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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 its overall sandy-brown plumage, long dark legs, a

long distinctive supercilium which was wider and whiter in front of eye, blackish loreal 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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