

Grey-crowned Prinia *Prinia cinereocapilla* in Sukhna Wildlife Sanctuary, Chandigarh, northern India

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While touring (25-28.v.2005) Sukhna Wildlife Sanctuary (area: 26km²; alt.: 300-600 m; 33°44'-33°49'N 76°48'-76°54'E), located north of Chandigarh city, on the Shivalik mountain ranges along the Haryana-Punjab state border, I was able to record the presence of Grey-crowned Prinia *Prinia cinereocapilla* at two sites. Both sightings were along a small reservoir in the Kansal (River) forest range (400 m in Punjab), in an opening with a grassy patch, in dry-deciduous vegetation, mainly comprising *Dalbergia sissoo* and *Acacia nilotica*.

First, I heard a prinia call for a few minutes. It was a loud and squeezed note, "weetoo-weetoo-weetoo-weetoo- tr-ti—", which attracted attention. The same call was heard again at a second location about 100 m ahead. Here I saw a bird in the crown of a large-sized shrub / small tree, with dense foliage, along the trail surrounded by grass. It was moving nervously from branch to branch overhead and giving forth a soft "tsirr-tsirrt-sirr" note. From below, the light orangey-buff wash on the sides of the breast and a typical prinia under-tail with black terminal spots, were visible. Then through binoculars, the bird was observed looking down, clearly revealing its head, which had a bluish-grey cap, back bill, a distinct orangey supercilium contrasting with a black line between the eye and the bill. It then flew away in a typical loose prinia-flight to an acacia tree nearby. In flight, its uniform rufous upperparts and tail were noticed. On this tree, it climbed up the branches slowly, clearly showing its plumage and size and then vanished into the bushes further ahead.

The call, plumage and habits of this species are distinct and cannot be confused with other prinias present here (Plain *Prinia inornata*, Ashy *P. socialis*, Grey-breasted *P. hodgsonii*, Striated *P. crinigera* and Rufous-fronted *P. buchanani*). The distinctive features being uniform rufous brown upperparts, light orangey under parts, a greyish crown with orangey-buff supercilium contrasting with a dark line joining the eye and a black bill below the supercilium and, its arboreal nature.

The present sighting bridges the gap in the distribution range of this globally Vulnerable species, as Sukhna lies between Margalla hills (450-1,000 m) in Pakistan (see below) and Corbett National Park (Uttaranchal) in India (Grimmett et al. 1998,

Kazmierczak 2000). Roberts (1992) first came across this taxon in the Margalla hills, "an extension of over 725 km...westwards of its known range (p. 205). However, subsequent searches in the Margalla hills have not been able to relocate this bird (Islam & Rahmani 2002), thus raising doubts about its presence in Pakistan as the species can be confused with its congeners (Islam & Rahmani 2002). Besides, there have been no recent records of this species from West Bengal and Assam and the current unquantified populations are known in only a few protected areas in Uttaranchal. The main threats outlined for this species are ecological disturbance causing loss and degradation of *terai* grasslands and forests and as the species is especially vulnerable to grassland degradation it is believed not colonize re-growth until well developed (Islam & Rahmani 2002).

In my opinion *P. cinereocapilla* can easily be overlooked if one is not familiar with it or its call or does not hear its call while searching in potential habitat. The chances of sighting this uncommon species dwindle as it is relatively shy compared to other *Prinia* spp. present in the same area, and sulks once it gets alarmed. The habitat at Sukhna, where it was found, is un-eroded / undisturbed dry deciduous forest with tall uncut grass in the lower southern aspect of the Shivaliks. At Sukhna sanctuary extensive soil and water conservation measures have been undertaken by the forest department. But, similar habitats in the adjoining Haryana and Punjab are degraded and threatened with deforestation and soil erosion. The situation is similar in unprotected areas all over the western Himalaya where very few well-forested and un-eroded tracts remain. So suitable habitat for this species in this region is not only highly fragmented but also might be prone to seasonal changes. A similar situation might exist further west in Pakistan. Besides, the lower Shivalik tracts in the western Himalaya have also not been explored to their full potential for the species. So the chances of sighting again at the same place may be less but not impossible. There is a greater chance of recording it during its breeding season, when it is vocal. In addition, bird watching skills differ from person to person. Maybe *P. cinereocapilla* is a seasonal migrant to Margalla Hills in

Pakistan or Roberts recorded it at a point of time when this species was trying to expand its range to Margalla Hills when suitable habitat was present there. Later, fluid environmental conditions were not conducive for the species (e.g. Hooded Pitta *Pitta sordida* or Tickell's Blue-Flycatcher *Cyornis tickelliae* or even Brooks's Flycatcher *C. polioegenys* migrate to the Himalaya for breeding every summer from the south and thus extend their range in the western Himalaya up to the lower foothills of Himachal Pradesh during some years, but not every year). Thus, Roberts' records cannot be overlooked or underestimated just because it was not located subsequently. What will happen to the record of Himalayan Quail *Ophrysia superciliosa* (now Critically Endangered) from Uttaranchal if we begin doubting past established records without scientific reasoning? The rationale behind the present sighting of this species at Sukhna is that a decade of conservation efforts in the Shivaliks has started bearing fruit.

References

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