

Correspondence

The Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra* in Ladakh: An addition to the avifauna of the Indian Subcontinent

The genus *Melanocorypha* comprises large, robust larks associated with open steppe habitats (Winkler et al. 2020). Of these, Bimaculated Lark *M. bimaculata* is known from Central Asia and winters in northern India and hence is considered the more likely species to occur in Ladakh (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Calandra Lark *M. calandra* occurs across southern Europe, northern Africa, and parts of western Asia including Afghanistan (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Shirihai & Svensson 2018), and has not previously been documented from the Indian Subcontinent (Praveen et al. 2026). Here I document a photographed individual from Spituk that was initially identified as a Bimaculated Lark but subsequently confirmed as a Calandra Lark following detailed review of photographs and discussion among observers and reviewers.

On the morning of 07 December 2025, I was birding near my residence, Gasha Birders House, in Spituk village (34.122°N, 77.527°E), Ladakh, India under typical winter conditions. During the early morning hours, I heard an unfamiliar lark vocalisation that was deeper, more resonant, and less musical than that of Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis* and Oriental Skylark *A. gulgula*. The bird was located on open ground and photographed [158–160]. Based on the expected regional occurrence and field appearance showing thick black breast patch, it was initially identified and reported in eBird as a Bimaculated Lark (Gasha 2025a).

The bird remained in the same area for two days and was subsequently observed by several members of the Ladakh birding community. At the time, the bird attracted attention because Bimaculated Lark itself was considered a rarity in Ladakh and hence several photographs were obtained.

After my original record on 07 December 2025 (Gasha 2025a), I saw it again on the following day (Gasha 2025). Gurmeet Stanba observed the bird on the following day (Stanba 2025), and Padma Gyalpo obtained much useful photographs of the bird in flight (Gyalpo 2025). Thus, the bird was observed and photographed independently by three birders during the two days that it remained at the same location. Even Bird Count India initially reported this same bird as a Bimaculated Lark, following the original identification in the eBird checklist (Bird Count India 2025).

Subsequent examination of photographs led to reconsideration of the identification. On 11 March 2026, Padma Gyalpo uploaded one of photographs of the bird to iNaturalist (Gyalpo 2026). During the subsequent discussion associated with that iNaturalist observation, Johannes S. was the first identifier to suggest that the bird is a Calandra Lark rather than a Bimaculated Lark. Thus, the iNaturalist discussion prompted reconsideration of the identification after several months of the original observation. Following the suggestion on iNaturalist, the identification was immediately revisited amongst birders and eBird reviewers, including through social media and WhatsApp groups. These subsequent discussions eventually led to the identification being revised in eBird from Bimaculated Lark to



158. The Calandra Lark at Spituk, Ladakh, 07 December 2025, showing bulky structure and extensive black breast patch.



159. Side profile highlighting heavy bill, subdued facial pattern with less prominent loreal pattern.



160. Bird in flight showing broad wings and white trailing edge and white outer tail feathers.

All photos: Sonam Choldan Gasha

Calandra Lark. All associated eBird checklists were updated. This chronology is important because it distinguishes the initial recognition of the possibility of Calandra Lark on iNaturalist from the later discussions among Indian birders and eBird reviewers.

The identification is based on a combination of structural and plumage features visible in the photographs [158–160]. The bird showed a distinctly bulky structure with a thick neck and deep chest, consistent with the Calandra Lark and unlike the

slenderer structure usually shown by the Bimaculated Lark. The bill was notably heavy and deep-based and the bird exhibited a large, bold black breast patch that appeared extensive and nearly merging at the centre of the throat. The upperparts appeared relatively plain with limited streaking, while the underparts were largely clean and pale. Facial patterning was subdued, lacking the stronger facial contrast often shown by the Bimaculated Lark (Shirihai & Svensson 2018). Flight photographs showed broad wings with diagnostic prominent trailing edge and white outer tail feathers (Shirihai & Svensson 2018), with a slightly longer tail than expected for Bimaculated Lark [160]. The pictures of underwing taken by other birders show slightly dark underwing, darker than what is shown by Bimaculated Lark (Gyalpo 2025b). Taken together, these features confidently separate the bird from Bimaculated Lark and confirm its identity as Calandra Lark.

This may represent one of the first instances in India in which a species new to the national avifauna was initially recognised through collaborative identification on iNaturalist before formal regional acceptance. It also demonstrates the importance of multiple observers, photographic documentation, and subsequent review in the identification of rare birds. This sequence demonstrates the value of retaining photographs and revisiting records when additional evidence becomes available. It also illustrates how online biodiversity platforms can facilitate the recognition and subsequent validation of species that might otherwise remain overlooked.

The known range of Calandra Lark extends as far as Afghanistan (Praveen 2018) and does not extend to Pakistan or northern India (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). This observation therefore represents the first confirmed photographic record for the country and the subcontinent and a significant eastward vagrancy. The occurrence may reflect long-distance dispersal or weather-assisted displacement from western populations. The cold desert and steppe-like habitats of Ladakh may provide suitable conditions for occasional vagrants, though these regions remain relatively under-surveyed during winter.

Several prior reports of Bimaculated Lark from Ladakh and adjacent regions exist in eBird (Delany 1981; Faustino 2000; Nubu 2025). Ladakh eBird reviewers are encouraged to contact these observers and establish the correct identity as these may have involved Calandra Larks.

I thank Padma Gyalpo, Gurmeet Stanba, Johannes S., members of the Indian birding community, and eBird reviewers for valuable discussions and assistance in evaluating this record. I also thank contributors on iNaturalist whose observations and comments helped initiate reconsideration of the identification.

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– Sonam Choldan Gasha

Gasha Birders Houseem Spituk, Ladakh, India, E-mail: choldan18@gmail.com

The Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* in the Corbett Tiger Reserve, Uttarakhand, India

On 23 November 2025, at 1400 h, HCJ, SSS, and AC saw and photographed a large finch in Dhela Zone (29.402°N, 78.973°E, c.327m asl) of the Corbett Tiger Reserve, Uttarakhand, India [161]. The bird was perched on top of a dead tree in a dry forested stream for nearly five minutes before it flew away. It was identified as a possible Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*. GD searched for the bird at the same location later during the afternoon but could not see it again. AC shared images with MS who confirmed the identification of the bird as an adult non-breeding Hawfinch, based on the features including a large dull yellowish bill, black on lores, bib and above the bill; brown head, grey nape, brown cheek and ear-coverts, warm brown coloration to underparts and scapulars; black wings with white coverts.



Photo: Huang Chung Jung

161. Hawfinch showing dull yellowish bill, black on lores, bib and above the bill with white coverts on black wings.

On 24 November 2025, MS, AC, GD, PK and JS searched the bird at Dhela from 0640 h to 0830 h. At 0651 h, the bird came on a bare treetop in the same stream where it was seen on the previous day, and was seen and photographed till 0656 h when it flew away [162]. The bird was reported from the same location on 25 November at 0650 h (Mehta 2025a) and later at 1424 h for about 50–60 minutes (Mehta 2025b). It was observed perched on bare branches and also coming down to feed on the ground (Mehta 2025b). However, it was not observed at this site since then.