Courser performing the broken-wing display while the Great Grey Shrike is perched close.

126. Great Grey Shrike successfully preyed on the first Indian Courser chick.

127. Great Grey Shrike successfully preyed on the second Indian Courser chick.

All photos: Ratnakar Hiremath

128. Great Grey Shrike impaled its prey, the Indian Courser chick.

129. Great Grey Shrike decapitating its prey, the Indian Courser chick.

130. Great Grey Shrike impaling the decapitated head on another *Acacia* spp. tree thorn.

another *Acacia* spp. tree thorn **[130]**. This is known behaviour of the species, Great Grey Shrikes use a relatively large number of feeding places; these are their impaling sites where they store food larder (Schön 1994).

In existing literature, there are no documented cases of Great Grey Shrike preying on a chick of Indian Courser, and our observations appear to be the first such recorded case (Ali & Ripley 1987). These observations highlight the ability of Great Grey Shrike to detect and capture cryptically coloured and large-sized prey. In contrast, the defensive responses of Indian Courser, although limited only to threat displays rather than direct physical aggression, suggest its sole reliance on camouflage to avert the risk of predation during the vulnerable stages of life, such as breeding and nesting.

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Addition of the Crow-billed Drongo *Dicrurus annectens* to the avifauna of Jammu & Kashmir, India

In this note, we report the sighting of a Crow-billed Drongo *Dicrurus annectans* near Kalakote (33.242°N, 74.440°E), Rajouri District, Jammu & Kashmir, India.

On 25 November 2025, SKB, AR, their daughter, and HK visited the area for birdwatching and reached the site at 1015 h. At 1110 h, while observing birds along a small hill stream, we noticed a drongo sallying for insects from a tree branch. Shortly afterwards, the bird was displaced by Large-billed Crows *Corvus macrorhynchos*, forcing the drongo to fly away. Thereafter, a distinctive metallic call was heard from the surrounding pine *Pinus* sp. trees. We followed the call and soon spotted the bird perched on the top of a pine tree. It was identified as a Crow-billed Drongo **[131]**, on the basis of a broad tail with shallow fork, white spotting on the underparts, and the characteristic stouter bill (Grimmett et al. 2011). We took some photographs and shared them with GPS who confirmed the identification as a first-winter Crow-billed Drongo.

In the Indian Subcontinent, the Crow-billed Drongo breeds in the Himalayan foothills from Uttarakhand eastwards through the north-eastern India and winters mainly in Bangladesh and the adjoining north-eastern India (Rocamora & Yeatman-Berthelot 2020). There are no previous records of this species from Jammu & Kashmir (Kichloo et al. 2024; Kichloo 2025). In the area between the present location and the eastern Uttarakhand, this species has been reported only from Sirmaur District of Himachal Pradesh (Abhinav et al. 2019; eBird 2025).

Photo: Sachin Kumar Bhagat/Anu Ramotra

131. Crow-billed Drongo near Kalakote, Rajouri District, Jammu & Kashmir, India.

This observation constitutes the first record of the Crow-billed Drongo from Jammu & Kashmir and extends the known distribution of the species further north-west in the Western Himalaya. The record also suggests that suitable habitat for the species may exist in the Kalakote region and adjoining areas.

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The Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* in Assam

The Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* is a distinctive waterbird, easily recognized by its long, curved bill and streaked brown plumage (Smith et al. 2025). It has a white underbelly marked with dark streaks, a mottled brown and gray back, and a prominent white stripe above the eye that contrasts with the dark crown and nape. On 04 October 2024, at 1507 h, I observed a Whimbrel resting near the sand dunes of Khabolughat on the Subansiri River in Upper Assam's North Lakhimpur district. Despite the rain, the bird displayed typical behavior and allowed close observation. I photographed the individual **[132]** and recorded a video, later confirming the identification.

Photo: Jugal Borah

132. Whimbrel Khabolughat, Subansiri River, Assam.

This record represents the first documented photographic evidence of the Whimbrel in Assam. Earlier surveys, including those by Stevens (1914, 1915a,b) and Betts (1956), did not record the species in the Subansiri floodplains. Historical accounts, however, include the sighting of a small flock in Lakhimpur in 1900 and individuals shot in North Cachar (present-day Dima Hasao district) in 1899 (Baker 1929), but specimens remain untraced. There is also a mention of the species from Dibru-Saikhowa (Choudhury 2006, 2009), though the number of birds and exact locations were not specified.

Highly migratory, the Whimbrel has a wide global distribution. In India, it is most frequently recorded along the coasts but also occurs in inland wetlands. Records from much of inland north-eastern India, however, remain scarce. The lack of systematic surveys, particularly along river floodplains outside the birding season, further limits our understanding of seasonal movements in the region. Although not a rare waterbird (Skeel et al. 2020), this observation highlights the underexplored biodiversity of the Subansiri floodplains and their importance as stopover sites for both resident and migratory species. This record makes a significant contribution to Assam's ornithological documentation. It also adds to our understanding of the Whimbrel's distribution in India, particularly with respect to inland flyways.

We confirmed the identification with the help of Shyamal Saikia, Manash Pratim Medhi, Sutirtha Lahiri, Leons Mathew, and Binanda Hatibaruah, to whom I express my sincere gratitude.

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– Jugal Borah

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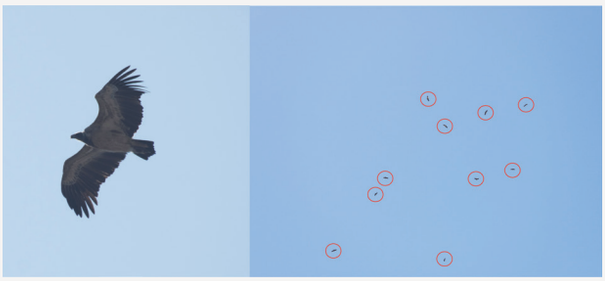
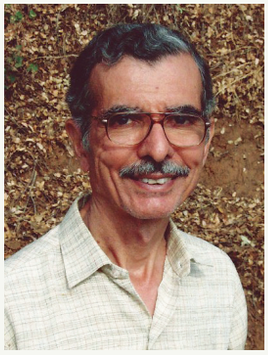
Errata



133. An Indian Vulture in flight at Vaibhargiri Hill and a large flock at Rajgir Zoo area.

In the last issue (IB 22(1): 32A), we covered a photograph (#76) of a vulture from Rajgir Wildlife Sanctuary, Bihar, India labelled as an Indian Vulture *Gyps indicus*. However, it is in fact a juvenile Himalayan Vulture *G. himalayensis*. The mistake is regretted. The correct photo of the Indian Vulture that should have accompanied that article is presented here **[133]**, which indeed is an Indian Vulture. Our thanks to Adhithyan N.K. for spotting this mistake.



Obituary

Jamshed P. Irani: A rare bird watcher

The tribe of bird watchers in India has grown satisfyingly over the years, but on 28 April 2026 ornithologists across India mourned the loss of a rare bird watcher. Not only did he observe every detail of a bird, but he recreated the bird on paper or canvas with supreme artistry and scientific rigor. After completing a diploma in Commercial Art from the Sir J. J. School of Arts, Bombay, in 1958, the world of ornithology was fortunate that he was discovered and mentored by India's foremost ornithologist, Sálim Ali, from 1963. His first assignment was to create plates for the monumental ten volume *Handbook of The Birds of India and Pakistan* and Jamshed Irani has the distinction of being the only artist who has plates in every volume of the Handbook.

Sálim Ali was a perfectionist; both as regards his own work and that of others. It is a testimony to Jamshed Irani's own commitment to excellence that Dr. Salim Ali turned to him for the illustrations for so many bird plates: in *The Book of Indian Birds* and in *The Birds of the Eastern Himalayas* and in *Common Birds* by Salim Ali and Laeeq Futehally and for a poster when BNHS was searching for the elusive Jerdon's Courser. In addition, Jamshed also illustrated *Our Feathered Friends* by U. Chopra and *Watching Birds* by Jamal Ara. He was commissioned by the late King of Bhutan, Jigmi Dorji, to paint four birds in oil on canvas for the palace. While all his illustrations of birds demanded exacting scientific accuracy, Jamshed also produced artistically beautiful renditions of birds and other type of wild life, some of which were reproduced as greeting cards and even postage stamps. His talent was such that he could capture the essence of a wide variety of natural subjects - fish to butterflies to tigers and mountain scenery.

The postal department first contacted him for paintings of birds but, having discovered his talent, challenged his versatility on a wide range of subjects - from women pilots to portraits of eminent personalities and from flowers to the Konkan Railways, The Scindia School and The International Leprosy Congress!

Slim to the point of looking emaciated, generous yet humble and self-effacing, Jamshed Irani was a person who won the hearts and the respect of all those who knew him. After working for 32 years with Larsen & Toubro (L&T), he retired as a Senior Manager - Advertising in 1996. But Jamshed never retired from expressing the creative excellence that was the hallmark of his life. Jamshed made a mark that no other contemporary Indian artist has made in the field of ornithology and it was fitting that he was awarded the 2003 gold medal of the Salim Ali Loke Wan Tho Ornithological Research Fund of the BNHS. Astonishingly, in the 1980s at the age of 42, when his right hand was incapacitated by a freak accident, Jamshed trained his left hand to create artistic work with the same precision and beauty that he earlier created with his right hand.

Jamshed Irani was not one to rest on his laurels or to become stereotypical and, when he was already in his 80s, he was creating exquisite renditions of birds, butterflies and flowers in silk thread embroidery, and doing intricate carvings on Emu egg shells and in wood. Born in the beautiful little cantonment town of Devlali, Jamshed loved nature and loved painting nature from an early age. His parents, Khorshed and Pirojshaw Irani were wise and caring enough to encourage his talent and in his final years Jamshed escaped from Bombay to the natural beauty of his farm in Karjat. Jamshed has gone but his legacy lives on in the publications referred to by ornithologists in India.

– Dilnavaz Variava
Former CEO of WWF-India, Vice President of BNHS and Steering Committee Member of The National Board for Wildlife

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