

# BOOK REVIEW

## **Birds of Himachal Pradesh (Non-Passerine - Volume 1)**

**Devinder Singh Dhadwal & Bindu Kanwar. Paper back 301 Pp. Price: INR 1250/-**

## **Birds of Himachal Pradesh (Passerine - Volume 2)**

**Devinder Singh Dhadwal. Hardbound 340Pp. Price: INR 1350**

**Book Review by Praveen, J.**

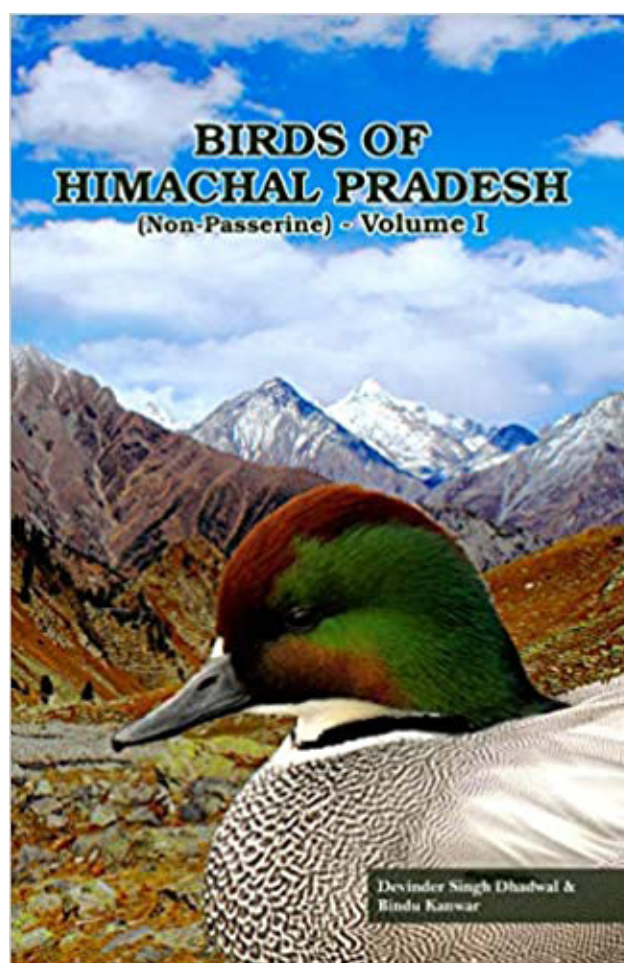
**Villa #5, Embassy Homes, Mudavanmugal, Poojappura P.O, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala 695012, India**

**Email: paintedstork@gmail.com**

Several states have brought out books on the birds of the state – Goa, Assam, Delhi, Kerala – to name of few. This set of two books from Himachal Pradesh (HP) is the most recent addition to the state series and towards a growing body of avian literature for the western Himalaya. These volumes aim to cover all the species that have been recorded from HP in recent years.

The first author, who works for the HP State Forest Department, has shown admirable passion in studying birds over a long time and he has amassed tremendous field knowledge almost single handedly on their status and distribution. All the images barring a few mentioned specifically were taken by the author. Though not mentioned, probably many of them were photographed within the state. To photo document most of the species that have occurred in an Indian state is an unparalleled, truly remarkable feat.

The skeleton of this work revolves around the photographs and their associated tweets. Each page has have one or two species and most species have multiple photographs. Photographs cover different age class, sex (using a rather non-standard notation  $\uparrow \downarrow$  vs  $\sigma \varphi$ ), angles of view, or posture. The tweets call out the main field feature, its status in the state and the sites/districts where it may be found. Additional information like IUCN threat



status, Wildlife Protection Act (WPA) Schedule status and a relative abundance measure (Common, Not Common, Rare) are also included. Some species carry an estimated number of individuals that are recorded in the state. The first edition has a 13-page introductory section that starts with a 'Tribute to Birds', a few habitat photographs, and a list of main treks while the second edition has

# BOOK REVIEW

lists of threatened birds, summer visitors, and winter visitors. Each volume has a complete checklist at the end for the species covered in that volume.

If one randomly browses through the book, there are some good photographs, in fact most pages have at least one good photograph. Some of the photographs are rather special for India – like the stunning image of the cute Little Gull in its breeding plumage; however, there are a number of passable images as well. An over insistence of reproducing self-taken photographs has surely affected the production. I do not think the readers would be happy with substandard images of widespread species like the Tawny-bellied Babbler. A state book on birds is expected to be a crowd puller; encouraging a fresh generation to pick up the hobby. I wonder if the photographs and field identification tweets do true justice to that. For e.g., the account of Indian Nuthatch calls out grey undertail coverts but both the photos do now show that feature.

With his vast field experience, a reader expects the correct status and distribution of all the species from the state is well covered; however, one tends to wonder why easily accessible status summaries like the eBird bar charts were not put to use. It is certainly giving an incomplete status for many species; like the Sulphur-bellied Warbler and White-browed Fulvetta that have only two sites called out while there are many more known sites. For WPA status, I recommend authors follow 'India Checklist' (Praveen et al. 2020) as there is a lot to be fixed in these volumes.

All new generation bird books have a stiff challenge to ensure that the photographs used are identified correctly, and this work is no exception. With an average of 3-4 images per page, this book has 2,000-2,500 images and

getting every ID correct is a herculean task.

The only time-proven method to get this right is to show the photographs to as many people as one can – and where identification is difficult or doubtful, drop the photograph. I would highly recommend the author to do run this process more intensely in the next edition, as I was able to find several mistakes in photographs that can be readily identified; not to mention others where it is impossible to be certain from the depicted images. I shall list out a few in the hope that they will get corrected in the next edition and rather not to belittle the wonderful work the author has showcased. Images of Great Egret are depicted as Intermediate Egret (p. 69), Wood Sandpiper & Temminck's Stint shown as Long-toed Stint (p. 111), Nordmann's Greenshank, a strictly coastal species that winter in Bangladesh, is almost certainly a Common Greenshank (p. 135), Steppe Eagle shown as Indian Spotted Eagle (p. 212), and Tawny Eagle (p. 214), an immature White-eyed Buzzard shown as Booted Eagle (p. 219), and Fulvous-breasted Woodpecker depicted as Rufous-bellied Woodpecker. In the second volume, author found the warblers challenging. To call out a few, an *Acrocephalus*, probably a Blyth's Reed Warbler is assigned as a Blyth's Leaf Warbler (p. 123), the Green Warbler (p. 121) shown has a crown-stripe and is probably a Hume's Warbler, one of the pictures of Grey-sided Bush Warbler (p. 102) is a Brownish-flanked Bush Warbler, Clamorous Reed Warbler shown as Blyth's Reed Warbler (p. 106), Common Chiffchaff shown as Booted Warbler (p. 112), and one of the Buff-barred Warblers (p. 119) is Ashy-throated. I highly recommend the author to get all images vetted by multiple ID experts. I would also encourage the author to formally publish some of the important photographic records from the state, e.g., Lesser Flamingo, Black-crowned Sparrow Lark, Hume's Groundpecker, Common Reed Bunting, Lesser Shortwing, White-bellied Sea Eagle,

# BOOK REVIEW

and Hume's Wheatear. As it stands, there are no sufficient details in the book for those records nor is it clear whether the associated photographs were captured within HP.

Some other general improvements I would suggest are additional sections on the history of ornithology in HP, a synthesis of the different bird communities of the state, a section on where to bird in HP and what birds to expect (not as trek routes), a neat map of the physiography, a proper section (rather than back of the front cover) on how to use the book and interpret the codes, and finally, to change the production style into a single volume – even a 700-page paperback is quite feasible. It is worthwhile using online databases to crosscheck the status and distribution of birds and make appropriate changes. Getting the tweets refereed by a couple of birdwatchers/ornithologists familiar with the ornithology of HP is another avenue for quality improvement. Along with this, services of a good editor would be useful to tighten the language, site spellings (Nagrota Surian has 3 spellings in the book), uniformity in bird names, dates (month & year of some of author's published sightings do not match with the ones given in the book) and consistency in tables (e.g., threatened birds list has two species that are not in author's state checklist).

While thumbing through any book, I attempt to identify an audience for the same. The author has not spelt out clearly who the intended audience is but I found it really hard to identify the target audience of this work. While this book has plenty of photographs, it is not a field guide as the books do not attempt to depict all the plumages of every species to aid in field identification. It is also not a status and distribution handbook as it is mostly based on author's observations without utilizing the vast knowledge available online. Coffee table book,

it certainly is not with the kind of photographs. The volumes provide a near-complete checklist of birds found in Himachal Pradesh with photographs of each species that are probably taken within the state; some exceptions are straightforward like the extralimital subspecies of the Common Wood Pigeon being depicted.

Credit to the author, the book is comprehensive in terms of species coverage – but that has resulted in the book being a sort of personal photo album. At a steep price of INR 2,600/-, I suspect only an avid book collector or a library would shell out the bucks to possess these volumes.

## Reference

**Praveen J., R. Jayapal & A. Pittie (2020).** Checklist of the birds of India (v4.1). Website URL: <http://www.indianbirds.in/india/>. [Date of publication: 25 July 2020.]

