

# Pale Rock Sparrow *Carpospiza brachydactyla* in Gopalpura Hills, Tal Chhapar (Churu district, Rajasthan): a new species for the Indian Subcontinent

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Pale Rock Sparrow *Carpospiza brachydactyla* (Fig. 1) is 'a rather featureless and dull sandy bunting or lark-like bird,' (Clement *et al.* 1999). It 'has diagnostic combination of rather short but strong and slightly bulbous bill, long, narrow outer wings with pale secondary-panel and double wing-bar, pale edges and white tips to tail (particularly obvious from below), and bright legs,' (Cramp *et al.* 1994). Juvenile birds are browner above and buff below (Beaman & Madge 1998). The species is known to breed in the Middle-East up to Iranian Baluchistan (Meinertzhagen 1954; Rasmussen & Anderton 2005). The species is not listed from the Indian Subcontinent in Ripley (1961), Ali & Ripley (1987), and Grimmett *et al.* (1998, 2011), nor for the Oriental region in Inskipp *et al.* (1996). Kazmierczak (2000) states that it is not known to occur in the Indian subcontinent though it may occur in Pakistan. Specimens have been collected from Shindand, and Adreskan, in Afghanistan in April and May (Vielliard 1969; Rasmussen & Anderton 2005).

On 15 February 2012, between 1100 and 1130 hrs, SSP observed a mixed flock of 200–250 sparrow-like birds in the Gopalpura Hills (27°44'24"N, 74°20'24"E), adjoining Tal Chhapar Wildlife Sanctuary in Churu district, Rajasthan, India (Fig. 2). On closer observation it was discovered that the flock comprised



Fig. 1. Pale Rock Sparrow *Carpospiza brachydactyla*. Photo: S. S. Poonia.



Fig. 3. Pale Rock Sparrow *Carpospiza brachydactyla* feeding among stones on the ground.

House Sparrows *Passer domesticus* and up to 50 individuals of another passerine species. SSP photographed the latter, and sent the pictures to MS for identification. The photographed birds showed pale sandy-brown upperparts with buff edges to coverts and secondaries. Underparts and flanks were buffish. The wings were long, reaching well beyond the upper tail coverts. The birds had a poorly-defined pale buff supercilium, and a pale sub-moustachial stripe. Their legs were pinkish. The flesh-coloured bulbous beak seemed strong, finch-like, with some birds showing a prominent pinkish lower mandible, and a hint of a gape, indicating these birds to be juveniles. Based on these features, MS identified the birds as Pale Rock Sparrows.

When first spotted, the Pale Rock Sparrows were feeding on the ground, lark-like in behaviour (Fig. 3), occasionally perching on broken rocks, or flying into small trees (Fig. 4) and bushes, along with the House Sparrow flock, when flushed. Other birds seen in the vicinity were Variable Wheater *Oenanthe picata*, Red-tailed Wheater *O. chrysopygia*, Rufous-fronted Prinia *Prinia buchanani*, Indian Bushlark *Mirafra erythroptera*, and Black-crowned Sparrowlark *Eremopterix nigriceps*. However, the Pale Rock Sparrows were only interacting with House Sparrows, with which they were actively feeding. SSP suspects having seen



Fig. 2. Gopalpura Hills near Tal Chhapar, Churu district, where the Pale Rock Sparrows were seen.

Photo: H. S. Sangha



Fig. 4. Pale Rock Sparrows occasionally flew up into trees.

the species in the same location on 27 January 2011 and had recorded this as an unconfirmed sighting of a 'petronia-like' bird in his diary.

This sighting of Pale Rock Sparrow is intriguing, as its recorded wintering range is western Saudi Arabia, and north-eastern Africa (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005; del Hoyo *et al.* 2009). However, Swinhoe (1882), and Paludan (1959) have mentioned wintering of the species in Kandhar (Afghanistan). It is possible that birds from the eastern limits of their summer breeding range winter in the Indian Subcontinent, and have probably been overlooked in the past. It is recommended that birdwatchers keep a sharp lookout for the Pale Rock Sparrow to obtain a clear picture of the species' status and distribution range in the Indian Subcontinent.

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**Editor's note:** Pale Rock Sparrow *Carpospiza brachydactyla* has also been reported from the Rann of Kachchh, Gujarat, by Jugal Kishore Tiwari, who spotted several birds on 27 January 2012. [Subhas Chandra N. S. in *Deccan Herald* dated 20 February 2012.]

# Ernst Schäfer's comprehensive historical bird collection from Sikkim and Tibet at the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin

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The bird collection of the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin (ZMB) is, with more than 200,000 items, the largest in Germany. One collecting focus of this international collection is East and Southeast Asia. The ZMB holds extensive collections by Walter Beick [China: Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu, 1926–1932; 859 specimens (Stresemann 1937)]; Gerd Heinrich (Iran, Indonesia, Myanmar, 1927–1938; > 3,500 specimens); Rudolf Mell (China: Guangdon, 1915–1921; ~1,200 specimens); and Hugo Weigold (China: different provinces, 1914–1919; ~1,500 specimens).

Beyond this collecting focus, there are only a few small collections from India. Among the oldest collections from India are those of Wilhelm F. G. Behn (coasts, and Nicobar Islands, 1845/1846), M. Lamare-Piquot (Bengal, 1821–1826), as well as the expedition of Prinz Waldemar von Preußen / Werner Hofmeister (India and the Himalayas, 1844–1846).

However, the largest collection of Indian birds in the ZMB is that of Ernst Schäfer, collected in Sikkim 1938/1939. Ernst Schäfer (1910–1992) was a German zoologist and hunter. He took part in three expeditions to Sikkim, and Tibet and adjacent