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Grey-crowned Prinia *Prinia cinereocapilla* in Majathal Wildlife Sanctuary: An addition to the avifauna of Himachal Pradesh

The Grey-crowned Prinia *Prinia cinereocapilla* is endemic to the Indian Subcontinent, and found discontinuously from the Himalayan foothills of Uttarakhand to Bhutan (Rasmussen &

Anderton 2012). In Uttarakhand, it is mainly found in Nanital District, however, relatively recently, it has also been recorded from several localities in Dehradun District (Singh 2000; Sondhi 2012; ebird 2021). It was also recorded at Sukhna Wildlife Sanctuary, along the Haryana–Punjab state border in 2005 (Singh 2006). Further westwards, a small population was discovered in the Margalla Hills of Pakistan during May 1985 (Roberts 1992). However, the species has not been found in the area, despite considerable effort (Islam & Rahmani 2002). Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) and Grimmett et al. (2011) have asked for verification of this record, as confusion in identification is quite possible. However, Singh (2006) opined that the species might have been present there, but gone extinct later on, or it could possibly be a seasonal migrant to the Margalla Hills. In this note, we present the first record of the Grey-crowned Prinia in Majathal Wildlife Sanctuary, Himachal Pradesh, and the threats it faces.

VKB and RK surveyed the Majathal Wildlife Sanctuary, located in the border areas of Shimla and Solan Districts of Himachal Pradesh, for its faunal assessment from 20 February to 31 March 2021. The sanctuary is bounded in the northern side by the Sutlej River, and to the southern by a mountain ridge. It is an Important Birding Area (IBA Site Code- IN-HP-153) with an area of 3,086 ha (Rahmani et al. 2016).

On 16 March 2021, while returning to the sanctuary headquarters at Chandi, Shimla, after surveying the Matrech beat in the Solan District, VKB saw a small bird jumping in the branches of *Phoenix silvestris*, near Sakor village, Kunihar Tehsil, Solan District (32.31°N, 76.95°E; c. 1,332 m asl). VKB quickly took a record photograph before the bird flew away. The bird couldn't be identified in the field and after returning, its photographs were forwarded to CA and other friends. It was suspected to be a Grey-crowned Prinia, but it couldn't be confirmed as the photographs were not clear enough, and this species could be confused with its congeners. VKB and RK revisited that place on 21 March 2021 to confirm its identification. Six birds were recorded, and decent photographs were captured during this visit. A contrasting blue-grey crown, thin bill, prominent supercilium contrasting with dark eye-stripe and lores, and warm rufous upperparts were clearly seen, which confirmed it as Grey-crowned Prinia [45]. The Striated Prinia *P. criniger* was also present at the same locality.



45. Grey-crowned Prinia in non-breeding plumage.

On 29 March 2021, CA and RK visited the same location to collect more details of the habitat, and to try and estimate the number of birds. Call playback was also used this time. They searched near a track on the hill side, starting from the village to about 500 m, beyond the last individual recorded. About 1,500 m track along the hill side, 200 m track to the top of the hill and the top was searched. This hill slope was sparsely covered, predominantly by *Pinus roxburghii* trees and was c. 1.5 km from the bank of the Sutlej River in the Shivaliks. The understory comprised *Phoenix silvestris*, and *Lantana* sp., and in the open areas the major grass species were *Themeda* and *Carex*. A total of eight individuals were counted, of which, six responded to call playback. Similar habitats were also present in the surrounding hills; only a few of these, which spread on this track to Chandi, were explored, and the bird was not found. The possibility of its presence at other locations cannot be ruled out as much of the areas in the sanctuary, and the surrounding unprotected areas remain unexplored. An extensive survey is required, covering more suitable habitats in this region, to estimate the population of the Grey-crowned Prinia.

CA visited this site again with Piyush Dogra on 27 June 2021, to confirm whether the bird was breeding at this location. Call playback was used in a similar stretch of path, and this time a total of six birds were spotted, out of which four responded to call playback. During the breeding season, the sides of its head and ear-coverts also turned blue-grey, and the supercilium disappeared [46]. A survey was carried out for two days, and the birds seemed to hold territories. Although no direct evidence of breeding was recorded, the population was present during the breeding season in the correct habitat of this sedentary species (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Madge 2020), thus the birds were probably breeding at Majathal Wildlife Sanctuary.

The Grey-crowned Prinia is considered to be rare or, at best, uncommon (Madge 2020). Its population is suspected to be rapidly declining through habitat loss and thus it has been listed as 'Vulnerable' (BirdLife International 2016). Although the present site is located inside a protected area, there was considerable human disturbance. According to Mishra (1993), 17 settlements, with a population of about 650 inhabitants, were present inside the sanctuary. The site is located between two villages and we saw people collecting fuel wood and fodder, and grazing their

animals in the Prinia's habitat. Forest fires are common in the sanctuary. During our visits we observed several burnt areas in the sanctuary, and thus forest fire is a major threat for prinia. There are two quarries and cement manufacturing units close to Majathal Wildlife Sanctuary. These are also a pollution threat to the sanctuary. A detailed survey should be carried out in the suitable habitats in the sanctuary, and the surrounding unprotected areas, and proper steps should be taken to safeguard the future of the species in this region.

The present records of the Grey-crowned Prinia are the first for Himachal Pradesh. The closest record is from Sukhna Wildlife Sanctuary, which is c. 60 km away from the present location. This location is c. 150 km north-westwards of Dehradun, where the western-most records in Uttarakhand occurred. The present record of a new population, far away from the nearest known records, is in line with the fact that the bird has disjunctive population and is highly local (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). This report is also useful as it reveals a new site to study the ecology and behaviour of a poorly known species. The bird closely resembles its congeners and is shy, thus easily overlooked.

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46. Breeding plumage of Grey-crowned Prinia.