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Vulture feeding stations
Bugun Liocichla
Red-tailed Wheatear

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Front Cover: Indian Paradise-Flycatcher from Uttarakhand
Photographer: Subrato Sanyal

Back Cover: Bugun Liocichla Artwork
Art work: Bedi Universal

# Scavenger assemblage and carcass utilization at a community-managed supplementary feeding station for vultures in Nepal

Sagar Nath Rimal, Sanjay Singh, Sushan Acharya, Aastha Joshi & Abhinav Malla

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**Abstract**

Supplementary Feeding Stations for Vultures (SFSVs) are an important conservation intervention in Nepal, supporting threatened scavenger populations while providing opportunities for ecosystem services. This study assessed scavenger assemblages and carcass consumption at a community-managed SFSV in Dang, Nepal. During the study period, a moderately diverse scavenger assemblage was recorded comprising eight scavenger species. Vultures accounted for most observations, with White-rumped Vultures *Gyps bengalensis* and Himalayan Vultures *G. himalayensis* being the most frequently recorded species. Six cattle carcasses with an estimated combined biomass of ***c.***425 kg were monitored during the study period. Scavengers consumed ***c.***360 kg of biomass, leaving ***c.***65 kg of residual material. Carcass utilization was more rapid for skinned carcasses than for unskinned carcasses, suggesting that pre-skinning may facilitate access to carrion for scavengers.

## Introduction

The catastrophic population decline of Asian vultures, primarily *Gyps* sp., represents one of the most rapid biodiversity collapses in modern history. Between 1992 and 2007, populations of the White-rumped- *G. bengalensis*, the Indian- *G. indicus*, and the Slender-billed Vulture *G. tenuirostris* plummeted by over 97% across South Asia due to the veterinary drug diclofenac, which induces fatal renal failure in scavenging birds (Oaks et al. 2004; Prakash et al. 2012). This crisis destabilized ecosystems, as vultures historically provided critical services by efficiently removing carrion, preventing zoonotic disease transmission, and recycling nutrients (Carter et al. 2007).

In response, Nepal emerged as a leader in Asian vulture conservation through the innovative establishment of community-managed Supplementary Feeding Stations for Vultures (SFSV), or "vulture restaurants" since 2006 (Praveen 2009). These sites provide diclofenac-free carcasses and have been pivotal in stabilizing critically endangered populations, with some areas in Nepal documenting significant annual recovery rates (Galligan et al. 2020). Nationwide counts demonstrate continued progress, with 1,905 individuals across seven vulture species recorded across 32 districts during the 2019 national survey (Rana et al. 2020). Populations of the White-rumped Vulture increased in Terai lowlands and Pahad hills of Nepal at a mean rate of 22% per year between 2013 and 2018 (Galligan et al. 2020) coinciding with the implementation of multiple vulture conservation measures in Nepal reflecting the success of conservation interventions outlined in Nepal's Vulture Conservation Action Plan 2023–2027 (DNPWC & DoFSC 2023). GPS tracking of wild White-rumped Vultures in Nepal confirmed adult annual survival rates of 97%, with no recorded NSAID-caused mortalities, providing direct evidence that the food chain is now effectively free of toxic drugs among tracked individuals during the study (Mallord et al. 2024). This progress culminated in the declaration of the world's first Vulture Safe Zone, the Gandaki-Lumbini Vulture Safe Zone in December 2021, covering nesting, roosting, and foraging areas across Nepal's Gandaki and Lumbini provinces (SAVE 2021).

However, critical knowledge gaps persist. Existing research on SFSVs has predominantly focused on vulture population dynamics and diclofenac mitigation, neglecting broader ecological impacts. Specifically, it remains unknown how SFSV management practices such as carcass pre-processing and site rotation influence scavenger guild diversity and carcass removal efficiency.

This study aims to address the gaps by evaluating the carcass utilization by scavengers in SFSVs. Specifically, it aims to document the diversity of scavenger assemblages that utilize these feeding sites and quantify the efficiency of carcass removal.

## Methodology

The study was carried out at the SFSV inside Divya Kamdhenu Gaushala in Shantinagar-2, Dang District, Nepal. We employed a multi-faceted approach to collect data on scavenger diversity and carcass removal dynamics at the SFSV. All fieldwork was conducted for ten days from 17 March to 27 March 2025.

### Study site

The SFSV (28.1796°N, 82.1937°E; 250 m asl) is a 2,774.6 m² feeding area that lies within the Bagmare Bishnupur Community Forest (subtropical Sal Forest), interspersed with farmland. The SFSV operates under a community co-management system: the Gaushala (cow sanctuary) maintains *c.*100 aged or sick cattle,

and the Community Forest User Group handles the station's operations, funded partly by selling cow dung. The station receives an estimated 15–20 carcasses per month i.e. *c.*180–240 carcasses per year. Carcass placement follows protocol guidelines; depending on labour availability; some carcasses are skinned before feeding, while others are left intact.

### *Scavenger diversity monitoring*

Scavenger assemblages were monitored using camera-trapping and direct daytime observations to document both diurnal and nocturnal species **[172, 173]**. A motion-activated camera-trap was positioned approximately three meters from the carcass deposition area and operated continuously, day and night, to record still photographs and video clips. Camera data were retrieved daily for species identification and behavioural observations. During daylight hours (0700–1700h), direct observations were conducted from a concealed vantage point using a Panasonic Lumix FZ80 camera with 100x optical zoom, allowing recording of species identity, counts, and feeding activity.

Camera photographs and video sequences from both type of cameras were examined individually and chronologically. To standardize replication and avoid inflating counts from repeated triggers during a single feeding bout, a distinct observation was defined as the duration from when an animal first entered the frame until it was no longer in the frame. As scavengers were not marked, it was not always possible to be certain whether the return visits by the scavengers were the birds already counted or whether they involved new birds entering the camera view.

All photographic and video footage captured by the automated trail camera and the daytime direct surveillance camera were synchronized and cross-checked using precise embedded timestamps. This temporal alignment allowed us to reconcile overlap observations, verify species activity periods, and maintain a temporally consistent dataset across both monitoring systems.

All species were identified based on morphological characteristics observed in photographs, video footage, and direct sightings, using standard field guides for the region (Grimmett et al. 2011).

### *Carcass removal efficiency*

Carcass removal processes were monitored qualitatively. Fresh domestic cattle *Bos taurus* carcasses were placed in open areas to maximize scavenger accessibility.

- Mass estimation: Initial and residual carcass mass were estimated visually by SFSV station workers, rather than measured directly, as no weighing equipment was available at the feeding station. Estimators were experienced in cattle handling, transport, and carcass skinning through their routine work at the station. There were four SFSV workers, each with about five years of experience in cattle handling. However, they had received no formal training specifically in

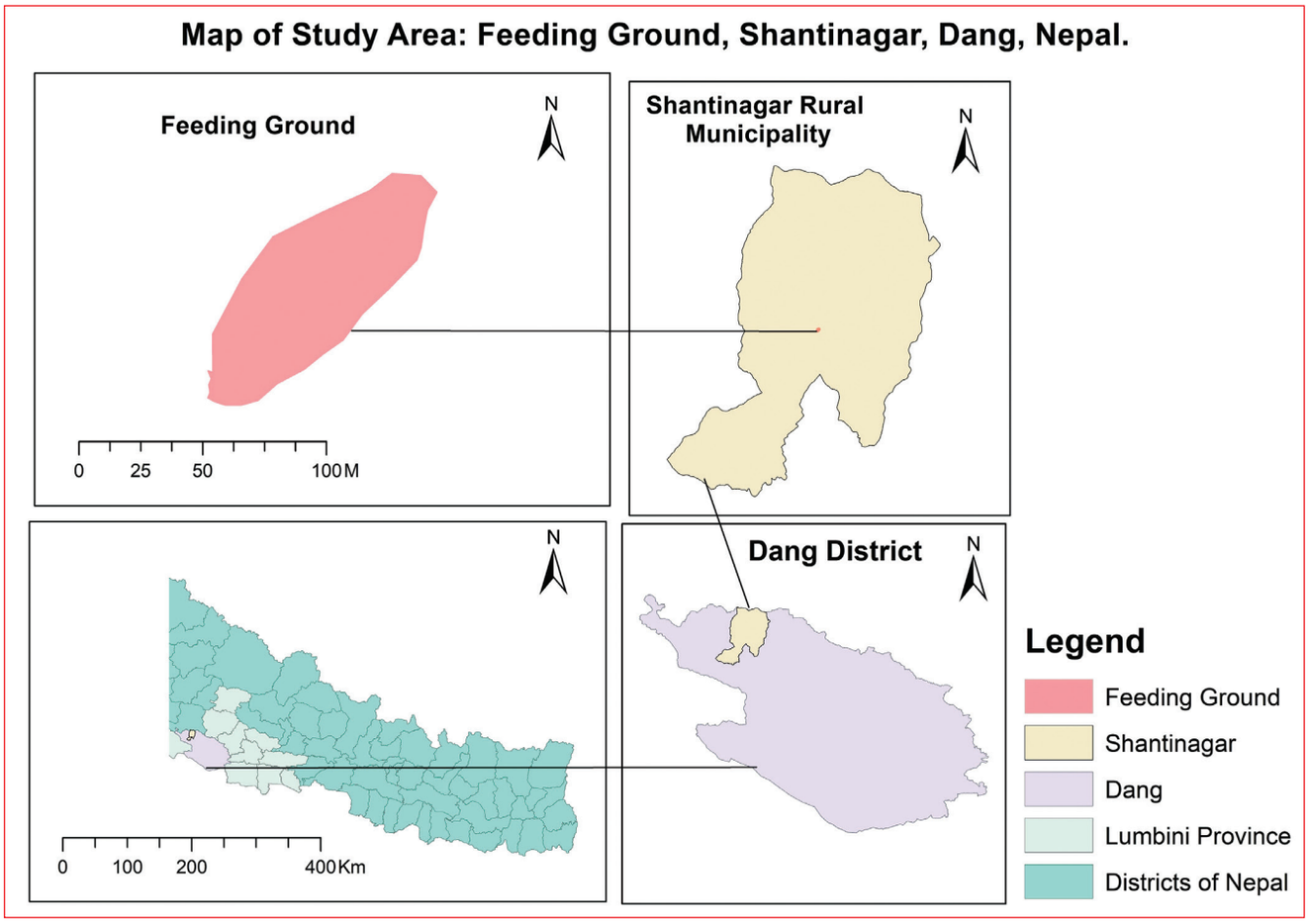



Fig 1. Map of the study area, and its geographic placement within the larger landscape.



172. Mixed scavenger guild feeding on a cattle carcass at the Divya Kamdhenu Gaushala Supplementary Feeding Station for Vultures, Dang, Nepal.

visual weight estimation. No calibrated reference weights or reference animals were used to check or correct estimates during the study. Estimates were based on the estimators' general familiarity with local cattle body size and condition, informed by routine handling of livestock of known approximate market weight in the course of their work, rather than on any standardized visual assessment protocol. These values are therefore treated as approximate field estimates, accurate only to the nearest 5 kg; this precision is carried through all subsequent calculations.

- Precision and reporting of estimated masses: Because initial and final carcass masses were estimated visually rather than measured instrumentally, the resulting values were treated as approximate field estimates. Derived quantities calculated from these estimates were reported only to a level of precision justified by the underlying mass estimates. Accordingly, carcass mass, removal, removal rate, and removal efficiency were rounded to an appropriate level of precision following established guidance for the reporting of measurement results (Taylor & Kuyatt 1994; JCGM 2023).
- Parameter recording: For each observation, parameters like the date, carcass type, number of carcasses, estimated initial mass (kg), estimated final mass (kg), total feeding time (hours), and skinning status (yes/no) were recorded. Skinning significantly influences scavenger accessibility and hence that is an important parameter to record (Ogada et al. 2012a).
- Informal interviews: To supplement observational data with contextual information on station management practices, informal interviews were conducted with SFSV station managers and skinners at Divya Kamdhenu Gaushala during fieldwork. Interviews focused on carcass sourcing, handling, and skinning practices, and were recorded as field notes.



Both: Sagar Nath Rimal

173. Mixed scavenger guild feeding on a cattle carcass at the Divya Kamdhenu Gaushala Supplementary Feeding Station for Vultures (SFSV), Dang, Nepal captured through a trap camera.

## Analysis

### Scavenger diversity analysis

Data from all ten days were pooled for a site-level assessment. Relative abundances were calculated from the cumulative number of individual scavengers recorded during all carcass monitoring sessions. Because individuals were not uniquely marked, counts represent observed abundance records rather than confirmed unique individuals. Consequently, diversity metrics describe the composition of scavenger observations at carcasses during the study period and should not be interpreted as estimates of

the true population-level diversity of the scavenger community. Species diversity was assessed using the Shannon–Wiener diversity index (H) (Shannon 1948).

Removal efficiency: Carcass removal rate (kg/hour) and percentage removal were calculated using visual mass estimates and recorded feeding time. Visual mass estimates (initial and final) and feeding duration were used for these computations. Carcass removal efficiency was represented by two measures; a 'Removal rate' (in kg/hour) and 'Percentage removal' (as %). Removal rate is the ratio of total mass of the carcass removed and total feeding time. Percentage removal is the ratio of total mass of the carcass removed and the initial mass, expressed as a percentage.

## Results

### Scavenger community & diversity

Over 463 camera-trap events, we recorded three *Gyps* vultures and five facultative scavenger species (Table 1). White-rumped Vultures were most abundant, followed by Himalayan Vultures **[174]**. Egyptian Vultures were rare, accounting for just three observations (Table 1). Among facultative scavengers, visits by Large-billed Crows *Corvus macrorhynchos*, followed by Common Mynas *Acridotheres tristis*, feral dogs, Bengal Foxes *Vulpes bengalensis*, and Wild Boars *Sus scrofa* were recorded. The Shannon diversity index for the assemblage was H = 1.54 (Pielou's J = 0.52), indicating moderate diversity but strong dominance by the Gyps vultures.



Sagar Nath Rimal

**174.** White-rumped Vulture (top) and Himalayan Vulture (bottom) resting in a tree adjacent to the SFSV at Divya Kamdhenu Gaushala, Dang, Nepal.

**Table 1.** Scavengers recorded at SFSV, in Divya Kamdhenu Gaushala, SRM - 2, Dang, Nepal

| Species | Total Observation | Feeding time | Scavenger type |
|---|---|---|---|
| White-rumped Vulture *Gyps bengalensis* | 158 | Diurnal | Obligate |
| Himalayan Vulture *Gyps himalayensis* | 148 | Diurnal | Obligate |
| Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* | 3 | Diurnal | Obligate |
| Large-billed Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos* | 86 | Diurnal | Facultative |
| Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis* | 30 | Diurnal | Facultative |
| Feral Dog Canis *lupus familiaris* | 18 | Both | Facultative |
| Bengal Fox *Vulpes bengalensis* | 7 | Nocturnal | Facultative |
| Wild Boar *Sus scrofa* | 13 | Nocturnal | Facultative |

### *Carcass removal*

During the 10-day monitoring period at the SFSV, six cattle carcasses with a combined initial estimated mass of *c.*425 kg were observed for scavenging activity. Scavengers effectively processed an estimate of *c.*360 kg of biomass, leaving approximately 65 kg of residual material, demonstrating an overall removal efficiency of 85%. Carcass mass was estimated visually based on standard livestock weight ranges. Residual mass was estimated visually based on a field assessment of remaining biomass. Estimates were also informed by the routine manual cleaning of residual carcass material by site workers familiar with carcass handling at the feeding station. Feeding station exhibited rapid carcass processing capabilities throughout the study period (Table 2).

Skinning had a dramatic effect: skinned carcasses were consumed at 30 kg/hour, compared to only 5 kg/hour for unskinned carcasses (Table 4). Correspondingly, mean removal efficiency was much higher for skinned carcasses than for unskinned.

**Table 2.** Details of feeding parameters

| Parameters | Results |
|---|---|
| Total no. of carcasses | 6 |
| Mean no. of carcasses/day | 0.6 |
| Total initial mass (kg) | 425 |
| Mean initial mass (kg) | 70 |
| Total final mass (kg) | 65 |
| Mean final mass (kg) | 11 |
| Total removal (kg) | 360 |
| Mean removal (kg) | 60 |
| Total feeding time (hrs) | 33.5 |
| Mean feeding time (hrs) | 5.6 |

**Table 3.** Skinned vs Unskinned Mean

| Group | Mean removal rate (kg/hr) | Mean removal efficiency (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Skinned | 30 | 89 |
| Unskinned | 5 | 62 |

## Discussion

### Scavenger community trade-offs

The feeding station effectively concentrates resources for target ***Gyps*** vultures, but this comes with a homogenization of the scavenger guild. Our moderate Shannon diversity (H = 1.54) with low evenness reflects a classic pattern: vultures overwhelmingly dominated the predictable food supply, while opportunistic feeders were comparatively scarce. This mirrors findings from other vulture-rich feeding sites, where facultative scavengers like mammals and generalist birds arrive mainly after vultures have finished feeding (Ogada et al. 2012b). The low presence of nocturnal mammals (e.g., foxes, wild boars) suggests temporal niche partitioning: these species may exploit carcasses only at night. Such competitive exclusion of facultative scavengers could reduce ecosystem resilience, since facultative scavengers normally provide "back-up" carrion removal when vultures are absent (Ogada et al. 2012b; Hill et al. 2018).

### Impact of skinning on carcass processing

Our results confirm that pre-skinning carcasses dramatically accelerate consumption. Vultures must tear through tough hides to access internal tissues; removing the hide beforehand allows birds immediate access to high-value tissues (organs, muscle) and greatly speeds feeding (Ogada et al. 2012b). Rapid carcass consumption by vultures reduces carcass persistence time, thereby shortening the period during which carcasses may act as pathogen reservoirs. This will indirectly limit opportunities for disease transmission through increased dispersal through other scavengers like feral dogs (Ogada et al. 2012b). Despite this, routine skinning is not universally practiced. Informal interviews revealed that skinning was primarily performed only by historically marginalized Dalit community members, consistent with traditional caste-based occupational roles for carcass handling, inherently constraining labour availability for this task.

## Conclusion

This study provides a short-term assessment of scavenger assemblages and carcass utilization, at a community-managed supplementary feeding station for vultures in Dang, Nepal. The feeding station was used extensively by *Gyps* vultures and other scavengers, and carcass utilization appeared to be more rapid for skinned than for unskinned carcasses under the conditions observed. These findings suggest that pre-skinning may improve carcass accessibility and utilization at feeding stations.

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# Notes on foraging behaviour and vocalization of the Bugun Liocichla *Liocichla bugunorum*

Bahar Dutt, Vijay Bedi & Khandu Glow

Dutt, B., Bedi, V., & Glow, K., 2026. Notes of foraging behaviour and vocalization of the Bugun Liocichla *Liocichla bugunorum*. *Indian BIRDS* 22 (4): 102–105
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*Manuscript received on 27 February 2026.*

The Bugun Liocichla *Liocichla bugunorum* is a point-endemic and remains one of India's least-known birds. Since its description in 2006 (Athreya 2006), most literature has focused on its discovery, distribution, and conservation significance (Allen & Catsis 2007; Peterson & Papes 2007). Relatively little has been documented about its natural history. During filming and field observations in the Singchung Bugun Village Community Reserve in May 2024 (Fig. 1), we made a series of observations relating to its feeding behaviour, use of a particular fruiting tree, foraging in undergrowth, and vocalisations.

Our observations were made over 12 consecutive days between 03 and 14 May 2024, largely along trekking trails within the reserve. Although the work was not originally designed as a structured ecological study, repeated observations at the same feeding locations allowed us to document patterns that appeared consistent across days. We used direct visual observation through photography and videography to document the presence and behaviour of the Bugun Liocichla.

## Preference for fruiting *Heptapleurum hypoleucum* trees

The Bugun Liocichla is known to feed on small berries, insects, and possibly other vegetable matter (Athreya 2006; Collar et al. 2020; BirdLife International 2024), but specific food plants have not been documented. During our study, birds were seen often feeding on the fruits of *Heptapleurum hypoleucum*.

We repeatedly saw Bugun Liocichlas visiting fruiting individuals

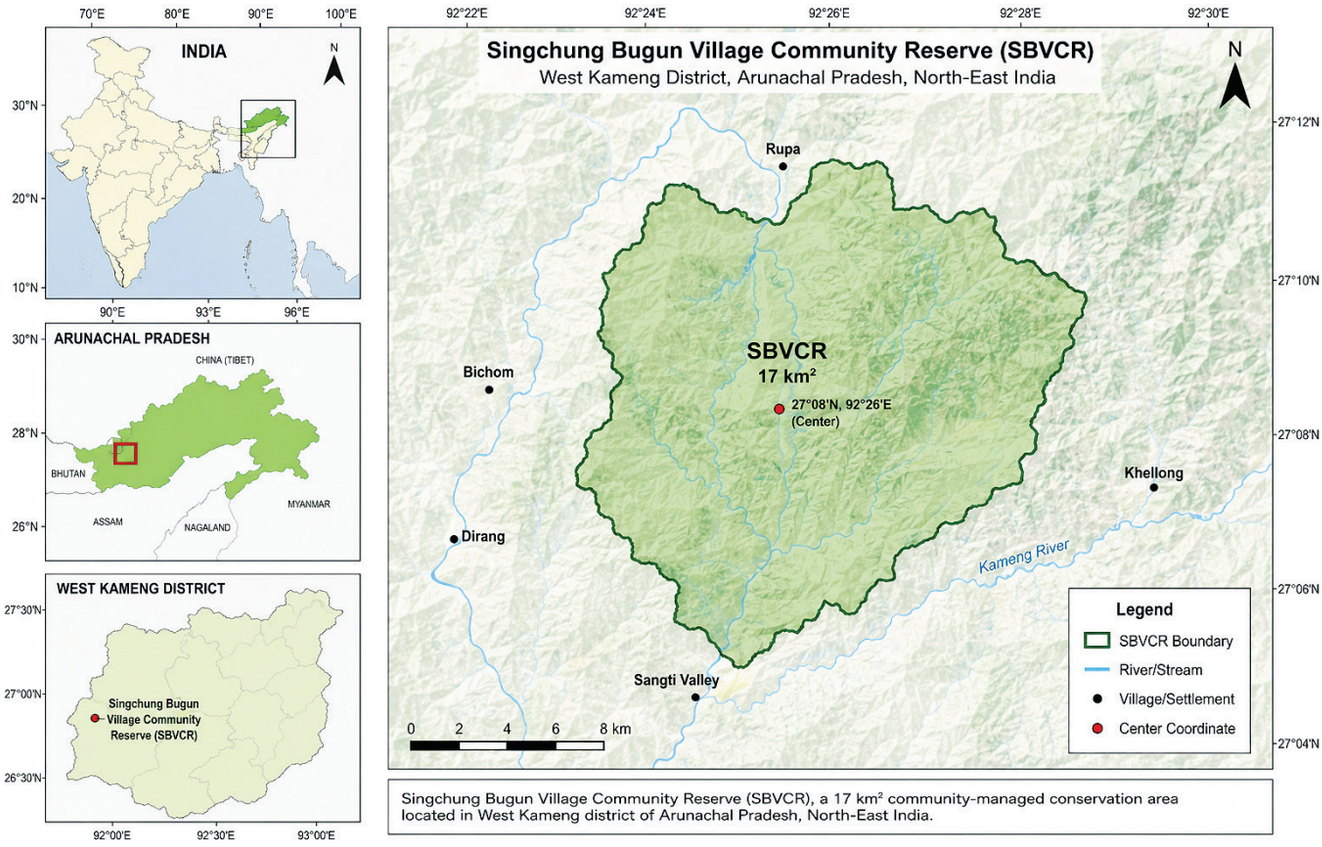



Fig. 1. A map of Singchung Bugun Village Community Reserve, situated in the West Kameng district, Arunachal Pradesh, north-eastern India.

of *Heptapleurum hypoleucum*, a tree species with its range in north-eastern India and South East Asia (Upadhaya & Mir 2021). These are tall canopy-forming trees and there were two fruiting trees of this species in our study area **[175, 176]**. There were also six individuals of this species that were not fruiting. These trees were also being used by other birds including Beautiful Sibia *Heterophasia pulchella*, Rusty-fronted Barwing *Actinodura egertoni*, Whiskered Yuhina *Yuhina flavicollis*, Striated Bulbul *Alcurus striatus*, and Grey-winged Blackbird *Turdus boulboul*. However, the Bugun Liocichla repeatedly returned to the same trees over multiple days, suggesting that these fruiting trees formed an important part of its local foraging network.



**175.** A *Heptapleurum hypoleucum* tree in Singchung Bugun Village Community Reserve.



All: Vijay Bedi

**176.** A close up of the same tree (**[1]**) showing the fruiting pattern.

After realizing this preference on the first day itself, we monitored three focal trees specifically during our study duration and noted whether Bugun Liocichlas visited them. Our observations stretched the entire daylight, from 0700 to 1800h, and we used hourly intervals to record its presence. The species did not use the trees continuously throughout the day, but visited the trees on occasions. We used both sight and aural detections. Each hour-band was considered as 'visited' if the birds were present in any of the three focal trees. Across the 12 days of the study period, the total number of days when an hour-band was visited was obtained to get a single value for every hour-band.

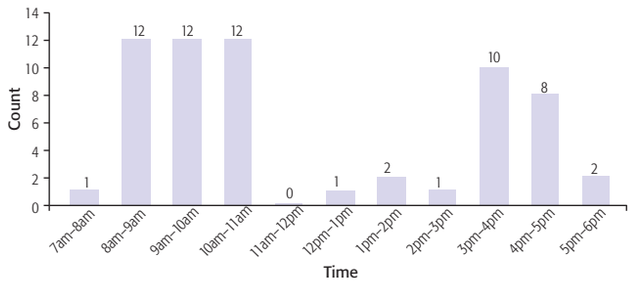



Fig. 2. Bar chart showing the number of visits to the focal trees for each hour-band between 07:00 h and 18:00 h over the 12-day observation period.

Every day, Bugun Liocichla visited the focal trees in at least five hour-bands, and at most seven hour-bands. As expected, activity peaked during the morning between 0800 h and 1100 h, when birds were recorded almost daily (Fig. 2). A secondary peak occurred during the late afternoon between 1500 h and 1700 h. In contrast, activity during midday and early morning was very limited.

Despite this regularity, visit frequency was uniform across days, with some days showing relatively higher activity (e.g., Days 5, 8, and 10 with 7 visits) and others showing slightly lower activity (e.g., Days 4, 9, 11, and 12 with 5 visits). Overall, this pattern suggests regular site use with moderate temporal variation, indicating that while the species reliably returns to the feeding trees every day, the intensity of use fluctuates across the time of the day.

Hence, repeated use of the same trees suggests that fruiting *Heptapleurum* trees may represent a locally important food resource. However, whether this temporal pattern applies more broadly across the species' habitat, or whether it reflects preference for this particular tree species alone, remains unclear. Our observations only indicate that, at least during the study period, these trees were used predictably and repeatedly by the birds.

## Foraging behaviour on fruiting trees

Very little is known about the foraging behaviour of the Bugun Liocichla. It is known to forage in pairs or small flocks, on the ground, working through low undergrowth, creeping in tangled vines, or even clambering on trunks in the manner of the Himalayan Cutia *Cutia nipalensis*. It has been observed at all levels in vegetation, from ground to the canopy of tallest trees (Athreya 2006; Collar et al. 2020; BirdLife International 2024). In our study, individual birds usually spent about 60 to 90 seconds in the focal tree, moving through branches while picking fruits before flying off to nearby vegetation. Birds often approached a fruit cluster, paused briefly, and selectively picked individual ripe fruits rather than feeding indiscriminately. In all observed feeding

events, birds selected black ripe fruits while ignoring nearby green or semi-ripe fruits **[177, 178]**. Out of the 71 independent visual observations, 24 instances (34%) involved active fruit consumption. During all feeding events, individuals consistently selected ripe fruits (black in colour) and avoided unripe or semi-ripe fruits (green), even when these were available in close proximity, suggesting a strong preference based on visual assessment of fruit maturity.



**177.** Bugun Liocichla feeding on the fruits of *Heptapleurum hypoleucum* tree.



**178.** Bugun Liocichla feeding on the black pulp of fruit of *Heptapleurum hypoleucum* tree.

The birds usually fed by nipping at the fruit pulp while the fruit remained attached to the branch. Occasionally they detached fruits before feeding. Unlike some frugivorous birds, they did not appear to swallow whole fruits. Feeding continued even during light rain, when several other species were also active in the same trees.

Although we cannot estimate the overall importance of fruits in the species' diet, these observations confirm that ripe fruits of *Heptapleurum hypoleucum* are actively consumed and possibly selected based on fruit maturity.

## Use of undergrowth and feeding on beetles

Bugun Liocichlas were repeatedly found foraging in dense patches of Stinging nettle *Urtica dioica* along trails and forest openings. The birds frequently moved low through the undergrowth, hopping between stems and apparently inspecting the undersides of leaves. Closer inspection of the leaves revealed that the leaves had several leaf beetles (Family: Chrysomelidae), particularly beetles resembling *Calligrapha sp.* **[179]**. These beetles typically remained hidden beneath leaves or at the junction of leaf stalks and stems, locations that likely provided shelter from rain and predators.



**179.** Beetle *Calligrapha* sp. hiding under the leaf of Stinging nettle *Urtica dioica*

Later, we observed Bugun Liocichlas probing beneath leaves and extracting beetles directly from these concealed positions **[180]**. Feeding in nettle patches was especially frequent during early morning and late afternoon, broadly matching the periods of increased activity at fruiting trees. These observations suggest that dense undergrowth rich in arthropods may be an important foraging habitat for the Bugun Liocichlas, in addition to the canopies of fruiting trees.



All: Vijay Bedi

**180.** Bugun Liocichla foraging for beetles hiding under the leaf of Stinging nettle *Urtica dioica*

Rusty-fronted Barwings were repeatedly observed using the same nettle patches and the same fruiting trees. Both species also occurred together in mixed-species flocks on several occasions. Whether this reflects overlap in diet, shared foraging strategies, or simply similar habitat preferences remains uncertain, but the association was consistent enough to be noteworthy. Athreya (2006) did not list this species in the list of birds that are considered associate species of the Bugun Liocichla.

## A short, high-frequency vocalization

The Bugun Liocichla's primary vocalization song consists of descending, flute-like phrases, transcribed as *wieu'u-wee'i-tuu'i-tuu'uw-tu'oow* and a higher-pitched variant, *weei'u-tuuu'i-tuu'uw-tu'oow.* These phrases are characterized by a clear tonal quality and a downward-slurred inflection, both diagnostic for the species. In addition to the longer sequences, abbreviated or shortened versions have been documented, including *"weee-keew"* and *"yu-weee-keew"* (Athreya 2006). These appear structurally similar to the primary phrases but exhibit reduced complexity and duration. There are several recordings or sonograms of its typical song and its variants in citizen science media archives (Macaulay Library 2026; Xeno Canto 2026).

Presumed females are known to contribute a distinct, dry-sounding call, transcribed as *"trrrr-trii-trii"* (Athreya 2006). Macaulay Library did not have any such recordings. Xeno Canto recordings are not downloadable for aural comparison, but from the notes given by the recordists, they presumably have one or two of this type of calls. However, sonograms are not clear enough for a detailed analysis. During our recordings, we also documented a shorter and sharper vocalisation that differed noticeably from the described song phrases (Fig. 3). Subsequent to our recording, Sudip Simha and Micah Rai also obtained such a recording two years later (Simha 2025).

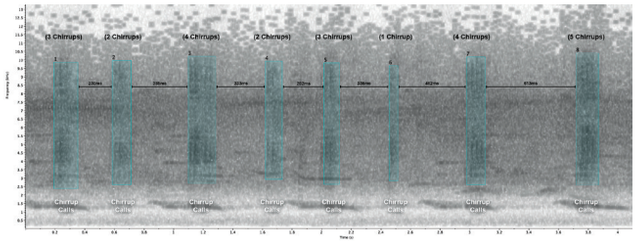



Fig 3. A portion of six chirrup calls of Bugun Liocichla showing time duration between every chirrup call in milliseconds.

This call consisted of rapid "chirrup"-like notes repeated singly or in short sequences. They extended to much higher frequencies than the primary song whistles, reaching roughly 9000 Hz, whereas the better-known song phrases are concentrated largely between about 2000–4000 Hz. The chirrup calls were brief, often separated by fractions of a second, and occurred in sequences of one to five notes. Their behavioural context remains unclear, although we presumed they may represent short-range communication calls used within dense vegetation. However, it was also produced by multiple individuals when they were presumably mobbing a lizard at the bottom of a tree (Simha 2025). Hence, these calls could be multi-purpose.

## Discussion

Our observations add some simple but important natural-history details to little known ecology of Bugun Liocichla. In particular, the repeated use of fruiting *Heptapleurum* trees, selective feeding on ripe fruits, and regular foraging in nettle undergrowth rich in beetles together suggest that the species depends on a combination of fruiting trees and insect-rich shrub layers.

Protection of insect-rich microhabitats, preservation of mature fruiting trees, and prevention of forest fragmentation will be critical to ensuring long-term food security for the Bugun Liocichla. The species has survived in community forests and this community reserve setup by the Bugun community houses almost the entire global population of this species. Hence, engaging local communities in monitoring and safeguarding key feeding sites could strengthen conservation outcomes, given that much of the species' known range lies within community-managed forests.

Much about the species' ecology remains unknown, particularly seasonal changes in diet, breeding-season food requirements, and wider habitat use. Nevertheless, even simple repeated field observations can help improve understanding of this elusive species and contribute towards its long-term conservation.

## Acknowledgements

A grant from The Habitats Trust gave us an opportunity to film this threatened species. This paper would not be possible without the help from Dr. Umesh Srinivasan, Indian Institute of Science who has been conducting long term research in the region. Anish Mandal helped us to identify the tree and plant species. Our trackers and naturalists are our partners in this research Binod Munda, Dorjee Bachung, Dombe Pradhan. BD and VB would like to thank the people of Sinchung Village who have donated their land for the conservation and for allowing us access to their ancestral lands to conduct this research. We would like to thank - Arunachal Pradesh forest department, Shergaon forest division, Millo Tasser and in particular community members Indi Glow, Naresh Glow, Dawa Sarai, Sangey Norby Phiang, and Nima Tsering Monpa. Thanks to Prerna Gupta for making the illustration of Bugun Liocichla used in the back cover of this issue.

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# Correspondence

## The Indian Paradise-Flycatcher *Terpsiphone paradisi* from the Little Andaman Island: An addition to the avifauna of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands

We spent a few days birding in Little Andaman in early December 2024. On the morning of 13 December 2024, while exploring a forest edge near the Farm Tikery settlements (10.587°N, 92.528°E), we encountered a mixed species foraging flock. Most of the birds were local species, but the sudden appearance of a Paradise-Flycatcher *Terpsiphone sp.* quickly captured our attention. DAP first spotted it in a berry-laden tree, and he immediately alerted the rest of us. The sighting caused a stir of excitement, as a Paradise-Flycatcher in this region suggested it could be either an Amur Paradise-Flycatcher *T. incei* (hereinafter, APFC) or a Blyth's Paradise-Flycatcher *T. affinis* (hereinafter, BPFC), both species rarely seen in India outside the northeast (eBird 2025).

Soon after our initial sighting, the bird flew to a broad-leaved tree, where DB managed to take a few photographs **[181]**. He remarked that the bird appeared different from the Paradise-Flycatchers typically encountered in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands – the APFC and BPFC. This prompted a closer inspection, during which we all noted that the bird resembled an Indian Paradise-Flycatcher *T. paradisi* (hereinafter, IPFC), a species familiar to us from mainland India. We continued to follow the bird as it perched briefly on another tree, providing a clear, well-lit view. This observation confirmed our identification of the bird as an IPFC.



Debankur Biswas

**181.** Indian Paradise-Flycatcher exhibits a long crest, strongly contrasting plumage, and a broader black throat patch that merges into the chest.

The BPFC is a common resident across the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, frequently encountered in forests and known to breed locally (Rasmussen et al. 2024). In contrast, the APFC is a rare winter visitor or passage migrant, with only a few records between October and March and no evidence of breeding on the islands (del Hoyo et al. 2020). The bird we observed differed from both these species in several distinct field marks. It lacked the cold grey upperparts and faint eye-ring typical of the APFC, instead showing rich rufous tones across the mantle, wings, and tail. Compared to BPFC, it appeared larger, with a longer crest, and displayed a stronger contrast between the glossy black head and rufous upperparts. The black throat patch was also broader and merged more fully into the chest. These combined features closely matched those of the IPFC (Moeliker et al. 2020), a species not recorded from the Andaman & Nicobar Islands.

There is one confirmed observation of IPFC from Andaman & Nicobar Islands subsequent to ours, of a similar plumaged bird from Swaraj Dweep on 14 April 2025 (Kumar 2025). However, several records of IPFC exist from regions surrounding the Andaman Islands. A notable pelagic observation was made near Rondo Island, Iboih, Sukakarya, Sabang City, Aceh, Indonesia (6.300°N, 94.700°E) in international waters (Bandara 2020). The observer, a navy merchant, reported that the vessel was enroute from Djibouti to Singapore without any port stops, crossing south of Sri Lanka when the sighting occurred; the bird was found dead the following day. Additional reports include one from Pahang, Malaysia (Zahidin 2019), although this record lacks supporting details or photographs and may represent a misidentification. In Thailand, the species has been documented in Phetchaburi (Lawton 2022) and in Nong Plak Phraya during January–March 2023 (Taengtum 2023). In Singapore, it was recorded at the Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve between December 2017 and November 2018 (Tan 2017) and later at the Singapore Botanic Gardens in November 2022 (Lee 2022). Additionally, Myanmar has yielded about six to seven records since 2017 (eBird 2025).

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## A colour-aberrant Ashy-throated Warbler *Phylloscopus maculipennis* from Uttarakhand, India

On 16 November 2021, at approximately 1600 hours. I was birding in the vicinity of Ranikhet Cantonment, Uttarakhand, India (29.639°N, 79.454°E; *c.*1900m asl) when I observed a warbler foraging among the leaves of a Banj oak *Quercus leucotrichophora* tree. From my previous experience with leaf warblers of the region, I identified the bird to be an Ashy-throated Warbler *Phylloscopus maculipennis* based on its size, structure, behaviour, and plumage pattern. However, the bird was unique in having very limited pigmentation on its head and throat and near-absence of plumage markings on its head, while its iris and bill were dark. At that time, I thought it was partially leucistic. The bird seemed to have a symmetrical lack of pigment on head and throat feathers as well as a brighter yellow on the mantle and chest feathers as against what is normally observed in the species **[182–185]**. On returning from Ranikhet at the time, I misplaced the memory card on which the images of the bird were taken and I forgot about this incident till recently, when I found the memory card and saw the images of the warbler again.

Unusual plumaged birds that are not entirely white or entirely black are often casually labelled as leucistic or partially leucistic. However, there are many more colour aberrations than these popular terms (van Grouw 2021). A detailed examination of these photographs suggests that my bird was exhibiting a form of colour aberration known as "progressive greying" (van Grouw 2021). Importantly, dark iris and normal coloured bill and legs argue against several other forms of colour aberrations.



**182.** Ashy-throated Warbler showing a mostly white hood pointing to lack of melanin.



All: Avadhesh Malik

**183.** The yellow parts of its plumage appear more yellow due to lack of melanin



**184.** Presence of two wing bars on green flight feathers consistent with Ashy-throated Warbler



**185.** Normal coloured bill and legs eliminate other forms of colour aberration.

In case of the present bird, it can be observed that the head, throat, mantle and much of the underparts lack melanin – thus causing whitening of what are supposed to be grey or black parts, and at the same time resulting in brighter yellow colouration of the green and yellow parts. Carotenoid pigments are unaffected by progressive greying. Consequently, feathers that are normally green appear brighter yellow because the melanin component responsible for the green coloration is reduced or absent.

Similar patterns of progressive greying affecting only the head and body while sparing the wings and tail have been reported in heritable forms of the condition (van Grouw 2021). In the heritable forms, the loss of melanin often starts immediately in the post-juvenile moult when all body feathers get replaced. It may be noted that the post-juvenile moult in passerines is symmetrical and the feathers of the wings and tail are not moulted in the first year (Ginn & Melville 1983; Jenni & Winkler 2020). The wing feathers and tail feathers, however, do not regrow in the first post-juvenile moult, so they still are fully melanised, as in this bird. If the bird survives to undergo its first complete adult moult, the wing and tail feathers may also lose melanin, producing whitening in those feathers as well.

Among *Phylloscopus*, there has been isolated cases of colour aberration reported as "leucism" from India in social media; including a Greenish Warbler *P. trochiloides* from Kotagiri, Tamil Nadu (Rathor 2023) and a Lemon-rumped Warbler *P. chloronotus* from New Tehri, Uttarakhand (Gupta 2023) – both in February 2023. Similarly, colour aberrant Willow Warbler *P. trochilus* has been reported from Scotland (Alibone 2011). However, all these

cases are likely to be instances of progressive greying and their evidence has not been strictly reviewed here.

The above observations, in correlation with the fact that leucism is rare in nature (van Grouw 2021), are most consistent with progressive greying, possibly of a heritable form, in which body feathers lost melanin during the post-juvenile moult.

I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for the incisive insights that helped shaped this discussion and my fellow birder and friend Padma Gyalpo for his help while researching this topic.

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## The Collared Kingfisher *Todiramphus chloris*: An addition to the avifauna of Mizoram

The Collared Kingfisher *Todiramphus chloris* is a medium-sized kingfisher, with a large dark-coloured bill, bright turquoise-blue head, back, wings, and tail; a distinctive broad white collar that extends ventrally to the underside; and a black mask with white supercilium. Subtle differences exist between the subspecies – usually with upperparts varying from blue to green to olive-toned, underparts sometimes buffier, and white loral spot that sometimes extends as a supercilium (Woodall 2020). It is a widespread species in Southeast Asia and a common resident in the mangrove swamps of Sundarbans and Bhitarkanika on the eastern coast of India (Ali 2002; Grimmett et al. 2013; Grewal et al. 2016; Majumdar et al. 2022; eBird 2025; Praveen 2025). It has frequently been documented as a vagrant, with stray records from Japan, Brazil, and the Christmas Island (Lees & Gilroy 2022).



Carter Lalchhuanmawia

**186.** Collared Kingfisher from Buhchangphai, Kolasib District, Mizoram.

On 17 August 2025, while birding in Buhchangphai (24.335°N, 92.657°E; *c.*68 m asl), a small town 22 km north of Kolasib, in northern Mizoram, India, CL noticed a blue-coloured bird perched on electric lines above paddy fields. Though facing the setting sun, CL managed to take discernible photographs of the unfamiliar kingfisher **[186]**. We identified it as a Collared Kingfisher by referring to descriptions and illustrations in standard field guides. The color of the wings and back are not visible in the photo but the faded scalloping in the front, and the yellow at the base of the lower mandible suggests that the photographed individual is immature (Grimmett et al. 2013; Grewal et al. 2016; Woodall 2020).

We found no mention of this species in Mizoram in discussions with experienced birders and in searching social media and published literature (Zonunmawia & Pradhan 2004; Choudhury 2008; Lalthanzara & Kasambe 2015; Lawlor & Lalthanzara 2021; Lawlor et al. 2023; Sawmliana 2024). We therefore conclude that this is the first confirmed sighting from the state of Mizoram. Since there is no vernacular name in the Mizo language, we propose to name it as *Kaikuangrâl-hnung-pâwl*, meaning a kingfisher with a blue back.

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## The Greater Adjutant *Leptoptilos dubius* preying on domesticated ducklings in rural Assam, India

On 21 August 2025, two adult Greater Adjutants *Leptoptilos dubius* were observed actively preying on domesticated ducklings during a bird survey near the village of Kokilamari (also known as Kokilamari Gelapathar), Sivasagar district, Assam (27.141°N, 94.666°E, 88 m asl). At about 1315 h, each Greater Adjutant managed to prey upon and consume two domesticated ducklings *Anas platyrhynchos domesticus*, in succession, in a waterlogged crop field **[187–189]**. Each Greater Adjutant managed to prey and consume two ducklings, though few ducklings were able to escape. During paddy cultivation, Greater Adjutants usually have access to ample food, such as, small fishes, crabs, snails, mud eels, etc (Elliott & Kirwan 2020). The birds were observed initially feeding in shallow waters but were later found preying on and consuming the domesticated ducklings. Despite the attempts of the poultry farmer to protect the ducklings from predation, they were unsuccessful. Local people have also reported that Greater Adjutants sometimes tear fishing nets to extract trapped fish to opportunistically feed on the catch. Despite such incidents and incurring a loss of domestic animals or poultry, the local community expressed some awareness regarding the conservation of the species, and acknowledging its current rare status.

The Greater Adjutant is a Near-threatened species, with populations limited to only three small breeding populations globally – Bihar (India), Assam (India) and Cambodia (BirdLife International 2000, 2001; Elliott & Kirwan 2020; Choudhary et al. 2011). In Assam, it is mainly distributed in the Brahmaputra valley, where it nests colonially, usually associated with other large storks (Choudhury 2000). The species functions as proficient predators, delivering live prey, such as, fish and invertebrates, to nestlings during the winter breeding season (November–February). Notably, even in the non-breeding period, they actively forage in waterlogged habitats following rain, exploiting seasonal flooding in beels and wetlands to capture accessible prey (Singha & Rahmani 2007).



**187.** Greater Adjutant preying on domesticated ducklings; poultry-farm owners trying to chase the birds away in the background.



All: Sthitapragyan Mallick

**188.** Greater Adjutants preying on domesticated ducklings.



**189.** Greater Adjutant feeding on domesticated ducklings.

Our observations document the feeding behaviour of the Greater Adjutant, and this behaviour of the species may likely lead to conflict with local communities and livelihoods in the future. This highlights the need for awareness programs to balance the conservation of this stork with the mitigation of its impact on village poultry and fishing practices.

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## A Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos* from the coast of southern West Bengal

On 10 September 2025, our team of ST, AD, SG, and PP went on a birding trip to Kargil Beach, Frazergunj (21.575°N, 88.242°E), a popular hotspot for waders, terns and gulls, in the district of South 24 Parganas *c.* 120 km from Kolkata by road. The site is largely a barren sandy beach with sparse vegetation and muddy puddles, bordered by a river that creates an estuarine habitat rich in food for shorebirds.

We arrived at the spot (Fig 1) around 1010 h and shortly after getting out of our vehicle, we observed a distinct-looking wader with a slightly decurved bill busily feeding near a puddle

alongside numerous other waders **[190]**. Some of us (AD, SG, and PP) got clear photographs of the bird, which we initially mistook for a Common Redshank *Tringa totanus*. Later that day, we submitted the record on eBird (Talukder et al. 2025) and shared the photos across several bird identification forums, where an expert suggested that it might be a Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos* and further discussions confirmed the identification. We observed the same bird again around 1300 h at the same location, where it continued to be seen until 14 September 2025.




Fig 1. Exact location of the bird with surrounding habitat (Google Earth)



Agniva Dasgupta

**190.** Pectoral Sandpiper, Kargil Beach, West Bengal.

Although similar to the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper *C. acuminata*, this species can be identified by the sharply defined boundary between its brown-streaked breast and white belly, its less rufous crown, and the absence of the bright buff-breast often shown by Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. Its flanks and vent are also less heavily marked (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). In flight, it shows narrow white bars on the upper wings and distinct white sides to the lower rump and upper tail-coverts (Grimmett et al. 2011).

The Pectoral Sandpiper breeds in Arctic tundra from the Taimyr Peninsula in Siberia east to Hudson Bay in Canada, and winters mainly in South America, with smaller numbers in Southeast Asia, Australia, and New Zealand (Farmer et al. 2020). Its route into the Indian Subcontinent remains unclear. One possibility is that this individual deviated, for unknown reasons, from its usual migratory path towards Australia and Southeast Asia along the East Asian–Australasian Flyway (Rajeevan et al. 2014). Although the species is the most frequent transatlantic vagrant in Europe (Harrop 1993; Undeland & Sangha 2002), it remains an extremely rare vagrant in the Indian Subcontinent. This record is the ninth sighting of the species in India and the first from the eastern coast, specifically West Bengal. Earlier records are from Punjab (Undeland & Sangha 2002), Kerala (Rajeevan et al. 2014; Reghuvaran 2017; Sreedevi 2018), Andaman Islands (Boesman 2017), Gujarat (Patel 2022), Tamil Nadu (Gajamohanraj & Sarang 2021), and Goa (Fonseca et al. 2024). These records have already been compiled in tabular form by Fonseca et al. (2024).

Special thanks to Kousheyo Bagchi, Sujan Chatterjee, Sandeep Biswas, Kanad Baidya, and Sourashis Mukhopadhyay for helping identify the species. We are grateful to the birding community of West Bengal for their constant support and enthusiasm.

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## Melanism in the Indian Eagle Owl *Bubo bengalensis*

Melanism, derived from the Greek *melanos* (dark-coloured), is generally defined as a condition characterized by abnormal deposits of melanin in skin and feathers, resulting in a blackish appearance. Melanism does not always involve an increase in pigment quantity; rather, it may result from altered distribution of melanin within feathers. In birds, two forms of melanin are responsible for plumage coloration: eumelanin, which produces black, grey, and dark brown colors, and phaeomelanin, which produces reddish-brown to pale buff colors (van Grouw 2021). Although a relatively rare form of colour aberration, melanism has been documented across many bird families, including several

owls such as the Eurasian Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo* (van Grouw 2017), Greyish Eagle Owl *B. cinerascens* (Kruskopf et al. 2024), Tawny Owl *Strix aluco* (van Grouw 2017), and the Ural Owl *S. uralensis* (van Grouw 2017). It can manifest as uniformly dark plumage, enlargement of dark markings, or altered pigment distribution resulting in atypical patterns.

The Indian Eagle Owl *B. bengalensis* is a widespread nocturnal raptor of the Indian Subcontinent, typically characterized by sandy brown to rufous plumage with bold black streaking, a pale facial disc and prominent ear tufts. While shade variations occur naturally within the species, there have been no documented sightings of dark morphs or melanistic individuals. Here, we report what appears to be the first photographic documentation of melanism in this species.

On 08 December 2020, at 1812 h, during a vehicle-based search for owls and mammals near Kendur, Shirur Taluka, Pune District, Maharashtra, we observed an unusually dark Indian Eagle Owl perched on a small rock among dry grass (18.794°N, 74.001°E). The bird was seen side-on as well as dorsal profile for *c.*20 s before flying into a nearby valley, where it could not be relocated. Photographs **[191, 192]** were obtained from a distance of 20–30 m under torchlight illumination.



**191.** The first melanistic Indian Eagle Owl seen in December 2020 showing near black upper plumage.



All: Aarav Rasquinha

**192.** The first melanistic Indian Eagle Owl in flight show white dark coverts, pale secondaries and pale bands across flight feathers.

A similar individual, maybe the same bird, was again observed at nearly the same location on 27 November 2022, at 1829 h. On this occasion, the owl was perched on a medium-sized rock covered with lichen, allowing for clearer photographs **[193]**. As in the earlier sighting, the bird eventually flew into the adjacent valley and was lost from view.



**193.** The second report of the melanistic Indian Eagle Owl, possibly the same bird, photographed in November 2022 showing dark phase and underparts.



**194.** A typical Indian Eagle Owl (left) and the melanistic individual (right).

In both observations, the individual exhibited uniformly dark brown to near-black plumage, atypical for Indian Eagle Owl. The facial disc showed only faint contrast, being slightly more obvious in the first sighting. The underparts lacked the characteristic buff ground color but light streaking was visible even though diffused and dark. The dorsal and wing coverts were largely uniform, with mottling greatly reduced; only a few pale brown spots were visible. In flight, the underwing revealed contrasting pale grey and whitish remiges on the primaries and secondaries, consistent with typical structural patterning. The bird displayed prominent ear tufts and overall proportions diagnostic of the species. However, the substantial suppression of normal patterning and streaking, combined with the uniformly darkened plumage throughout the body, head, and wing coverts, indicated a melanistic condition characterized by altered melanin distribution rather than simply darker individual variation.

This case likely represents the first documentation of melanism in Indian Eagle Owl and this species is not known to have dark morphs. Uniformly darkened appearance with reduced patterning but retention of structural features suggests that this case may represent the 'first type' of melanism described by van Grouw (2017). In that type, all of the plumage is darker and appears blackish or dark brown, likely due to increased or more evenly distributed eumelanin deposition. Alternative explanations—soot staining, feather wear, shadow are highly unlikely, given repeated sightings in different lighting and multiple images with different time stamps.

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## The Smoky Warbler *Phylloscopus fuligiventer* from Mayurbhanj, Odisha: An addition to the avifauna of Odisha

The Smoky Warbler *Phylloscopus fuligiventer* is a small, dark-colored warbler that is characterized by its dark coloration and warbled song. This species breeds in the western Himalayas (northwestern India and small parts of northern Pakistan and western Nepal) and frequents temperate and subalpine forests and shrubby hillsides (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Most of the records are from the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Haryana, Manipur, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand with one historical account from adjoining West Bengal (Fig. 1; eBird 2025).

On the morning of 20 January 2025, at 0715 h, SM made an impromptu visit to the wetland named Sarkari Dam (22.094°N, 86.555°E) to look for any warblers that may have wintered in the area, as well as other wetland species at the vegetated edges. The wetland is surrounded by large masses of *Typha* and almost unopened borders of creeping mats of *Ipomoea*, creating a thick lush margin of shallow edges. The reservoir is bordered by agricultural fields offering a mosaic of habitats that draw in a variety of insectivorous birds. SM was scanning a shaded patch of vegetation close to the bund when an unfamiliar call emanated from the east side of the *Ipomoea* Bush. A few minutes later, the bird flew from the bush and started foraging on the top of the bush. SM photographed **[195]** the species and later the bird was identified as Smoky Warbler by its overall dull plumage, sooty-grey wash below using the field guide (Grimmett et al. 2011). The species was carefully distinguished from other dark *Phylloscopus* warblers that may occur in eastern India. Unlike Dusky Warbler *P. fuscatus*, the species did not have prominent superciliary stripes and ear-coverts. Tickell's Leaf Warbler *P. affinis* was ruled out due to its brighter greenish upperparts and clearer underparts. The consistently sombre coloration, structure, and behaviour supported the identification as *P. fuligiventer*.

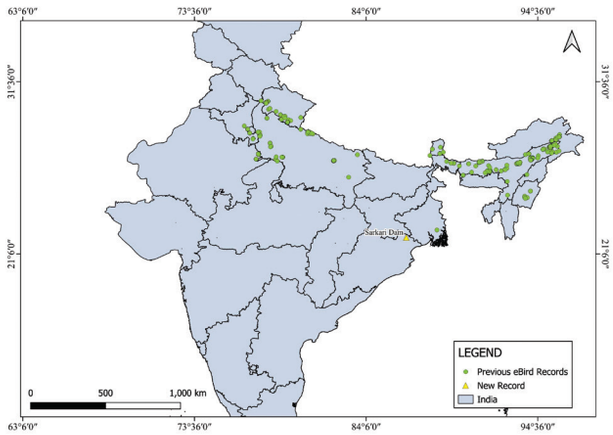



Fig 1. Map summarizing the records of Smoky Warbler in India (Source: eBird).



Soubhagya Mohanty

**195.** Smoky Warbler at Sarkari Dam, Mayurbhanj, Odisha.

Initially, it was presumed that the birds were just passage individuals on their way to more widespread or more suitable wintering sites. However, a series of subsequent visits over the next few weeks confirmed their ongoing presence at the site until the first week of February The species was recorded in four eBird checklists between 20 January 2025 and 08 February 2025. The bird appeared to have temporarily settled in the same reed-dominated areas along the lake margins. Its absence after first week of February coincided with a discernible decrease in water levels, making portions of the reed beds available for livestock grazing, potentially resulting in habitat degradation or disturbance. This constitutes the first confirmed record of the species from Odisha The nearest known record is from West Bengal, ***c.***245 km north of the present site, highlighting the potential of under-surveyed wetland habitats in the region to host overlooked winter visitors.

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## The Spotted Crake *Porzana porzana* in Himachal Pradesh, India

The Spotted Crake *Porzana porzana* is a small waterbird in the family Rallidae. It breeds across much of Europe and western Asia, and winters primarily in Africa and the Indian subcontinent (Taylor 2020). It can be distinguished from similar species by the profuse white spotting on the head, neck, and breast (Grimmett et al. 2011). The species is olive-brown above with dark and white streaks, and has a grey supercilium, throat, and breast. The underparts are pale, with brown and white barring on the flanks (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). In India, the Spotted Crake is a widespread but rare winter visitor (Grimmett et al. 1998), with records mainly from north-western Maharashtra, Gujarat, Kolkata, and the Delhi region, and sporadically from Jammu & Kashmir, Ladakh, Punjab, Rajasthan, Assam, the eastern coast, central India, the southern Deccan, and the south-western coast, some of which may represent passage migrants (Praveen 2025; but see Grimmett et al. 2026). This note reports three records of Spotted Crake from Himachal Pradesh.

On 27 November 2016, CA visited marshes around the Shah Nehar Barrage near Sthana village, Kangra District, in the outflow area of Pong Dam (31.962°N, 75.906°E; *c.*325 m asl). While searching for Great Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*, which was recorded on the previous day (Abhinav et al. 2018), a crake was observed feeding among reeds **[196]**. After some time, clear views were

obtained. The bird appeared grey-brown and plump, with prominent white spotting on the head and underparts. The flanks showed white barring, while the upperparts had sparse white streaking. The bill was orange-yellow with a darker tip **[197]**, and the legs were greenish-yellow. Based on these features, the bird was identified as a Spotted Crake. It remained shy, staying mostly under cover and not venturing into the open. Dhadwal & Kanwar (2018) subsequently reported that the species was recorded at the same location during the winter of 2017.



**196.** Spotted Crake photographed at Shah Nehar Barrage area, Pong Lake on 27 November 2016.



Both: C Abhinav

**197.** The same Spotted Crake in **[196]** showing orange-yellow bill with a darker tip. Photographed from Shah Nehar Barrage area, Pong Lake on 27 November 2016.

On 10 October 2022, RR and DO observed a crake at Sissu Lake, Lahaul and Spiti District (32.475°N, 77.128°E; *c.*3,034 m asl). The crake had prominent spotting on the head and underparts, by which it was identified as Spotted Crake **[198]**. It was seen feeding in a marshy area adjacent to the lake, which had sparse patches of vegetation. The bird frequently emerged into the open to feed, retreating into cover upon the slightest disturbance. It was last recorded at the site on 14 October 2022.

On 08 November 2022, HC observed a crake feeding in a marshy area along the Bata River, Paonta Sahib, Sirmaur District (30.459°N, 77.585°E; *c.*405 m asl.) The following morning, the bird was relocated at the same site, where it emerged from the vegetation and began feeding in the open. Several photographs were taken, and the bird was subsequently identified as a Spotted Crake, based on its small size and distinctive spotted plumage **[199]**. The bird remained relatively confiding and continued feeding in the open for an extended period. It was not seen again at this location on subsequent visits.



Raj Rawal

**198.** Spotted Crake photographed from Sissu Lake, Lahaul, Himachal Pradesh on 10 October 2022.



Himanshu C

**199.** Spotted Crake photographed along the Bata River, Paonta Sahib, Himachal Pradesh on 09 November 2022.

There are a few previous records of the species from Himachal Pradesh. Hume & Marshall (1880) mentioned its occurrence in the Kotgarh and Rampur (= Rampur Bushahr), both in Shimla District of the state. The former specimen was listed in the 'Catalogue of the birds in the British Museum' (Sharpe 1894). Grimmett et al. (2011) mapped a record from western Himachal Pradesh, away from Shimla District, but this record couldn't be traced. Tim Inskipp was contacted regarding this record on multiple occasions, but no response was received. den Besten (2004) didn't report this species from Kangra District, located in western Himachal Pradesh. The sighting by CA at Pong Lake in November 2016 represents the first photographic record of Spotted Crake from Himachal Pradesh. Given its secretive behaviour and preference for densely vegetated wetlands, the Spotted Crake is likely under-recorded in Himachal Pradesh. Additional surveys of suitable wetland habitats during migration and winter may help clarify its status and distribution in the Western Himalaya.

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## Possible bark ingestion behaviour in a Brown-headed Barbet *Psilopogon zeylanicus*

On 26 September 2025, at 1705 h, while birding near Oriya Road in Mount Abu, Rajasthan, India (24.627°N, 72.741°E; 1,200 m asl), I observed a Brown-headed Barbet *Psilopogon zeylanicus* engaging in unusual behaviour involving possible bark fragment ingestion from a branch of a Cluster Fig *Ficus racemosa* **[200]**. The bird was observed chipping-off bark fragments in its bill, and then manipulating the bark fragments by repeatedly tossing pieces in the air; but it struggled to manage the larger fragments **[201–202]**. Some pieces fell to the ground, which were eventually retrieved, and the bird then attempted to break them into smaller pieces. The bird was seen ingesting 2–3 smaller bark fragments over a period of *c*.5 min, before flying away carrying a remaining piece in its bill (Sahil 2025). During my observations, there was no apparent evidence of insects on the bark. Some branches, including the one on which the bird was perched, bore fungal growth, but the bird appeared to have chipped-off a section of bark from an adjacent branch without visible fungus, suggesting the behaviour may not have been solely related to foraging for small invertebrates.

The Brown-headed Barbet is primarily frugivorous, occasionally takes insects and animal matter, and known to excavate nest cavities in dead wood. The species generally feeds on a variety of berries and fruits, and also consumes flower parts (Ali & Ripley 1983; Short & Horne 2001; Krishnan 2021). Similar diets are typical across Asian Barbets (Megalaimidae), which are mainly arboreal frugivores and supplement with insects during breeding. Certain African Barbets (Lybiidae), as well as Coppersmith Barbet *P. haemacephalus*, a species common in the Indian Subcontinent and Southeast Asia, feed on insects and larvae, which the birds seek among branches and crevices of bark (Marshall & Marshall 1871). There appears to be no literature available on intentional bark ingestion feeding behaviour for Brown-headed Barbet. Some frugivorous bird species ingest small stones and grit to aid in digestion (Dean & Milton 1991; Gionfriddo & Best 1995). Woody material, twigs, or cambium is occasionally eaten to assist digestion or obtain minerals in a few unrelated groups, such as Ruffed Grouse *Bonasa umbellus* and certain parrots (Forshaw 2010; Rusch et al. 2020).



**200.** Brown-headed Barbet manipulating bark fragments in its bill.



**201.** Brown-headed Barbet tossing bark fragments.



**202.** Brown-headed Barbet manipulating bark fragments in its bill.

All: Sahil Zutshi

In correspondence with the author of the *Birds of the World* species account for Brown-headed Barbet (Krishnan 2021), the following explanations were proposed and are considered here: (1) the bird may have been extracting small invertebrates concealed within the bark; (2) bark fragments may have been ingested to function as gastroliths or to aid digestion in the gizzard; and (3) the individual may have been collecting wood fragments

for use as nest lining or nest construction, given that Brown-headed Barbet uses wood chips and excavated material in nests which are usually constructed in cavities of a dead or partly dead tree trunk or branch. The lack of obvious surface invertebrates does not exclude hidden prey, and the apparent deliberate retrieval and transport of fragments could be for either digestive or nesting purposes; however, ingestion of bark material is unique. Comparable cases of true bark ingestion have not been documented in Asian barbets, though bark-stripping and wood-pecking behaviours are noted in related groups such as woodpeckers (Tate 1973; Winkler et al. 1995). In Malaysia, "woodpecking" has been observed with a Red-throated Barbet *P. mystacophanos* to extract insect larvae, representing a rare instance of true woodpecker-like foraging (Short 1973). The nature of this behaviour indicates deliberate foraging rather than incidental excavation and suggests that some barbets exhibit woodpecker-like feeding behaviour and capabilities, with implications for understanding feeding flexibility and evolutionary relationships. Bark itself may provide limited direct nutrition but can harbour secondary food sources such as fungi, lichens, or concealed invertebrates; alternatively, bark fragments might serve a functional role in digestion. Without repeated observations or gut/behavioural-study data, it is not possible to distinguish between opportunistic foraging, gizzard-related ingestion, or transport for nesting. The observation therefore highlights the need for additional records and for any future observers to document context, and whether fragments are retained at a nest site, or whether multiple individuals exhibit similar behaviour.

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## Status of the Little Owl *Athene noctua* in Himachal Pradesh, India

The Little Owl *Athene noctua* is a compact, plump, and relatively small owl with broad and rounded wings (Holt et al. 2020). It is sandy-brown in colour, with white spotting on the upperparts and white streaking on the crown, and has brown streaking over whitish underparts (Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). The Little Owl is larger than the similar Spotted Owlet *A. brama*, and the two species are sympatric only in Baluchistan (Pakistan) (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). The Little Owl shows streaking on the crown, breast, and flanks, and broader whitish bands on tail, compared to the Spotted Owlet showing a spotted crown, scaled or barred underparts, and narrower banding on tail (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). This note documents the sightings of the Little Owl from the Lahaul and Spiti District of Himachal Pradesh, India.

On 23 August 2016, AV and KG reached Thinam (32.312°N, 78.063°E; *c.*4,665 m asl), a temporary settlement in the Spiti Valley, Lahaul and Spiti District, Himachal Pradesh. Beyond this point, they trekked along the mountain base as the dirt road ends here. After *c.*1 km, in a rocky area with numerous large boulders scattered across the terrain (32.317°N, 78.062°E; *c.*4,715 m asl), they observed an owl. It was immediately identified as a Little Owl as per features, and given that no other similar species occur in this habitat. The individual was shy and did not allow a close approach. A few photographs were taken with binoculars and phone before we left the site **[203]**.



Ankit Vikrant

**203.** Little Owl at Thinam on 23 August 2016.

On 07 October 2017, Rima Dhillon, Sarabjeet Kaur, Navjit Singh, and Narbir Kahlon from the Chandigarh Bird Club were birding in the Lahaul and Spiti District. While travelling between Batal (32.358°N, 77.619°E; *c.*4,020 m asl) and Chhota Dara (32.294°N, 77.522°E; *c.*3,800 m asl) in Lahaul, they reached an unnamed location, roughly halfway between these two settlements. They observed an owl perched on a boulder near the road and identified it as a Little Owl (Kaur 2017). The area lies between the mountains and the Chandrabhaga River, and the habitat was boulder-strewn and rocky. A few photographs were taken before continuing their journey.

While birding around Tashigang village (32.293°N, 78.053°E; *c.*4,430 m asl), Spiti, on the afternoon of 08 June 2025, MAS noticed an owl, which flew close to him and settled on a nearby rock. The individual was seen carrying a vole *Alticola cf. stoliczkanus* that it had probably hunted. It was identified as a Little Owl based on features. The same individual was observed again a few days later, roosting during the day on a large rock on the hillside. The site was surrounded by stony slopes, supporting sparse herbaceous cover and scrub, dominated by

*Lonicera spinosa* and *Caragana versicolor*. On 12 June 2025, CA, DO, and AJ visited the site and recorded the owl at the same roosting location in the afternoon, along with MAS and KG **[204]**. Subsequently, on 07 July 2025, MAS and KG observed two fledglings of the species close by **[205]**. The nest site, which was later identified with the help of locals, was a natural cavity in one of the cliffs closer to the village, where fledglings were observed (Mohammad 2025a), confirming that the species was breeding locally **[206, 207]**.



C. Abhinav

**204.** Little Owl on a day-roost at Tashigang on 12 June 2025.



Mohammad Abdus Shakur

**205.** A fledgling of Little Owl at Tashigang on 07 July 2025.



Kalzang Gurmet

**206.** Nesting hole of Little Owl at Tashigang.



Mohammad Abdus Shakur

**207.** Habitat at nesting site and arrow indicates the nest.

The breeding site was located *c.*200 m from its day-roost site. We followed recommended practices and guidelines (Barve et al. 2020) for documentation of the nest observations; and the measurements of the nest and nest site were taken after the breeding season was over. It was in a crevice *c.*8.5 m from the ground; the depth of the cavity hole was 45 cm and the diameter of its opening was 15 cm. Marks of whitish faecal matter were noticed on the rock below this opening and on the ground. A conversation with the locals revealed that this species was very vocally active at this location during March and April, suggesting that they might have been vocalizing during the mating season. The owl family was seen at this site regularly till mid-July 2025. An adult bird was seen occasionally during winter of 2025–26, as per local residents of the village. Garry Bhatti spotted the species at the same location along with his birding tour members on 11 November 2025, 08 March 2026 and 24 June 2026 (Garry Bhatti, pers. comm., dated 05 July 2026). The breeding of Little Owl was again recorded at the same location by MAS, when he recorded two immature birds near the nest hole (Mohammad 2026). The known breeding season of the species in South Asia is from March–June, and the species builds nests in rock crevices or mud cliffs and in tree-holes (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).

On 27 September 2025, while walking in the fields around Kibber village, MAS flushed an owl roosting amidst rocks in a nullah (32.339°N, 78.009°E; *c.*4,176 m asl). It had the typical undulating flight, observed during the previous sightings of the Little Owl, and was confirmed from the flight shots during the encounter (Mohammad 2025b).

There have been a few other sight records of the Little Owl from the Spiti Valley. All known records are mentioned in the Table 1. The records from same location and same year are not mentioned separately. There might be a possibility that more records of Little Owl exist from Spiti, given the ongoing camera-trapping research and systematic bird surveys in the region conducted by different organisations including Nature Conservation Foundation.

**Table 1.** Records of Little Owl from Lahaul and Spiti District, Himachal Pradesh

| S. No. | Date | Location | Remarks | Reference |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Undated, before 2016 | Monkor, Spiti | Sight record by Tanzin Thuktan and Rinchen Tobge | pers. comm. Tanzin Thuktan |
| 2. | 23 August 2016 | Thinam, Spiti | First photographic record | Vikrant (2016), this work. |
| 3. | 07 October 2017 | Between Batal and Chhota Dara, Lahaul | Photographic record | Kaur (2017), this work. |
| 4. | 26 December 2017 | Near Chicham Bridge | Photographed | Kesangchunit (2024) |
| 5. | 29 July 2018 | Near Kibber, Spiti | A record of Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus* is mentioned in the text. However, at this particular date the species is unlikely in Spiti, as it is a winter visitor to India. The photograph provided is probably of Little Owl, as it seems to be more compact and paler than the former. The photograph is of lower resolution to be completely sure. | Dutta et al. (2022) |
| 6. | Between 12 and 15 August 2019 | Kibber Village | Sight record by Pronoy Baidya and Jalmesh Karapurkar | Pronoy Baidya, pers. comm., dated 20 October 2025 |
| 7. | 22 February 2020 | Gue, Spiti | Unconfirmed sight record | Sharma (2020) |
| 8. | 24 June 2021 | Exact location in Spiti unknown | Unconfirmed sight record.<br>It seems that the observer has combined data/observations from several checklists because of the presence of unlikely species at the place mentioned in the checklist | Nair (2021) |
| 9. | 25 May 2023 | Between Dhar Lung Wooh and Demul | Unverifiable sight record | Srinivasan (2023) |
| 10. | June – August 2025 | Tashigang, Spiti | First breeding record | Mohammad (2025a), this work |
| 11. | 27 September 2025 | Kibber, Spiti | Photographic record | Mohammad (2025b), this work |
| 12. | June – July 2026 | Tashigang, Spiti | Breeding at same site | Mohammad (2026), this work |

Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) mention Little Owl as a resident of Himalayas from Baltistan to northern Sikkim from 2,715 to 4,700 m asl. Their distribution map shows this range beyond the borders of Himachal Pradesh, extending south-eastwards through the adjoining Tibetan Plateau. Grimmett et al. (1998, 2011) mention and depict Little Owl in India, only from Ladakh and northern Sikkim. Praveen (2025) included Himachal Pradesh within the distribution range of the species, based on some of the above-mentioned records in Table 1, which are on eBird (eBird 2025). The species is missing from the checklist of birds of Himachal Pradesh (Lakshminarasimha 2017). Dhadwal & Kanwar (2018) mentioned Little Owl from Spiti in their checklist, however, the species account was not given due to unavailability of photograph. The species was also recorded for the first time in Uttarakhand in Upper Bhagirathi River Basin at 4,240 m (Joshi et al. 2025). This note also mentions the presence of the species in Lahaul and Spiti, citing a bogus reference, "Marshall, A. J. (1984)" titled "Notes on birds from Lahaul and Spiti, Himachal Pradesh" apparently in the Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society 81 (2), pp. 364–367. No such note exists in the said volume of Journal of Bombay Natural History Society and no such author with the said name exists in known ornithological bibliographies, for e.g., Pittie (2025). Several other references cited in Joshi et al. (2025) are also bogus, questioning the reliability of the record. On communication with the authors, no reply was received. There, however, exists an unpublished photographic record of the species from Uttarakhand on social media from Chopta, Rudraprayag District dated 15 October 2015 (Negi 2015), which became the basis of its inclusion in the checklist of birds of Uttarakhand (Mohan & Sondhi 2024).

All records of Little Owl presented in Table 1 are from the past decade, however considering the overall range of the species, these records are not unexpected. The record by AV and KG from Thinam appears to be the first photographic record of the Little Owl from Himachal Pradesh, while the sighting from Tashigang appears to be the first breeding record for the state. These multiple records reveal a previously undocumented distribution range of Little Owl in the Lahaul and Spiti District of Himachal Pradesh. The species has not been recorded previously during the winter, likely due to coverage issues during winter season, however present records confirm Little Owl as a breeding resident in Spiti Valley.

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## The Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella* from the Mishmi Hills: An addition to the avifauna of Arunachal Pradesh, India

The Mishmi Hills, located in eastern Arunachal Pradesh, India are well known for their high avian diversity. The region encompasses parts of Upper and Lower Dibang Valley, Lohit, and Anjaw Districts.

On 24 November 2025, during a birdwatching tour organized by Mrugaya Xpeditions, a bunting-like bird was observed at 1300 h, while travelling from Mayodia towards Tiwarigaon, Arunachal Pradesh. The bird was seen in open habitat comprising rocky hillsides with grasses and sparse tree cover, feeding on grass seeds along the roadside. The bird was observed for approximately five minutes during which photographs were obtained to confirm its identification. It was bold but frequently flew short distances and disappeared into dense grasses before reappearing. We finally lost the sight of the bird when a heavy vehicle passed by. At first sight, the bird looked like one of the yellow-coloured buntings but much larger than the similar looking Yellow-breasted Bunting *Emberiza aureola* and Chestnut Bunting *E. rutila*.

The bird showed a chestnut rump and upper tail coverts, as well as prominent white outer tail feathers visible in flight. Based on these characters, together with its large size and overall structure, the bird was identified as a Yellowhammer *E. citrinella* **[208]**.



Omkar Dharwadkar

**208.** Yellowhammer photographed on 24 November 2025 from Arunachal Pradesh, India.

In India, the Yellowhammer has been recorded from the Western Himalaya from Kashmir, Ladakh, Himachal, and Uttarakhand (Praveen 2025). The nearest known record to the present observation is from Lubra village in Nepal, approximately 1,180 km west of the Mishmi Hills (Ghimire, 2025). This observation therefore represents the easternmost record of the species in the Indian Subcontinent and the first record for Arunachal Pradesh (Singh 1995; Choudhury 2006; Singh et al. 2013).

Populations breeding from eastern Europe eastwards to south-central Siberia and north-central Mongolia are believed to winter in South Asia (Copete 2020). The observed individual may therefore belong to the subspecies *E. c. erythrogenys*, the expected subspecies in India, although subspecific assignment is difficult on the basis of the available evidence.

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## The Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius* near Ropar Wetland, Punjab, India

The Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius* is a widespread Palearctic corvid distributed across Europe and temperate Asia. Within the Indian subcontinent, the species is primarily known from the Western Himalaya, with confirmed records from Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand, where it inhabits wooded landscapes, forest edges, and mixed broad-leaved forests, generally at mid to higher elevations (Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Praveen 2025).

On 03 January 2026, at 1604 h, NS and SM observed two Eurasian Jays at Sadabarat Nature Trail, near Ropar Wetland, Rupnagar District, Punjab, India (30.983°N, 76.528°E; *c.* 320 m asl). The site comprised a mixed scrub–woodland habitat in the Shivalik foothills, interspersed with agricultural fields. The vegetation included scattered trees, secondary growth, and understorey shrubs, forming a semi-open woodland structure with small temporary water bodies.

The birds were initially seen perched on a fallen dry tree close to a puddle. They subsequently descended to the ground, where they were observed foraging on seeds and bathing in shallow water. The birds repeatedly hopped between low branches and the water body for approximately 15–20 minutes before flying away.

Identification of the birds was based on several diagnostic features. Both individuals were medium-sized corvids, smaller than House Crow *Corvus splendens*, with a brownish body, long tail, black bill, a distinct black moustachial patch on the cheeks near the bill, and a conspicuous blue-and-black barred wing patch bordered by white. The tail showed contrasting dark and white feathers. No vocalisations were recorded. Both individuals appeared similar in plumage, and sex could not be determined in the field. One individual was photographed, documenting the diagnostic wing pattern and facial markings **[209]**.



Navdeep Singh and Satvik Modgil

**209.** Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius* photographed at Sadabarat Nature Trail, Rupnagar District, Punjab on 03 January 2026.

A review of published literature and regional checklists, including those accessible through eBird, revealed no previously published records of the Eurasian Jay from Punjab (Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Praveen 2025; eBird 2026). However, we found a newspaper report about one sighting from Pir Muchhalla Forest, District Sahibzada Ajit Singh Nagar, by Anuj Jain on 23 October 2019 (Singh 2019). The present observation therefore represents the second documented record of the species from the plains of Punjab.

The study area lies along the Shivalik foothill zone, which forms a contiguous habitat belt extending into neighbouring Himachal Pradesh, including Solan District. Such landscape connectivity may facilitate occasional dispersal of forest-associated species like the Eurasian Jay into the plains of Punjab. The present record may represent localised winter dispersal or vagrancy, a behaviour known in the species across parts of its Palearctic range (Madge & Kirwan 2024).

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## A colour-aberrant Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus* near Khanyan, Hooghly, West Bengal

On 29 December 2025, a Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus* showing abnormally pale plumage was observed near the DVC canal (23.055°N, 88.329°E) at Khanyan, Hooghly district, West Bengal, India. The bird was found among bamboo thickets along the canal and was frequently observed perched in the open, allowing repeated visual examination.

Although the individual was detected on the first day, clear photographic or video documentation could not be obtained immediately. After several days of repeated visits and patient searching, videos (Ghosh 2025) were eventually obtained using a Fuji Finepix S8500 camera **[210–212]**. The bird's behaviour appeared typical of the species and allowed prolonged observation, facilitating confirmation of its identity, despite its unusual plumage.

A follow-up observation of a similarly pale Brown Shrike was made in the same general area on 08 January 2026. However, this could not be photographed.

The observed bird showed markedly paler plumage than normally coloured Brown Shrikes, leading initially to uncertainty in identification. However, structural features, posture, and behaviour were consistent with Brown Shrike. The wing and tail feathers appeared particularly pale, possibly reflecting reduced pigmentation during feather growth, while several white feathers were evident on the body and head. The bill and feet retained normal coloration. Following careful review of the video footage and consultation with experienced ornithologists, the colour aberration is interpreted as possible progressive greying, rather than leucism (van Grouw 2021). No abnormal behaviour was noted during the observation period.



**210.** Colour aberrant Brown Shrike with normal coloured bill and feet.



**211.** Brown Shrike with white feathering in head and crown.



All: Subhajit Ghosh

**212.** Brown Shrike showing pale wing and tail.

A review of available literature, including colour aberration reports in *Indian BIRDS*, regional ornithological journals, and standard species accounts, did not reveal any published record of any colour aberration in the Brown Shrike from South Asia. To the best of my knowledge, this observation represents a possible first documented instance of any colour aberration in Brown Shrike.

I sincerely thank my friends and fellow birders for their valuable discussions and guidance, which greatly assisted in clarifying the identification and interpretation of this unusual individual.

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## The Greater White-Fronted Goose *Anser albifrons* in Uttarakhand, India

The Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons* is a winter visitor to northern India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh where it mainly occurs around large wetlands, lakes, reservoirs, and river systems (Grimmett et al. 2011). In India, it occurs throughout northern, western, and eastern India occasionally straggling to central and southern India to the states of Odisha, Maharashtra, and Karnataka (Praveen 2025).

On 18 January 2026 at 1030 h, while surveying for Asian Waterbird Census (AWC) in Uttarakhand, the author observed a single Greater White-fronted Goose at Baijnath Barrage, Bageshwar District, Uttarakhand (29.908°N, 79.615°E), in the Kumaon Himalaya. It was identified based on its overall grey-brown plumage, orange legs, pinkish bill, characteristic white frontal patch at the base of the bill, and black barring on the belly (Majumdar et al. 2024) **[213]**.



Deepak Kumar

**213.** Greater White-fronted Goose photographed from Baijnath Barrage, Bageshwar District, Uttarakhand.

Available eBird records indicate that the species has previously been reported from Uttarakhand mainly in and around Asan Conservation Reserve, Dehradun. However, there appears to be no published note or status update of the species in Uttarakhand. Table 1 below summarizes the occurrence of the species in Uttarakhand.

All the previous records in the state are concentrated around lowland wetlands in Dehradun District. The Baijnath record

**Table 1.** Records of Greater White-fronted Goose from Uttarakhand

| S. No. | Date | Location | Reference |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 20 January 2008 | Asan Conservation Reserve, Dehradun | Suvarna (2008a, 2008b) |
| 2 | 14 January 2023 | SH 22, Herbertpur, Dehradun | Singh (2023a) |
| 3 | 27 January 2023 | SH 22, Herbertpur, Dehradun | Singh (2023b) |
| 4 | 27 January 2023 | Asan River, Herbertpur, Dehradun | Arora & Mahajan (2023) |
| 5 | 28 January 2023 | Asan Conservation Reserve, Dehradun | Khan (2023) |
| 6 | 10 February 2023 | Asan Conservation Reserve, Dehradun | Jain et al. (2023) |
| 7 | 03 December 2023 | Asan Conservation Reserve, Dehradun | Rao (2023) |

suggests that the species may occasionally occur in riverine wetlands within the Kumaon Himalaya during winter.

I am thankful to Riya Jain, Dhananjai Mohan, Mahendra Singh Gusain, Forest Department Baijnath, Uttarakhand and other people associated with AWC 2026.

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## Nest of Streak-throated Swallow *Petrochelidon fluvicola* usurped by Brahminy Starling *Sturnia pagodarum*

The Brahminy Starling *Sturnia pagodarum* is a widespread resident in the Indian Subcontinent (largely excluding the north-western and north-eastern parts) (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). It inhabits open deciduous forest, scrub, and cultivated areas near human habitation; and is especially fond of waterlogged areas (Craig & Feare 2020). Both sexes build the nest, which is an untidy structure of dry grass, dead leaves, paper, and other material, lined with finer material, placed in hole in tree, often one made by woodpecker (Picidae) or barbet (Capitonidae), or nest of tit (Paridae) taken over, or sometimes hole in wall or roof of building used, or nest box accepted (Craig & Feare 2020). A pair nesting in steel anchor-pipe of a telephone pole has also been reported (Sharma 1996). Streak-throated Swallow *Petrochelidon fluvicola* breeds in large colonies, and is a mud-nesting aerial insectivore that constructs very closely spaced (honeycombed) retort-shaped nests with a long entrance tube, on natural sites and buildings close to water, notably bridges over large rivers (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). We report opportunistic sightings of a pair of Brahminy Starlings usurping and occupying a nest-structure of Streak-throated Swallow in the nesting colony of the latter.

On 08 June 2025, at 0630 h, while birding in Rampura (24.460°N, 75.436°E), Neemuch District in Madhya Pradesh, we saw a pair of Brahminy Starlings visiting the nest colony of Streak-throated Swallow that were built on the inner wall inside the dome of a temple **[214]**. The temple is situated on the banks of Gandhi Sagar reservoir which is part of the Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary (BirdLife International 2026). The starlings were observed to be in the process of repeatedly removing the nesting material which was originally inside the nest of Streak-throated Swallow. It could not be determined whether this nest of Streak-throated Swallow was active or was an old inactive nest structure. The pair of Brahminy Starlings were removing fine material from inside the nest with their bills and discarding it on the temple floor, while large pieces of nesting material, such as feathers etc., were discarded further away up to a distance of *c.*5–20 m in flight. During this process of removing nesting material, and after each time this was done, Brahminy Starlings were observed cleaning their bills on the floor or on grass. The nests were being visited by the starlings frequently (i.e., every 2–3 min). While they were in the process of repeatedly discarding the original nesting material, they were also observed to be bringing fresh grass straws from nearby and depositing it inside the nests. Photographs were taken to document this behavior **[215–216]**. We followed recommended practices and guidelines in Barve et al. (2020) for documentation of the nest observations.

Two days later, on 11 June 2025, the Brahminy Startlings were again observed to be busy cleaning and tending to the nest structure but the frequency of this activity was noted to be relatively lower than earlier. Incidentally, some Streak-throated Swallows were also seen around the nest site. On 14 June 2025, Brahminy Starlings were not observed removing any original nesting material from the nest nor seen placing fresh grass straws in the nest, and thus, it was suspected that the starlings had laid eggs in this nest structure and were in the process of egg incubation. It was noted that they would return to the nest in *c.*15–20 minutes after each flight, and were found staying inside the nest for as long as *c.*10–32 min. It was also noted that the nest was seldom left empty by the starlings. When one bird flew away, the other bird would be present at the nest. Occasionally both the birds would leave the nest and fly away, but would usually return within 2–3 minutes.

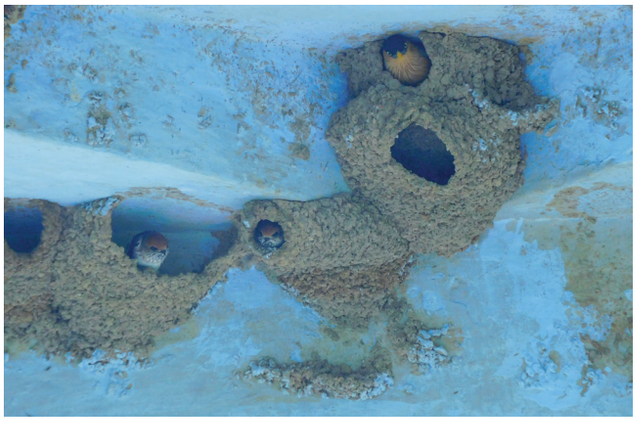
In the initial days of the observation, a small number of Streak-throated Swallows (about *c.*5–10) were seen around the nests, whereas after good rains on 18–19 June 2025, hundreds of them were seen flying around the temple. On 21 June 2025, after a close observation, it was found that the Streak-throated Swallows were restoring and renovating some of their nest-structures with wet mud. Meanwhile, the Brahminy Starlings were also seen in the occupied nest. Despite the Streak-throated Swallows flying around the nest, the starlings remained present in the occupied nest. We did not observe any antagonistic interaction between the starlings and the swallows, but the swallows attempted to reoccupy the nest that



**214.** Brahminy Starling (center) in the nesting colony of Streak-throated Swallow.



**215.** Brahminy Starling with nesting materials on nest of Streak-throated Swallow.



All: Lakhan Kumar

**216.** Brahminy Starling occupying the nest of Streak-throated Swallow while the latter species occupies neighbouring nests.

had been occupied by the starlings. After the Brahminy Starling took over the nest, the swallows made several tries to regain it. They would hover around the nest and its entrance but could not enter because the Brahminy Starling was always present inside; instead, they would land at neighbouring nests. No physical confrontation or aggressive fighting was observed between the two species during this time.

It is uncertain whether the starling eggs eventually hatched, or whether the starling chicks survived and reached fledging maturity. It is also uncertain whether either the eggs or the chicks had naturally survived as the stage of the breeding cycle could not be ascertained. The possibility of the eggs or the chicks being predated before maturity must also be considered. Thus, it is uncertain and inconclusive whether the Brahminy Starlings had successfully bred at this nest structure. That said, we can conclude that Brahminy Starlings usurped and occupied a nest of Streak-throated Swallow and attempted to breed in the latter's nest.

Many birds fiercely compete for nesting sites, such as cavities or tree-holes, especially in the case for cavity-nesting birds. Other species, such as, House Sparrows *Passer domesticus* have been known to occupy and usurp nests of Streak-throated Swallow (Pawar et al. 2025). Our observations show the adaptive breeding behavior of Brahminy Starling and breeding challenges faced by Streak-throated Swallow.

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## The Black-faced Bunting *Emberiza spodocephala* from Wular Lake: An addition to the avifauna of Jammu & Kashmir

The Black-faced Bunting *Emberiza spodocephala* is widely distributed across Asia, breeding in central and eastern Asia from the upper Ob' valley and northeast Altai, east to the coasts of the Sea of Okhotsk, and the northern half of Sakhalin (Byers et al. 1995). All breeding populations undertake southward migration during the northern winter. Their distribution includes much of southern and eastern China, Taiwan, extending along the Himalayan foothills from central Nepal, east through northern Myanmar, and extreme northern Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam (Kirwan et al. 2022). In India, the species winters in West Bengal, Assam, adjoining areas of Arunachal, Nagaland, Cachar, the Manipur valley, and Tripura (Praveen 2025). Vagrant records have been observed from Ladakh, Punjab, Uttarakhand, and northwestern Uttar Pradesh (Praveen 2025).

On 24 January 2026 at 1155 h, during a birdwatching session near Wular Lake, Bandipora, Kashmir, the authors sighted a passerine bird perched on a willow tree *Salix* sp. along the lakeshore (34.381°N, 74.652°E, *c.*1580 m asl). The individual was photographed for documentation and identification. The images were shared in the 'Birds of Kashmir' WhatsApp group, where it was identified as Black-faced Bunting by Irfan Jeelani based on greyish head, black lores and chin, grey breast well demarcated from the lower yellowish-white underparts, and chestnut back **[217]**.

There are no previous records of Black-faced Bunting from Jammu & Kashmir (Kichloo et al. 2024; Kichloo 2025), hence



Ishfaq Majeed

**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. xanthoprymna*, 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.



Gurvinder 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. | UT Jammu & Kashmir | 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. | | 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, Sirmaur 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. | | Jhirna 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, Nanital 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.

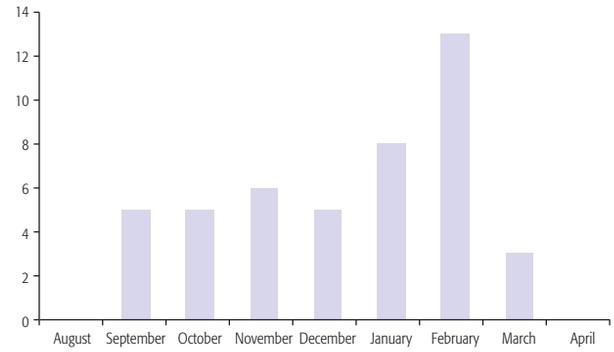



Fig 1. Month wise records of Red-tailed Wheatear in northern India

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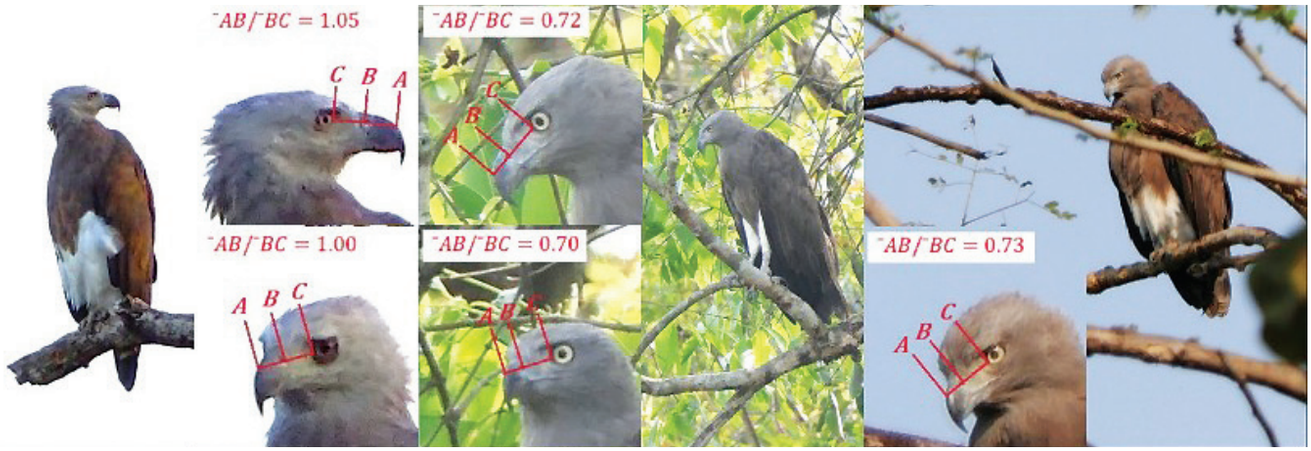
## The bill index: a new criterion to distinguish between the Grey-headed- *Icthyophaga ichthyaetus* and Lesser Fish Eagles *Icthyophaga humilis* in photographs

The Grey-headed Fish Eagle *Icthyophaga 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; Naoroji 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 *Icthyophaga 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




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**222.** The bill index of a Grey-headed Fish Eagle (left) and two Lesser Fish Eagle (center and right), with comparable orientations of their heads. Bill index is usually less than 0.80 for Lesser Fish Eagle and greater than 1.00 for Grey-headed Fish Eagle. A minority in both species may approach 0.90.

joining their extreme values at 0.90. Therefore, finding a bill index around 0.90 should make one consider other traits to identify the species.

**Table 1.** The bill index from photographs of GHFE and LEFE in the Macaulay Library

| Catalogue number | Region | Fish-eagle species | Bill index |
|---|---|---|---|
| ML614994449 | N India | GHFE | 1.05 |
| ML627857022 | N India | GHFE | 1.04 |
| ML630906081 | N India | GHFE | 1.00 |
| ML634028298 | N India | GHFE | 1.04 |
| ML613265974 | N India | LEFE | 0.78 |
| ML617847581 | N India | LEFE | 0.80 |
| ML620496287 | N India | LEFE | 0.75 |
| ML430401111 | S India | GHFE | 1.09 |
| ML628233564 | S India | GHFE | 1.00 |
| ML631424420 | S India | GHFE | 1.05 |
| ML594799621 | S India | LEFE | 0.80 |
| ML603037841 | S India | LEFE | 0.74 |
| ML608400163 | S India | LEFE | 0.80 |
| ML615662324 | S India | LEFE | 0.74 |
| ML205870191 | Indochina | GHFE | 1.06 |
| ML617124289 | Indochina | GHFE | 1.08 |
| ML548333801 | Indochina | LEFE | 0.70 |
| ML580586251 | Indochina | LEFE | 0.80 |
| ML608468791 | Indochina | LEFE | 0.73 |
| ML189139891 | Borneo | GHFE | 1.07 |
| ML211862711 | Borneo | GHFE | 1.00 |
| ML602595041 | Borneo | GHFE | 1.05 |
| ML626900928 | Borneo | GHFE | 1.04 |
| ML628750109 | Borneo | GHFE | 1.04 |
| ML608736428 | Borneo | LEFE | 0.70 |
| ML612160244 | Borneo | LEFE | 0.78 |
| ML612976000 | Borneo | LEFE | 0.70 |

Hoping that the bill index is confirmed as a practical, as well as consistent, criterion, I would add three considerations to stress the interest in trying it. (1) Young birds are even more difficult to differentiate based on plumage colours, variable with age and perhaps more similar between, than within, species. The few photographs I found suitable for the bill index suggest that it also works for juveniles (e.g., 0.90 for ML629071523, a GHFE, vs 0.72 for ML226413371, a LEFE) as long as they are of comparable age, because a GHFE still developing its bill might give an index even lower than an older LEFE. (2) Adult LEFEs vary considerably in grey plumage. I photographed the two LEFEs in in March 2025 in the Bardiya National Park, Nepal **[222]**, along the Girwa River (28.495°N, 81.251°E and 28.502°N, 81.250°E), only 850 m between. Their intraspecific difference in colours might add confusion with the sympatric GHFE, which has occurred about three kilometers upstream (iNaturalist 2024). (3) The above example of GHFE and LEFEs found at a short distance in a well-preserved area suggests that this coexistence happens naturally and may have little to do human-caused environmental changes. The forest along the Kinabatangan River, Borneo, offers a further example of the two species (ML628750109, a GHFE, and ML612976000, a LEFE) close together (4.7 km between) in well-preserved environment, in a different climate. In addition, contrary to the usual opinion on which kind of waters each species would prefer, these photographs from Borneo evidence the LEFE at a large river and the GHFE at a small tributary deep in the forest. A more reliable species identification of the GHFE and LEFEs would permit understanding more accurately where they coexist and, in perspective, how they can do so without excessive competition despite so similar morphology.

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## Occurrence of the Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina* in the Upper Brahmaputra Valley

The Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina* is a small passerine bird belonging to the Old-World flycatcher family, *Muscicapidae* (Zheng 2002; Outlaw et al. 2010). It is a migratory insectivorous bird breeding in southern Russia, Central Asia, and northern Pakistan. It winters primarily in Africa and north-western India. However, it is also known to occur further east, with scattered records especially on passage, from Nepal, Bhutan, and Arunachal Pradesh in India, and further south from south-western, and southern India, Sri Lanka, as well as Maldives in autumn passage (Kazmierczak 2000; Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). The Isabelline Wheatear breeds in expansive stony plateaus, valleys, gullies and winters in semi-desert with scattered bushes, preferring sandier substrates (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).

Records of the Isabelline Wheatear in the state of Assam are shown in Table 1 – they have been sporadic in recent years, which may lend to its status as a rare vagrant to Assam. This is the first time the bird has been sighted in the Upper Brahmaputra Valley.

**Table 1.** Reports of the Isabelline Wheatear in Assam, India

| District | Site | Date | Source |
|---|---|---|---|
| Baksa | Manas NP | 12 April 2017 | Ganpule (2017) |
| Kamrup Metropolitan | Deepor Beel | 12 Mar 2018 | Willoughby (2018) |
| Baksa | Makhibahan Grasslands | 18 Mar 2019 | Taylor (2019) |
| Baksa | Manas NP | 28 Sept 2022 | Choudhury (2022) |
| Sonitpur | Nameri NP | 20 Mar 2024 | Byrne (2024) |
| Golaghat | Kachomari | 02 Oct 2025 | This work |

On 02 October 2025, at 1445 h, a small buff-colored bird was seen perched atop a stump by the banks of river Dhanshiri in Kachomari, Golaghat (26.281°N, 93.982°E). Through a spotting scope the bird's uniformly buff wing-coverts, larger bill, dark lores and lankier vertical stance were some of the telltale features that led us to believe it was an Isabelline Wheatear. Due to the absence of a camera and the bird being distant, we were unable to get truly definitive views of the bird. The bird however got flushed due to roadside disturbance and flew to the shoreline and out of sight. When the bird flushed, it showed a narrow white rump with black central tail feathers and a broader black terminal tail-bar.

We ventured to the same location the next day at 1400 h equipped with photography gear in hopes of finding the bird. After about twenty minutes of relentless scanning, we glimpsed the bird 15–20 feet from us foraging around a heap of cattle dung. Several photographs were taken in proximity that confirmed its identity as an Isabelline Wheatear **[223]** and the same were cross-checked with several experts. The bird's upright stance showed us it's overall sandy-brown plumage, long dark legs, a long distinctive supercilium which was wider and whiter in front of eye, blackish loral eyestripe, almost uniform buff primaries, white rump, and prominent white side of the tail. Much to our surprise we saw another individual along the edge of the road bordering the river. Both birds were moving around in patches of scrubby grass and tracts of gravel. We got to hear the calls of the Isabelline Wheatear for the first time when one individual took flight leaving the other by the lonesome. Its vocalizations can be described as a mix of whistles, buzzes and crackling sounds. The following day yielded no sightings of the birds despite an extensive search by other birders who arrived at the location reinforcing its short window as a vagrant. We hope birdwatchers in Assam will be inspired to look for this bird in similar habitat with sparse scrub and borders of cultivated areas, given it has strayed so far from its usual wintering grounds in the Indian subcontinent.



Vishal Goswami

**223.** Isabelline Wheatear from Kachomari, Golaghat, Assam.

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