

Records of White-browed Shortwing *Brachypteryx montana* from Uttarakhand, and a review of its status in the Himalaya west of Nepal

Gunjan Arora, Puja Sharma, Tim Inskipp & Paul R. Elsen

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Gunjan Arora, Pocket C-9, Flat 9293, Vasant Kunj, New Delhi 110070, India. E-mail: gunjan@innerconceptsindia.com [GA].

Puja Sharma, A-13, New Friends Colony, New Delhi 110025, India. E-mail: pujasharma1@gmail.com [PS].

Tim Inskipp, 1 Herneside, Welney, Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, PE14 9SB, United Kingdom. E-mail: tim.inskipp@gmail.com [TI].

Paul R. Elsen, Department of Environmental Science, Policy, and Management, University of California, Berkeley, California 94720, USA.

E-mail: pelsen@berkeley.edu [PRE].

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The White-browed Shortwing *Brachypteryx montana* is widely distributed in moist montane forests of southern Asia (Cox 2006). The race *B. m. cruralis* has been reported to occur in central, and eastern Himalayas in the west, to south-western China, and northern Vietnam in the east (Clement & Rose 2015). Recently, del Hoyo *et al.* (2016) have split *B. montana* into eight species, with the Himalayan Shortwing *B. cruralis* being classified as monotypic, and the western-most species in the complex. Within the Indian Subcontinent, the species occurs from the Himalayas of Himachal Pradesh to Arunachal Pradesh, and southwards through the hills of southern Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Its status is described as scarce in Himachal Pradesh in northern India, and Nepal, and as more common eastwards from Bhutan (Collar 2016). It is an altitudinal migrant, breeding in temperate forests up to 3660 m asl, and wintering at lower temperate, and subtropical elevations, exceptionally down to 245 m asl (Inskipp *et al.* 2016).

Observations are presented from two brief visits to Corbett National Park in Uttarakhand in early January and late February 2016. A breeding season record substantiated with a sonogram of a sound recording from Askot Wildlife Sanctuary in Uttarakhand, in May 2014, is also documented. The status of this species in the Himalaya west of Nepal is reviewed, and inconsistencies in historical records relating to its distribution are discussed.

Observations

On 08 January 2016, GA, and PS were birding along the road near Mohaan (29.55°N, 79.11°E; 500 m asl), through the buffer zone at the north-eastern boundary of Corbett National Park in Uttarakhand. At Bakhrakot Nullah (29.56°N, 79.11°E; 570 m asl), the water level of the Panali stream was very low owing to the dry winter season, and they decided to walk along the riverbed to explore the riparian habitat. It offered excellent undergrowth of dense moist herbage, tall shrubs, leaf-litter, and brushwood—favourable habitat for skulking, terrestrial birds. The surrounding hilly terrain offered a dense canopy of middle, and upper storey of mixed broadleaved forest.

At 1530 hrs a chat-like bird in brown plumage was observed feeding on the ground in the boggy leaf-litter under a log, which

was sheltered by dense overhanging vegetation. A streamlet was running beside the area and small pools of stagnant water were dammed by large pebbles. The bird showed a distinct rufous lower forehead, rusty lores and eye-ring, but showed no trace of a white supercilium [27]. The bird was observed till 1630 hrs, after which the light became too low for further observation. It was initially identified as a female White-browed Shortwing; however, the possibility of it being a first-winter/immature male could not be ruled out based on Abdulali's (1987) description of one male specimen in female plumage dated 22 January 1903 that did not show 'a white streak over the eye'. Peter Clement (*in litt.*, e-mail dated 07 October 2016) agreed, and also highlighted the difficulty with ageing or sexing birds in the field, since they may have a white supercilium that may be often indistinct or entirely concealed. He also noted that nothing is known of their moult sequence, and whether (or over what period) males in first-winter plumage acquire the deep or slate-blue of the adult plumage through wear of the olive-brown plumage. He also speculated about the ecological advantages and challenges of males breeding in female-type plumage, and competing territorially against a fully adult blue male; all of which are yet to be fully determined and understood.



27. White-browed Shortwing showing a rufous forehead, rusty lores and eye-ring with no supercilium.

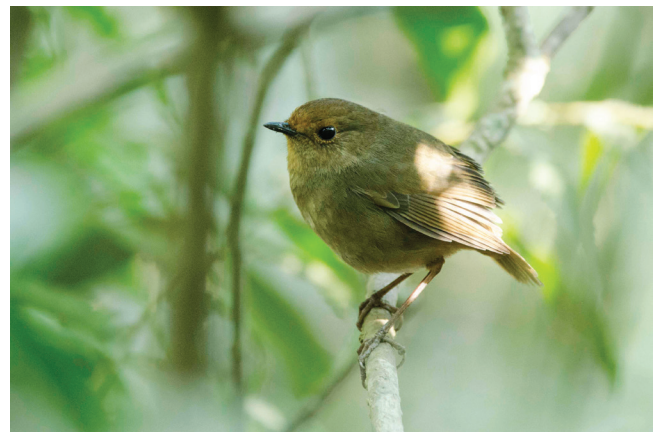
The shortwing was always observed foraging on the ground [28]. It would hop in short spurts, pausing briefly to pick up invertebrates from boggy patches, and frequently turning dried leaf-litter. At times, the leaf-litter was thrown to a distance of nearly one meter, reminiscent of the ground-feeding behaviour of some other thrush (Turdidae) species. During the period of observation in January, the bird fed in a small area, always returning to its favoured feeding spots at short intervals. It was also very territorial, and performed aggressive displays whenever there was a territory clash with other ground dwelling birds, especially those feeding on or near its ground territory (described below). In February, the bird appeared to cover a larger area owing to drying up of several boggy patches. Its whereabouts were not apparent for long periods of time, perhaps overlooked due to its shy and skulking nature. Interestingly, during the entire observation period, the bird was not heard to utter any sound despite its elaborate territorial displays.



28. White-browed Shortwing feeding on the ground turning leaf-litter.



29. Display - Tail upright and flared wings.



30. Display - Tail dipping downward and drooped wings.

Behaviour

On 09 January 2016, the bird was observed from 0800 hrs to 1400 hrs. It was particularly aggressive towards a male Snowy-browed Flycatcher *Ficedula hyperythra*, which kept returning to feed on the same spots on the ground that the shortwing preferred. The shortwing would chase away the flycatcher every time, by a short hop or a jump towards it, after which it used that spot to feed.

A male Rufous-bellied Niltava *Niltava sundara* would also often chase away the male Snowy-browed Flycatcher, but would in turn be chased away by the shortwing displaying as just mentioned. In one instance, at 1130 hrs the shortwing showed intense aggression towards the Rufous-bellied Niltava. After chasing away the niltava, the shortwing perched upon the log (under which it usually fed on the ground; 30 cm high), and displayed by flicking its wings. It then perched on a twig above the log, drooped its wings, raised its fanned tail upright, and progressed to dip it slowly [29, 30, 31]. It alternated between flicking its wings, pausing still for brief moments, and fanning its tail up and down again. At 1145 hrs, a flock of six Red-billed Leiothrix *Leiothrix lutea* swooped down exactly where the shortwing was feeding. The shortwing was quick to react aggressively by opening and closing its bill but without uttering any sound; it displayed by flaring its wings and tail, and chased away the intruding birds from its territory. Cox (2006) has also described similar display behaviour; however, this interspecific



31. Display - Wing-flicking and tail dipping downward.

Pics: Gunjan Arora

territorial behaviour, including threat displays, has not been documented earlier. Fleming *et al.* (1976) recorded that the bird 'flicks wings when it calls', which was also noted by Cox (2006) during its breeding period; however, the bird was silent during our period of observation in winter.

Interestingly, the shortwing did not react to either Chestnut-headed Tesias *Cettia castaneocoronata* or, Grey-bellied Tesias *Tesia cyaniventer* that often shared the same feeding habitat,

foraging unobtrusively in the foliage close to the forest floor. However, a Spotted Forktail *Enicurus maculatus* seemed to frighten it. It remained out of sight until the forktail finished preening, and then returned after 20 min. It was not bothered by other small passerines that shared its habitat or arrived in mixed hunting parties, especially to bathe, as they would quickly retire to the forest canopy.

We revisited the area on 28–29 February 2016. It was warmer than in January. Butterfly activity was very high, and deciduous trees like sal *Shorea robusta*, and haldu *Adina cordifolia* were shedding leaves. On 28 February 2016, the spot was watched between 1000 and 1430 hrs, and the same individual White-browed Shortwing was spotted briefly at 1020 hrs, and 1100 hrs at its original spot. The boggy area, which was its favoured feeding spot, had dried up. It appeared to cover a larger territory. On 29 February 2016, a larger area was surveyed between 0800 and 1230 hrs, but no other individuals were found. The same bird was seen feeding on the ground briefly at 1200 hrs, 10 m away from its original spot.

Historical records

Historically, the distribution of the White-browed Shortwing in north-western India, west of Nepal, has been confused by inconsistencies and errors.

Prior to 1900 the species was not mentioned in works that covered areas west of Nepal, e.g., Oates (1889). Osmaston (1904), based on a nest found in Uttarakhand (see below), which he considered was 'highly probable' for this species, speculated that 'the range of the species must extend to north-west Himalaya as far as Simla, at high elevations', but did not give any details, or references, as to how he arrived at this conclusion. Baker (1924) gave the distribution as 'Himalayas from Simla and Garhwal to Eastern Assam...', without a reference, but presumably after Osmaston. However, Roonwal & Nath (1947) noted that 'these inclusions seem to be without authority'. Ripley (1961) apparently followed these authors in omitting any reference to Simla, or Garhwal, but Ali & Ripley (1973), and Ripley (1982) both gave Garhwal as the western limit of its distribution, citing 'JBNHS 11: 471' (see below for clarification of this citation). Clement & Rose (2015), quoting Roonwal & Nath (1947) noted that, 'range formerly considered to reach Simla in Himachal Pradesh, and Garhwal, Uttarakhand, but now considered doubtful and no recent records from either area.' There have still been no definite records from Simla but other records from Himachal Pradesh (see below) indicate that it may yet be found there.

Baker (1933) ascribed the first nest ever taken of the species, from Tons Valley in Uttarakhand, to Osmaston (1898), supported with a citation: 'Journ. Bomb. Nat. Hist. Soc. vol. xi, p. 471, 1898'. However, Gaston (1993) could not find any mention of the species in the reference cited, and neither could Cox (2006), who presented a detailed summary of the historical nesting records of the species. However, a careful reading of Osmaston (1898) has revealed that on p. 472, while writing about the breeding of a Lesser Cuckoo *Cuculus poliocephalus*, he described a cup-like nest lined with fern stalks, and which was collected by F. Gleadow in the Tons Valley in Uttarakhand, on 05 June 1897 at 9500 feet (2900 m asl). The nest reportedly contained two pure white eggs of the foster parent, and one uniform chocolate coloured egg. Osmaston attributed the latter to the parasitic Lesser Cuckoo, and appealed for suggestions regarding the identity of the owner of the former, as the host species was not observed.

In 1903, Osmaston (1904) found seven nests of the White-browed Shortwing in Darjeeling, in eastern India (p. 511), including one nest that had been brood parasitised by a Lesser Cuckoo, which was found on 15 June 1903 at 7500 feet (2280 m asl) (p. 515; Baker 1906, p. 352). From the above, Osmaston (1904, p. 515) retrospectively identified the Tons Valley nest as probably belonging to a White-browed Shortwing, and reasoned that, 'the eggs and nest agree exactly with those of that species.' Once again the details of the brood parasitised nests were given under the Lesser Cuckoo, and not the White-browed Shortwing, which perhaps explains why subsequent authors overlooked them, and even considered the identification as 'possibly erroneous' (Clement & Rose 2015). Osmaston (1999) in his diary further clarified the location of his Tons Valley nest—it was found during a trek to Kedarkantha and Har-ki-dun, now in Uttarkashi District. In conclusion, despite Osmaston (1904) not being a hundred percent certain that the nest he had reported in his 1898 paper was of this species, it most likely was!

The nest was described, and illustrated by Brian Hodgson (though not published then) in the mid-nineteenth century, from one collected in Nepal; these details were mentioned by Hume (1889), and Oates (1889), and the illustration was published in Inskipp *et al.* (2016). However, they were not mentioned by Baker (1924, 1933), and therefore the assertion in the latter reference that the first nest of the species, ever taken, was the one taken by Osmaston in the Tons Valley, Uttarakhand is incorrect.

Past records

There are only six known records of the species from the Himalaya west of Nepal, of which three lack adequate supporting details. Gaston (1994) provided two records from the Great Himalayan National Park in Himachal Pradesh: One female was seen in the Jiwa Valley in September 1991 by S. Westerberg, and one, of undetermined sex, by A. J. Gaston in the Tirthan Valley, on the approach to the park, in October 1991. These records, the only published ones from Himachal Pradesh, were overlooked by Clement & Rose (2015). Tony Gaston (*in litt.*, e-mail dated 11 January 2017) confirmed that his observation was near Rolla (31.675°N, 77.488°E; 2100 m asl); however, he could not confirm the details because his notes were no longer accessible. Stephen Westerberg (*in litt.*, e-mail dated 11 January 2017) confirmed that he distinctly remembered watching the bird in a shady part of the forest near the Jiwa River, and also recollects his field sketch. He confirmed that similar species were ruled out at the time. PRE did not record the species during the period of his research, and bird surveys, in Great Himalayan National Park during 2011–2016 (Elsen 2015). However, Yann Muzika (*in litt.*, e-mail dated 22 July 2016), during a birding trip to the Great Himalayan National Park, reported that the species was heard singing from across the river, near the forest hut at Rolla, on 29 April 2016. This record is not supported by a sound recording or with details from the observer, and is thus considered unconfirmed.

From Uttarakhand, there have been two reports that are not supported by actual records or details, and are thus considered unconfirmed. Lamba & Bhatnagar (1979) included the species in a bare checklist based on surveys conducted in Corbett National Park during 1973–1975. Lamba (1985) subsequently expanded this to the rather confusing statement: 'Resident, subject to vertical movements, very rare. Distribution: Throughout the Park in dense, damp, and shady forest.' This is the only record

for Uttarakhand listed by Tak & Sati (2010). Jan *et al.* (2011) carried out a bird diversity study at Joshimath, and Auli Bugyal, in Chamoli District, in March–May 2010 and, based on transects, listed the species as ‘resident in a mixed patch.’ Their list also includes Collared Treepie *Dendrocitta frontalis* (no records nearer than Sikkim), and Lesser Necklaced Laughingthrush *Garrulax monileger* (no records nearer than central Nepal, besides being a lowland species), which suggests that their records need further confirmation.

A recent, confirmed, breeding season record from Uttarakhand is from Sarmoli village near Munsyari (30.08°N, 80.23°E; 2250 m asl) in Pithoragarh District from May 2014 (Elsen 2015). The area comes under Askot Wildlife Sanctuary, an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA; #IN099) (BirdLife International 2017). On 16 May 2014, PRE and his field assistant, Trilok Singh Rana saw and heard a singing male—an all dark bird with a small white supercilium. The bird was obscured in a dense tangle of vegetation beside a stream, and observed for nearly 15 min. The song of the bird was recorded, and is the first sound recording of the species from west of Nepal [FIG. 1].

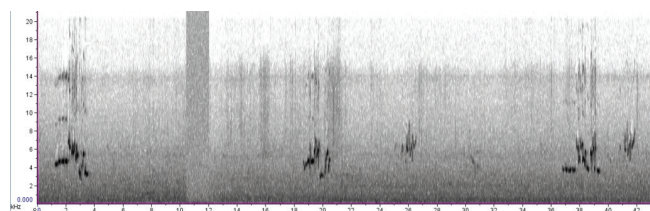


Fig. 1. Sonogram of the song of a male White-browed Shortwing recorded by Paul R. Elsen.

There are no historical specimens from the region (Abdulali 1987; Vertnet 2016). The status of the species over much of its range is difficult to assess because of the bird's typically shy and skulking behaviour in dense undergrowth (Cox 2006). It is also usually silent in the non-breeding season (Clement & Rose 2015) and, therefore, could be easily overlooked. Further ecological monitoring in and around Corbett National Park, during winter, especially in areas accessible by foot, is needed to determine whether its occurrence in the area is regular or rare. Birdwatchers should also keep a lookout for the species in summer, in the higher reaches of Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand.

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