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– Diptanu Debnath & Dipak Sinha

Dipantu Debnath, Student, Zoology Honours, Dept. of Zoology, N.S. Mahavidyalaya, Udaipur, Tripura, India; Member, Wild Tripura Foundation.
Email: debnath.diptaanu99@gmail.com

Dipak Sinha, Assistant Professor, College of Agriculture, Lembucherra, Tripura, India; Administrative Coordinator, Wild Tripura Foundation.
Email: dipak60abu@gmail.com

## The first wintering record of a West Himalayan Bush Warbler *Locustella kashmirensis* from India, at the Pong Lake, Himachal Pradesh

The West Himalayan Bush Warbler *Locustella kashmirensis* is a relatively recent split from the Spotted Bush Warbler *L. thoracica* and is endemic to the Indian Subcontinent (Grimmett et al. 1998; Alström et al. 2008; Clements et al. 2021; Praveen et al. 2021). In this note, I describe the winter records of this species from Pong Lake.

Pong Lake is an important wetland of northern India and is located north of the Indian plains, near the Shivalik Hills. On 7 March 2019, I visited the outflow area of Pong Dam at Sthana village, near Shah Nehar Barrage, Kangra District (31.96°N, 75.90°E; *c.*325 m asl). I photographed a warbler near the road, in a marshy area, at the edge of a small pond that had an ample growth of *Typha* sp. and *Ipomea* sp., surrounded by *Tripidium bengalense*, and *Lantana* sp. **[178, 179]**. The bird was shy and disappeared in the reeds within a few seconds. It remained silent during the next ten minutes, after which I left the place. It had warm brown colouration, a short tail, thin black bill, whitish supercilium, white chin and throat, and unspotted throat and breast. Based on these features, I suspected it to be either a West Himalayan Bush Warbler or a Spotted Bush Warbler *L. thoracicus* (Kennerley & Pearson 2010). I was familiar with the former species and had observed it on several occasions in its breeding grounds (Abhinav 2019). Both the species are almost identical in their winter plumages and, perhaps, only distinguishable by their vocalization. However, the wintering range of the Spotted Bush Warbler has been described only up to Uttar Pradesh in the west (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012); thus this bird was considered to be a West Himalayan Bush Warbler, which was later confirmed on subsequent sightings.

On 9 March 2020, I heard the characteristic song of a West Himalayan Bush Warbler for a few seconds, a rhythmic, mechanical series of clicks and buzzes, at the same spot. Call playback was used, but the bird did not respond, nor did it vocalize for the next 20 m. I had visited the same spot several times before the above records, between November 2019 and February 2020, but the bird was not seen or heard. I did not visit the place during the winter of 2020–2021, because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

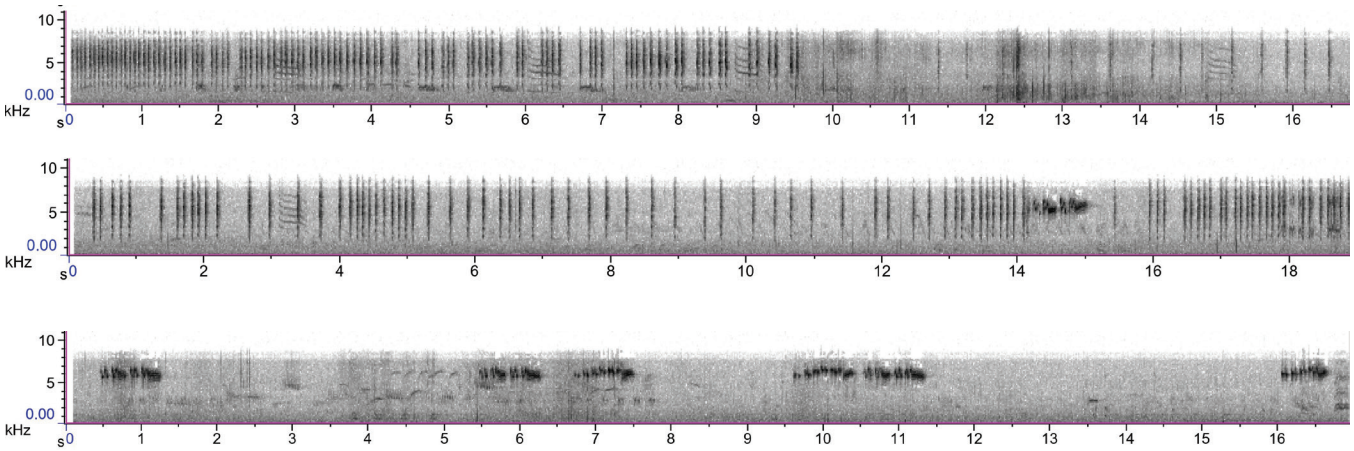
**178.** Habitat in the outflow area of Pong Dam at Sthana village, Kangra District, Himachal Pradesh, 29 December 2021.

**179.** West Himalayan Bush Warbler at Sthana village, Kangra District, Himachal Pradesh, 7 March 2019.

Both: C. Abhinav

On 29 December 2021, I visited the place again with Piyush Dogra and heard the song of a West Himalayan Bush Warbler briefly at the same place. It made only a few clicks and buzzes, fainter in comparison to its song on its breeding grounds. It became silent thereafter but responded to call playback after a few minutes. This time its vocalization was recorded, and sonograms were generated (Raven lite 2). The most common vocalization heard was a variably spaced, rapidly repeating, harsh 'trr-trr-trr-trr' which sometimes had song phrases in between **[178, 179]**. The typical song phrase, a pair of high-pitched clicks and a humming buzz, was also uttered later on, but not at regular intervals. These were without the initial low-pitched clicks or introductory elements of the typical song. Atypical phrases were also uttered frequently in between **[180]**. The bird came very close to me, but mostly kept to bushes, and remained out of sight. However, for a few seconds, it came out on the path and was clearly seen. During the next 20 m, I recorded two more individuals within 50 m, which responded poorly to call playback. On 31 January 2022, I again recorded two individuals at the same location. This time too, the vocalization was much less after call playback. I searched the surrounding habitat, about 500 m in both directions, but no other individual could be found.

In all these records, the birds were very shy and remained out of sight, apart from a few exceptions. They vocalized much less,




Figs 1–3. Vocalisation of West Himalayan Bush Warbler recorded on 29 December 2021 showing rapidly repeating, harsh 'trr-trr-trr-trr' which sometimes had song phrases in between, both typical and atypical.

and the characteristic song phrases were heard very rarely, with less amplitude, and always without the initial low-pitched clicks or introductory elements. Even after call playback, the birds were reluctant to vocalize and only uttered the characteristic song for a few seconds. Only on a few occasions, the birds approached the call playback site, but after much use of call playback. This behaviour is opposite to that shown on the species' breeding grounds, where this warbler is not difficult to see, as it sings loudly from the tops of bushes and also responds strongly to call playback.

On 27 March 2022, I revisited the place, with Piyush Dogra. I heard the song of a West Himalayan Bush Warbler, briefly, which was coming from the *Lantana* sp. scrub alongside the road. This time the bird was more vocal, but as soon as we approached, it became quieter. However, it showed much better response to call play. It came frequently to the exposed perches, much like as in breeding grounds, allowing us to click better photographs **[180, 181]**. However, it vocalized infrequently. There was an absence of greyish tone in plumage. The throat, breast, and centre of belly were white, without any spotting or warm buff tone. The beak was not completely black as in breeding season; the lower mandible was predominantly yellow and the upper had a hint of yellow. The undertail coverts had broad whitish tips.

Both: C. Abhinav

**180, 181.** West Himalayan Bush Warbler on exposed branches of Ipomea sp., [Note: 'Ipomea' in italics. Delete 'Piyush Dogra'] Himachal Pradesh, 27 March 2022.

## Discussion

The West Himalayan Bush Warbler's confirmed breeding range extends from north-western Himachal Pradesh, through Uttarakhand, east to west-central Nepal (Abhinav 2021). However, its non-breeding areas were completely unknown until recently. Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) suspected that the wintering range included the plains of Uttar Pradesh. The uncertainty in wintering range is perhaps due to its retiring nature and much less vocalization on its wintering grounds, thus going unnoticed in the reeds. It is also because of the likelihood that the West Himalayan Bush Warbler was called a Spotted Bush Warbler, before the species was split.

In India, there is only one probable record of a West Himalayan Bush Warbler during winter. One exhausted bird was recorded at Dehradun, Uttarakhand (30.28°N, 77.97°E; *c.*600 m asl) on 21 November 2017 (Warudkar 2017). It was recorded in *Lantana* sp. bushes, adjacent to human habitation, at the forest's edge in the Shivalik. There was no waterbody or marsh around this location and the bird was stressed, seemingly not in its appropriate wintering habitat, which could be marshes in the plains. In Nepal, it has been recorded at several locations during winter. Three birds were heard on 4 February 2017, and one was photographed on 24 February 2018 at Jagadishpur Reservoir, Kapilvastu District (Som 2018; Inskipp et al. 2020). Three birds were recorded at Lumbini, Rupandehi District on 5 February 2018, two along the Telar River, near Lumbini, Rupandehi District on 3 March 2020, and one at Jhilmila, Shuklaphanta

National Park on 11 March 2020 (Inskipp et al. 2020). Before the Spotted Bush Warbler complex was split, there had been several wintering records from the Chitwan National Park, Nepal, which lies south of the Annapurna Conservation Area, and also from the Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve and Koshi Barrage, which are presumed to have been of Spotted Bush Warbler (Inskipp et al. 2020). After the recent discovery of West Himalayan Bush Warblers in the Annapurna Conservation Area (Inskipp & Chaudhary 2016), it became unclear whether these wintering records, belonged to Spotted Bush Warbler or West Himalayan Bush Warbler (Inskipp et al. 2020). Similarly, further south, in the Indian plains, five specimens that had been collected from Nichlaul and Kalnahi in Maharajganj District, Uttar Pradesh, in February 1947, and labelled as Spotted Bush Warbler, need reassessing (Koelz 1947; Abhinav 2021). Thus, the wintering range of the West Himalayan Bush Warbler does include Nepal, and possibly adjacent Uttar Pradesh in India, but the exact range and status is still unclear.

The West Himalayan Bush Warbler is considered a local altitudinal migrant across much of its known range; however, there is little knowledge about these movements (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Abhinav 2019). Thus, the possibility that the birds in the first two records from Pong Lake, on 7 March 2019 and 9 March 2020, were migrating, was not ruled out initially. However, multiple individuals were recorded on separate occasions during the winter of 2021–2022, which suggest that the previously recorded birds might also have been wintering at Pong Lake. Perhaps they were only noticed in late winter because they became relatively more vocal, as the breeding season approached. These records from Pong Lake are the first confirmed wintering records of the species from India. Thus, the wintering range of the West Himalayan Bush Warbler extends up to Pong Lake, Himachal Pradesh, and further wintering records from Pong Lake and from other wetlands in northern India would consolidate this. The West Himalayan Bush Warbler was not reported from Kangra District by Whistler (1926a, b) or den Besten (2004). These records, from three winters, are the first from the Kangra District and add another piece to the jigsaw puzzle that is the wintering range of the West Himalayan Bush Warbler.

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– C. Abhinav
Village & P.O. Ghurkari, Kangra 176001, Himachal Pradesh, India.
E-mail: drabhinav.c@gmail.com

## The Red Knot *Calidris canutus* in western Maharashtra

This note describes a rare wader that was observed while conducting a shorebird census at the Vashi mudflats in Thane Creek (Maharashtra, India), during autumn migration, on 9 November 2021, at 0900 h. Our rowing boat got stranded on the exposed mudflats during the lowest of low tides (tide height 1.6 m) at transect (19.04°N, 73.00°E) where we saw a single Red Knot *Calidris canutus* **[182]**. It was found on an open foreshore mudflat, specifically, the upper region near the mangrove line. The mudflat is uneven, and the average low tide exposes nearly one to one-and-a-half kilometres of a soft muddy-sandy substratum. Shallow ditches and runnels hold water even during the low tide. Polychaetes and *Cerithium* sp., gastropods are commonly seen dwelling within this area. Apart from this macrobenthic diversity, mussels are also seen forming dense beds over this tidal flat. We saw a mixed flock of 2,500 individuals of Curlew Sandpipers *C. ferruginea*, Little Stints *C. minuta*, Broad-billed Sandpipers *C. falcinellus* and Lesser Sand-plovers *Charadrius mongolus* foraging on the mudflats. The Red Knot's feeding behaviour was similar to that of Curlew Sandpipers. We identified it using Grimmett et al. (2011), based on the presence of a prominent supercilium and its smaller size compared to Great Knot. We sent this image to Tim Inskipp who also agreed with our identification (Tim Inskipp, e-mail dated 9 December 2021)

Red Knots occur regularly on the south-eastern coast of India (Balachandran 1998); migrating along the East Asian–Australasian flyway. However, its occurrence along India's the western coast (eBird 2022) is sporadic, though it has been spotted multiple times along the western coast in recent years: from Gujarat (Ganpule 2016; Solanki 2018) and Kerala (Srinivasan 2015; Bharathan 2016) while past reports from Goa (Lainer 2004; Borges & Shanbhag 2007) has not been accepted for the state checklist (Baidya & Bhagat 2018). However, ours is the first report from western Maharashtra.