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217. Black-faced Bunting showing greyish head, black lores and chin, and grey breast well demarcated from the lower yellowish-white underparts, photographed from Wular Lake.

the present record represents the first documented occurrence of the species in Jammu & Kashmir. The nearest records of this species are from Ladakh (Gyalpo 2024) and Punjab (Antaal & Singh 2025). Since this location is further east than the record from Ladakh, it likely represents eastern-most wintering record of this species in South Asia (eBird 2025).

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Does the Red-tailed Wheatear *Oenanthe chrysopygia* winter in northern India?

The Red-tailed Wheatear *Oenanthe chrysopygia*, also known as Persian Wheatear depending on taxonomy (Clements et al. 2025), was previously treated as conspecific with Rufous-tailed Wheatear *O. xanthopyrma*, now recognized as Kurdish Wheatear. The Red-tailed Wheatear breeds in north-eastern Turkey, southern Armenia, Azerbaijan and much of Iran, extending eastwards into southern Turkmenistan, southern Tajikistan (Pamir range), Afghanistan and extreme western Pakistan; the non-breeding range of the species includes Arabian Peninsula, southern Iraq, southern Iran, eastern Afghanistan, Pakistan and north-western India (Collar 2020). Here, we describe our records of Red-tailed

Wheatear from multiple locations in Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. We also compile its records from northern India and assess the extent of its non-breeding range in the northern winter in the region and whether it extends beyond the western parts of the country.

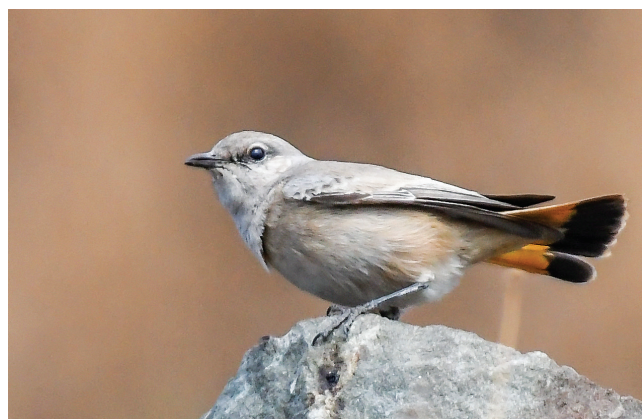
Himachal Pradesh

On 22 December 2023, GS visited Chakki Mod and Bhojnagar, Solan District in Himachal Pradesh for birding. A dull grey-brown wheatear was observed on the roadside near Bhojnagar (30.837°N, 77.061°E; c. 1,430 m asl). The bird was seen on a rocky hillside, where stones had been cut, presumably for future construction. The area comprised of large and small boulders with scattered retaining walls [218]. Due to its uncharacteristic appearance, the wheatear could not be identified in the field. Photographs were shared with CA, who identified the bird as Red-tailed Wheatear, based on the presence of warm rufous on the sides and tip of the tail. The rump appeared pale rufous, lighter than typically illustrated in field guides. GS revisited the site on next day to confirm the identification. The bird was noted in flight and also when the tail was spread [219], revealing rufous coloration along the sides. On 26 December 2023, CA and PD also visited the site and observed the wheatear actively foraging in the same location and photographed it. It remained at the same location for the next few months and the last sighting was on 26 February 2024. It would mostly perch in the open on stones or shrub-tops and afforded good views at this spot. While it was bold but when approached, it also frequently flew to the trees present near the top and at the base of this hill.



C. Abhinav

218. The habitat of Red-tailed Wheatear near Bhojnagar, Solan District, Himachal Pradesh.



Gurinder Singh

219. Red-tailed Wheatear near Bhojnagar, Solan District, Himachal Pradesh on 23 December 2023.

On 13 January 2024, GS recorded two individual Red-tailed Wheatears near Chakki Mod (30.856°N, 77.005°E; c.930 m asl); birds were sighted c.100 m apart on a dry streambed about 90 m wide, strewn with boulders. These birds also remained at the site till late February 2024. However, during the subsequent winter, no sightings were reported of the species despite multiple visits.

On 22 September 2025, at noon, while walking down the ridge line at Gete (32.309°N, 78.024°E; c.4,485 m asl), near Kibber village in the Spiti Valley, Lahaul and Spiti District in

Himachal Pradesh, MAS spotted a wheatear-like bird along with a few Black Redstarts *Phoenicurus ochruros* in a boulder-strewn habitat. At this time of year, since most of the Desert Wheatear *O. deserti* had left their breeding grounds, MAS pursued the bird for better examination and photographing the individual. The bird had a whitish throat, along with a pale rufous ear patch, and a rufous hint to the upper and underside of its tail, indicating it to be a Red-tailed Wheatear [220]. The individual was rather bold and was observed for 30 min as it moved around while foraging alongside the Black Redstarts.

Table 1. Records of Red-tailed Wheatear *Oenanthe chrysopygia* in northern India

S. No.	State	Location	Date	Remarks	Reference
1.		Bank of Chenab, Akhnoor, Jammu District	30 January and 04 March 2020	Photographed by multiple observers, maximum three individuals recorded in February	Kumar (2020)
2.	UT Jammu & Kashmir	Dignibal, Ganderbal District, Kashmir	December 2024 and 08–13 February 2025	Two birds recorded by multiple observers during February	Riyaz (2024); Kumar (2025)
3.		Zabarwan Hills, Srinagar District, Kashmir	12 February 2025 and 30 October 2025	Single bird recorded by multiple observers	Bhatt (2025); Majeed (2025)
4.		Dignibal, Ganderbal District, Kashmir	October–December 2025	A bird photographed by multiple observers	Sofi (2025)
1.	Himachal Pradesh	Dharamsala, Kangra District	February	Specimen (at 1,370 m)	Hingston (1921)
2.		Sairee (Seri), Shimla District	29 September 1912	Specimen	Dodsworth (1913); Jones (1948)
3.		Ranital, Kangra District	25 September 1921	Sight record	Whistler (1926)
4.		Renuka Ji, Sirmour District	27 October 2007	Sight record at c.950 m	Robson (2008)
5.		Chakki Mod, Solan District	December 2018	Photographed	Singh (2018)
6.		Chakki Mod, Solan District	November 2023	Photographed	Vikky (2023)
7.		Bhojnagar, Solan District	22 December 2023–26 February 2024	Three birds at two locations	Present records
8.		Gete, Lahaul and Spiti District	22 September 2025	Photographed	Mohammad (2025)
1.	UT Chandigarh	The Zakir Rose Garden, northern Chandigarh	06 October 2003	Photographed	Singh (2005)
1.	Punjab	Chappar Chiri Khurd, Mohali District	27 February–07 March 2022	Photographed	Das (2022)
1.	Uttarakhand	Rajaji National Park	Undated	Recorded during winter	Pandey et al. (1995)
2.		Jhima forest resthouse, Corbett Tiger Reserve	25–26 September 2006		Sharma & Chaturvedi (2010)
3.		Garjia Devi Temple, near Ramnagar, Nainital District	27 November 2018 and 12 February 2019	Photographed on both occasions	Present record
4.		Bijrani Range, Corbett Tiger Reserve, Nainital District	08 November 2019	Photographed	Kester (2019)
5.		Veerpur to Ranari road, Uttarkashi District	16 January 2021	Photographed at c.980 m	Rana (2021)
		Dehradun	November 2023	Photographed	Chandra (2023)
1.	Delhi		around 1920	Recorded by Holmes in her book- Bird study in India, 1920	Ganguli (1975)
1.	Haryana	Sultanpur Lake, Gurugram District	23 December 1977	Sight record	Sridharan & Bikhchandani (1981)
2.		Badhkal, Surajkund, Sultanpur and Bhindawas	2000–2006,	Several mid-winter records	Harvey et al. (2006); Harvey & Vyas (2018); Vyas (2019)
3.		Sultanpur, Gurugram District	04 October 2008	Photographed	Arya (2008)
4.		Jhanjharola village, Gurugram District	17–26 November 2017	Photographed	Sircar (2017); Mehta & Dogra (2018)
5.		Jhajhrola Road, Gurugram District	27 January 2018	Sight record (could be the above-mentioned bird)	Singal (2018)
6.		Sultanpur flats, Gurugram District	27 January 2019	Sight record	Thangaraj (2019)
7.		Nigana Kalan, Bhiwani District	31 January 2022	Photographed	Ahlawat (2022)
		Dhani Mahu, Bhiwani District	14 February 2025	Photographed with comments of sighting during previous year at same site	Ahlawat (2025)
1.	Uttar Pradesh	Haiderpur Wetland, Bijnor District	29 September 2020	Photographed	Loya (2020)



Mohammad Abdus Shakur

220. Red-tailed Wheatear at Kibber, Lahaul and Spiti District on 22 September 2025.

Uttarakhand

MS and RB visited Garjia Devi Temple area (29.496°N, 79.139°E; c.460 m asl), near Ramnagar, Nainital District at the outskirts of Corbett Tiger Reserve on 27 November 2018. They observed a dull-coloured wheatear on the stony riverbed [221]. It was identified as Red-tailed Wheatear by prominent rufous on its tail. On 12 February 2019, they revisited the spot for birding and were surprised to find a Red-tailed Wheatear at the same spot, probably the same bird. The bird was perhaps wintering in this area.



Richard Baines

221. Red-tailed Wheatear at Garjia Devi Temple region, near Ramnagar, Nainital District, Uttarakhand on 27 November 2018.

There have been several previous records of Red-tailed Wheatear from northern India which are summarized below in Table 1, along with the present records. Not all records have a photograph or a specimen, but such cases are few (7 or 8 out of 30) to alter the general pattern.

We have plotted a bar chart depicting the month wise number of records of the Red-tailed Wheatear. At locations where the species was observed over multiple months, a separate count was included for each month. In cases where more than one individual was seen at a site, the corresponding number was added to the monthly totals. Undated records and multiple records from the National Capital Region (NCR) between 2000 and 2006 were excluded due to the unavailability of exact dates.

The chart clearly demonstrates that the species is present during the peak winter months, with the highest number of records occurring in January and February.

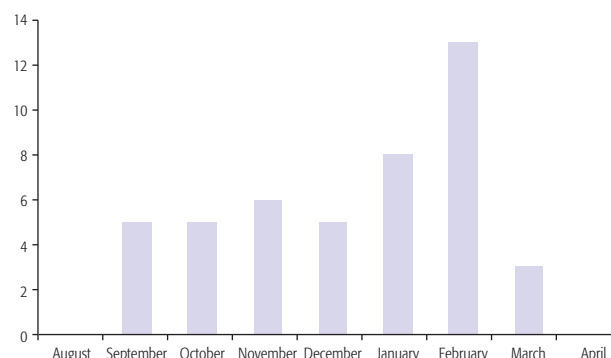


Fig 1. Month wise records of Red-tailed Wheatear in northern India

There is some confusion regarding the wintering range of Red-tailed Wheatear in northern India. Grimmett et al. (1998) described it as a winter visitor to Pakistan and north-western India from Himachal Pradesh to Gujarat, but depicted its regular wintering range as limited to a small part of western Rajasthan, northern Gujarat, and Pakistan. Kazmierczak (2000) and Grimmett et al. (2011) plotted a similar restricted regular wintering range. Outside Gujarat and western Rajasthan, only four individual records have been plotted in northern India by Grimmett et al. (1998), five by Kazmierczak (2000) and six by Grimmett et al. (2011). Ali & Ripley (1987) also mentioned a similar range, including records from Kangra, Himachal Pradesh during autumn passage. In contrast, Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) have plotted a much wider wintering range encompassing most of Gujarat and Rajasthan, extending northwards up to Himachal Pradesh as a broad band, remaining west of the Ganga River. However, their text only describes the species as a winter visitor to most of Pakistan, and western India in Rajasthan and Gujarat where it is considered scarce. Other parts of northern India shown within its winter range on the map are not discussed in the accompanying text. Praveen (2025) noted its wintering range in "eastern" Rajasthan (which should be western Rajasthan) and Kachchh, and considered records of the birds reported from Jammu, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi region and West Bengal to be of passage migrants. Stragglers have been reported as far east as West Bengal (Jha 1997; West Bengal Rarities 2017).

The Red-tailed Wheatear occurs on its wintering grounds from early October to the end of March with its peak passage in these two months, although some movement also takes place in December and February (Ali & Ripley 1987). Therefore, most records from November to February likely pertain to wintering individuals, especially those in January. As three Red-tailed Wheatears were seen throughout the winter at separate locations around Bhojnar, and given a previous wintering record from this area, the species may be considered an erratic winter visitor to this region. Although Chakki Mod, located nearby, is a popular birding destination, the drier habitats preferred by this species are rarely explored. Furthermore, its relatively inconspicuous appearance likely contributes to suspected misidentification or underreporting from this region. den Besten (2004) has mentioned Red-tailed Wheatear from Kangra District, referring

Whistler (1926), however Dhadwal (2019) has overlooked the previous records from the state and the species is missing from the latter.

The record of Red-tailed Wheatear from Gete, Spiti from late-September appears to be the first record from the trans-Himalayan region. It was likely on passage, migrating to its breeding grounds further north. The species breeds between 2,500 and 4,000 m asl in south-western Iran, 2,000 to 2,700 m asl in Afghanistan, 1,200 to 3,100 m asl in Tajikistan, above 2,100 m asl in Pakistan, and 700 to 1,200 m asl in Armenia (Collar 2020). The wheatear was observed at 4,485 m asl in Gete, and this is probably the highest elevation record of the species.

In Ramnagar, Uttarakhand, the Red-tailed Wheatear was seen twice, during November and February, where an individual was seen at the same location on two separate visits, suggesting it was possibly wintering. These observations appear to be the first wintering records for Uttarakhand. Our sightings also add to the scarce but growing number of winter records from northern India. Harvey et al. (2006) speculated that the species may be a rare winter visitor, based on several mid-winter records from the locations in the NCR. Our wintering records of Red-tailed Wheatear from Bhojnagar and Ramnagar, together with multiple records from northern India including NCR and Kashmir, particularly during December and January, indicate that the species does winter sporadically in northern India in small numbers. Thus, we can conclude that the species is usually a scarce winter visitor to the drier parts of western Rajasthan and Gujarat, but regular in suitable habitats; and becoming increasingly rare and sporadic eastwards across northern India: from Jammu and Kashmir to eastern Rajasthan, and its wintering range likely extends further east to Uttarakhand and the north-western edge of Uttar Pradesh, with a vagrant record as far east from northern West Bengal. The drab plumage of the species is likely a factor in it being overlooked or misidentified. More records of the species in the future will help in better understanding the extent of its wintering range in the region.

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The bill index: a new criterion to distinguish between the Grey-headed- *Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus* and Lesser Fish Eagles *Ichthyophaga humilis* in photographs

The Grey-headed Fish Eagle *Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus* (GHFE, hereinafter) and Lesser Fish Eagle *I. humilis* (LEFE, hereinafter) show considerable overlap in their wide distribution in southern Asia. Their morphology is so similar that they are often confused with each other in the field. I propose a distinguishing criterion based on bill measurements taken on photographs. This bill index would help better understand the extent of such range overlap and, in perspective, how similar species can coexist close to each other in various habitats.

By providing an increasing number of bird photographs from the field, citizen science offers a powerful tool to gain suggestions for ornithological research. Of course, this tool only works if the subject of the photograph is correctly understood for the suggestive traits, firstly, the diagnostic traits of its species. Despite their being impressive and approachable eagles, widely distributed in southern Asia and showing unique morphological traits (Londei 2020), the GHFE and LEFE have been overlooked in avian studies. These species seem to be sympatric in large parts of their geographic distribution, but their morphological similarity hampers identification where both seem to occur. This problem has a good example in the distribution and ecology of the LEFE, the less studied species. Until recently (Lethaby 2005; Naoraji 2006), its occurrence in India seemed to be restricted to the foothills of the Himalaya, with foraging restricted to small, fast-flowing rivers in forests. Now, it is seen as the commoner species in southern India, previously mistaken for the GHFE in many sites and frequent at the near-stagnant waters of reservoirs (Praveen 2011). Therefore, the habitat preferences might be considered as a provisional guideline, not a distinguishing trait.

In the original description of the LEFE, Müller & Schlegel (1841) pointed to the smaller size to distinguish the new species from the GHFE. For adult birds, they added the less clear tail pattern, lacking the black and white contrast of the GHFE's tail. On the other hand, they remarked on a strong similarity in body shape. Attempts to recognize subspecies complicated later comparisons. For example, Sharpe (1874) saw *Polioaetus plumbeus*, now *Ichthyophaga humilis plumbea*, either as a full species or a subspecies of the GHFE, whereas Gurney (1878) placed it in the LEFE based on the tail pattern, although he noted that large-sized individuals nearly equaled the GHFE in the measurement of the wing. With today's knowledge, vocalizations would be the best criterion to differentiate between the two

species: unlike several images in photo galleries, the sound recordings in Xeno-canto (www.xeno-canto.org) do not suggest any misunderstanding in their identification. The difference in body size is not so great as offering an adequate criterion during field observations, or in the resulting photographs, unless GHFE and LEFEs are seen together. Plumage coloration is the usual criterion. However, published comparisons (e.g., Lethaby 2005) reveal that no colour difference can work alone in every case except for the adult upper tail pattern, provided that the overlying wings let us see this trait in perched birds. When clear-cut traits are unavailable in the field, experts are often able to identify a bird based on its outline. Having seen many photographs and some living birds, I fully agree with Karuthedathu (2023): the rounded head, smaller bill, weaker tarsi, and compact structure with the wing tips almost reaching the tail tip consistently distinguish the LEFE from the GHFE in shape. The last of these distinguishing features is the most obvious, because the counterpart has its wing tips falling well short of the tail tip. This difference, remarked on by Rasmussen & Anderton (2005, both volumes) for the first time, can however be appreciated in perched birds only, and even then, quantifying it considerably depends on the posture of the subjects.

To quantify a shape difference through consistent proportions I tried a new criterion, hereafter called the bill index. On sufficiently clear photographs (not necessarily of the highest quality), I joined the inner corner of the eye to the culmen of the bill with a straight line crossing the nostril at its rear end [222]. The inner corner of the eye is a stable reference point against the small, rotational movements of the eye of raptors, while the rear end of the nostril is the best reference point in the individually variable margins of this opening. I segmented the line where it crossed (A) the culmen, (B) the rear end of the nostril, and (C) the scleral ring at the inner corner of the eye. The length of the culmen-to-nostril segment divided by the length of the nostril-to-eye segment made the bill index. The positions of B and C, critical for the orientation of the line that fixes A, are found with some approximation in low-quality photographs. The bill index is also affected by the orientation of the bird's head, because the true and are on different, intersecting, planes. Despite these drawbacks, GHFE and LEFE showed the difference even when their heads were not in full profile, provided that the head orientation was similar [222]. The GHFE and LEFEs in my photographs are from Sri Lanka and Nepal, respectively. Although GHFEs of Sri Lanka feature the most contrasting grey head in their species, while the LEFE is generally seen as an inconspicuous species for this trait, a confounding similarity would appear in with the LEFE on the right side [222], if only colours were considered. As regional variation in the bill proportions of either species, or both, might reduce their distinctiveness, I validated the bill index with regional comparisons of the two eagles in sympatry. From the Macaulay Library (www.macaulaylibrary.org) I selected photographs of subjects in adult plumage, suitably perched to show the distance between the wing tips and the tail tip. When clearly visible, the upper tail pattern confirmed the species identification. I also searched for the best possible approximation to the full profile of the bird's head. The resulting bill indexes (Table 1) do not suggest any intraspecific regional variation, while the interspecific difference, with no range overlap (1.00–1.09 vs 0.70–0.80), is high enough to make statistical tests redundant. However, an anonymous reviewer of the manuscript tried the bill index with other photographs, a minority of which showed the two species