

## Firethroat *Luscinia pectardens* from Habra, West Bengal, India

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On 11 March 2012 during an early morning birding trip to Shanpukur (22°86'N, 88°68'E), near Habra, North 24 Parganas district, West Bengal, Mr Mridul Kanti Kar, Mr Kanad Baidya, and Mr S Chakraborty spotted a small bird moving around on the ground in a dense thicket. Other members of the group, including senior birders, Dr Kshounish Sankar Ray, Mr Prosenjit Singh Deo, and Mr Abhijit Das soon realised that this bird's behavior and looks seemed different from other familiar birds of the area. I managed to photograph this skittish bird. This individual was very secretive and found under a dense bush beside a water-body in a well-wooded area, feeding on insects on the ground and occasionally perching on low branches. When approached closely it flew to a neighboring tree but returned almost immediately to the bush. The bird was silent during the entire duration of our observation, 0800–1200 hrs.

At a glance, in the field, the bird resembled a chat and we were quickly on the right page of the field guide, *Luscinia* spp. (Grimmett *et al.* 1998). The bird did not match any of the adult plumages. Its back and rump had a bluish-grey tinge, and orange-buff under parts suggested it was neither a juvenile Indian Blue Robin *L. brunnea* nor a first winter male Siberian Blue Robin *L. cyane*. While white is present on tails of both, female White-tailed Rubythroat *L. pectoralis*, and first winter male Firethroat *L. pectardens*, the absence of a white supercilium suggested that it might be a Firethroat [59]. Later on after checking the pictures, experienced birders, Mr. Adesh Shivkar and Mr. Sumit Sen confirmed it was a non-breeding male Firethroat.



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We revisited Shanpukur on 23 March 2012, and the bird was still there. What was interesting was that it had started moulting into its breeding plumage. A couple of feathers on its breast were already turning red, and its features, resembled an adult [60]. On 1 April 2012, the bird had almost completed moulting with a brilliant red spread across its breast with dark border [61]. It was a spectacular sight. But that day it was sighted for the last time.



Fig. 1. Locations of Firethroat sightings from South Asia.

Location	Date	Reference	Remarks
Garo Hills, Meghalaya, India	18 January 1950	Koelz 1954	A specimen collected by W. Koelz
Pasula Beel, Gurmar Haor, Bangladesh	24 April 1992	Thompson <i>et al.</i> 1994	A male in full breeding plumage found by D.A. Scott and S.M.A. Rashid
Mehao WLS, Arunachal Pradesh, India	21 June 1992	Katti 1992	A pair seen.
Orak-Glensang area, Arunachal	1992	Acharya <i>et al.</i> 2010	Seen twice in the same area in consecutive years, tropical broadleaved forest, alt 1050m.



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Photos: Abhishek Das

Firethroat is a vagrant or a rare winter visitor to north-eastern India, and breeds in south-eastern Tibet and western China (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005). There have been only four previous known instances where the species has been observed in South Asia of which one is from Bangladesh (Table 1, Fig. 1). This was the first record from West Bengal and quite possibly the first bird to be photographed in the field in India. The Firethroat is designated Near-Threatened by the IUCN (BirdLife International 2013) due to loss of its habitat.

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## Occurrence of Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina* in Tirunelveli and Thoothukudi districts, Tamil Nadu, India

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We describe here the repeated sightings of Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina* in the adjacent districts of Tirunelveli and Thoothukudi (Tuticorin), in southern Tamil Nadu (India), between January 2011 and January 2013. The area mainly comprises grassland, bisected by the Thamiraparani River, and has many rain-fed tanks and canals. Though the region receives rains during the NE monsoon (October–November), most of the area is relatively dry except for some tracts of lateritic soil near Vallanad Hills in Thoothukudi district.

On 30 January 2011, one of us (PJV) photographed a small brownish bird in the dry stubble fields adjoining Vijanarayanam tank (8°25'N, 77°46'E), which is 15 km from the famous herony of Koonthakulam in Tirunelveli district. During the visit, the tank was almost dry, with a few patches of water, and the bird was seen on a mound of soil in the fields adjoining the tank. The picture [62] was posted in Internet Bird Collection (<http://ibc.lynxeds.com/photo/isabelline-wheatear-oenanthe-isabellina/bird-perched-earth-mound>) where it was identified as an Isabelline Wheatear.

The second sighting of the bird was on 15 February 2011 (by SC) at Kannankulam (8°29'N, 77°45'E), a small tank adjoining Koonthakulam, and on a subsequent visit to this site another bird was photographed [63] on 25 December 2011.

On 13 January 2013 at around 1700 hrs, we (VGVA & KM) came across a small buffish bird in an area adjoining the airport in Thoothukudi (8°43'N, 78°01'E) and identified it as Isabelline Wheatear [64]. This site is about c. 40 km north-east of Koonthakulam. The area is a vast tract of grassland that is being converted into housing plots. The bird was perched on one of the brick structures put up to protect newly sown plants. We identified it as the Isabelline Wheatear based on the uniform buff colour, black loreal eyestripe, the almost uniform buff primaries, a thin black alula and extensive black on the tails with well-defined whites on the base. However, the bird maintained a relatively



Photo: P. J. Vasanthan

62. Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina*, Koonthakulam.