

# Status of Red-throated Thrush *Turdus ruficollis* in the Indian Subcontinent, west of Nepal

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The Red-throated Thrush *Turdus ruficollis* winters in India, and breeds in south-central Siberia, northern Mongolia, and north-western China (Clement & Hathway 2000; Collar 2019). It is considered a regular winter migrant in the Himalayas, from Nepal further westwards into Arunachal Pradesh, and the hills of north-eastern India (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012); barring some isolated records from west of Nepal (Grimmett *et al.* 2011). In this note, we review the status of this thrush by compiling all known records from the Indian Subcontinent, west of Nepal, while describing our own records from Himachal Pradesh.

The Red-throated- and Black-throated *T. atrogularis* Thrushes were, both, once considered distinct species (Oates 1890), but subsequently they were treated as races of a single species, in some works (Baker 1921), while in some, the earlier status quo was retained (Baker 1924). Ali & Ripley (1987) considered them as subspecies. Later they both were included in the Dark-throated Thrush complex (Grimmett *et al.* 1998; Clement & Hathway 2000; Kazmierczak 2000), but now these are again considered distinct (Grimmett *et al.* 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Praveen *et al.* 2016; Clements *et al.* 2018; Collar 2019). This taxonomic lumping has, to some extent, masked the real status of the Red-throated Thrush when it was being reported under the Dark-throated Thrush.

On 23 February 2011, CA saw a thrush feeding on damp ground, around a pond in Sthana village, near Shah Nehar Barrage, in the outflow area of Pong Dam, Kangra District, Himachal Pradesh (31.96°N, 75.91°E; c.325 m asl). It had grey upperparts and a whitish belly. It resembled a Black-throated Thrush, which is a common bird in the region, except for the dark rufous colour on the supercilium, throat, breast, and outer tail. It was shy and immediately took cover in the nearby reeds. The bird was photographed and identified as an adult male Red-throated Thrush. One adult male, probably the same individual, was seen on 17 March 2011, along with five Black-throated Thrushes at the same spot [101, 102].

On 25 November 2015, RR heard an unfamiliar call near his house in Rualing, Lahaul and Spiti District (32.61°N, 76.93°E; c.3,200 m asl). He saw a thrush sitting on a *Salix* sp. tree and took few photographs [103]. It stayed there for ten minutes and then flew away. It was not seen again. He posted its image on the Facebook group 'Birds of Himachal', where it was identified as Red-throated Thrush by CA and Ankit Vikrant. It was an adult male with an unmarked dark rufous throat, breast, and supercilium. There was extensive dark rufous in its tail.



C. Abhinav



C. Abhinav

101, 102. Red-throated Thrush at Sthana, Kangra District on 17 March 2011.



Raj Rawal

103. Red-throated Thrush at Rualing, Lahaul and Spiti District on 25 November 2015.

**Table 1.** Other records of Red-throated Thrush from the Indian Subcontinent, west of Nepal

State/ Country	Location	Date	Details	Altitude in m asl*	Reference
Uttarakhand	Sitabani, Ramnagar Forest Division, Nainital District	14 or 15 February 1997	One female bird was photographed; reproduced in Pfister (2004)	900	Otto Pfister <i>pers comm.</i> dated 03 April 2019
	Mandal, Chamoli District	03 February 2019	One adult male photographed	1,490	Prince <i>et al.</i> (2019a)
	Urgam, Chamoli District	04 February 2019	One adult male was seen	2,050	Prince <i>et al.</i> (2019b)
	Mandal, Chamoli District	27 & 28 February 2019	One bird was seen. More photographs of adult male from the same location and month by different observers are available in the Facebook group 'Indian Birds'	1,600	Krishnan <i>et al.</i> (2019a, b)
	Shyamket, Nainital District	28 February 2019	One adult male photographed	1,750	Ashok (2019)
	Mahesh Khan, Nainital District	19 March 2019	One adult male photographed	2,090	Wedderburn (2019)
Himachal Pradesh	Lahaul, Lahaul and Spiti District	Undated	Speke observed large flocks in May–June, in the Western Himalayas, which seems unlikely, as they are known to breed during May–July in Russia (Collar 2019). Perhaps some other species was involved	-	Jerdon (1872); Whistler (1925)
	Chamba town, Chamba District	1879–1884	Two were shot after a snow-storm	950	Marshall (1884)
	Dharamshala, Kangra District	11 February 1923	Whistler saw two individuals after a heavy snowfall	1,585	Whistler (1926)
	Keylong, Lahaul and Spiti District	18 October 1936	Three specimens collected in Lahaul Valley, perhaps from the same trip; now in 'Field Museum of Natural History'	3,100	Anonymous (1936a)
	Tsokang Nalla, Lahaul and Spiti District	21 October 1936	Three specimens collected in Lahaul Valley, perhaps from the same trip; now in 'Field Museum of Natural History'	-	Anonymous (1936b)
	Thirot, Lahaul and Spiti District	22 October 1936		2,720	Anonymous (1936c)
	Prashar Lake, Mandi District	29 January 2011	One individual photographed; probably a female / first winter bird, because it had a prominent black malar stripe and dark streaking on a rufous and grey breast. Upperparts and tail are not visible in the photograph	2,600	Goller (2014)
	Nagrota Surian, Pong Lake, Kangra District	09 and 12 March 2017	Two similar looking individuals, with very less rufous in plumage, were ringed during 'Bird Ringing Capacity Building Workshop' by H.P. Forest Department and the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, UK. Peter Clement commented on one individual that it was probably an extremely poorly marked first winter female Red-throated Thrush but the possibility of a hybrid couldn't be ruled out. Few sight records of these individuals after ringing from the same place and month.	400	Lakshminarasimha Ranganathan <i>in litt.</i> , e-mails dated 07 and 24 April 2019, Peter Clement <i>in litt.</i> , e-mail dated 16 April 2019
Jammu & Kashmir	Gilgit, Pakistan-occupied Kashmir	January 1878	Specimen of an adult hybrid male	1,500	Biddulph (1881, 1882)
	Kashmir Valley		Occasionally found in winter in the Valley	>1,600	Ward (1906)
	Tso Kar, Rupshu, Ladakh	28 September 1936	One specimen collected; now in 'Field Museum of Natural History'	4,550	Anonymous (1936d)
	Tikse, Ladakh	1976–1982	Was seen occasionally in early spring during the study period	3,250	Williams & Delany (1986)
	Shey, Ladakh	02 December 1981	Sight record	3,250	Mallon (1987)
	Shey, Ladakh	1990–1999	One or two sightings	3,250	Otto Pfister <i>pers comm.</i> , dated 02 April 2019
	Danyore, Gilgit, Pakistan-occupied Kashmir	23 February 2014	One bird photographed; appears to be a hybrid between Red-throated Thrush and Black-throated Thrush	1,500	Shah (2014)
	Spituk, Ladakh	27 November 2017	An individual was photographed	3,200	Lonchey (2017)
Saspul, Ladakh	28 March 2018	One male bird was seen	3,440	Datta (2018)	
Pakistan	Kaghan Valley	February 1911	D. Donald shot one individual	950	Whitehead (1914)
	Kallar, near Rawalpindi	24 February 1926	Specimen of a female bird was collected	500	Whistler (1930)
	Balloki headworks	03 March 1974	One bird was seen	200	Vitery (1994)

\*Where the exact location of the sighting is not available, a rough average altitude of the place is shown in the table.



While researching the past records of the Red-throated Thrush, we found some older records from Himachal Pradesh. These records, along with those from the Indian Subcontinent, westwards of Nepal, are given in Table 1 and shown in (Figs. 1, 2). Several records that only mentioned *T. ruficollis*, without details of subspecies, or a description, from the period when the two species were considered races of one, are not included in the table.

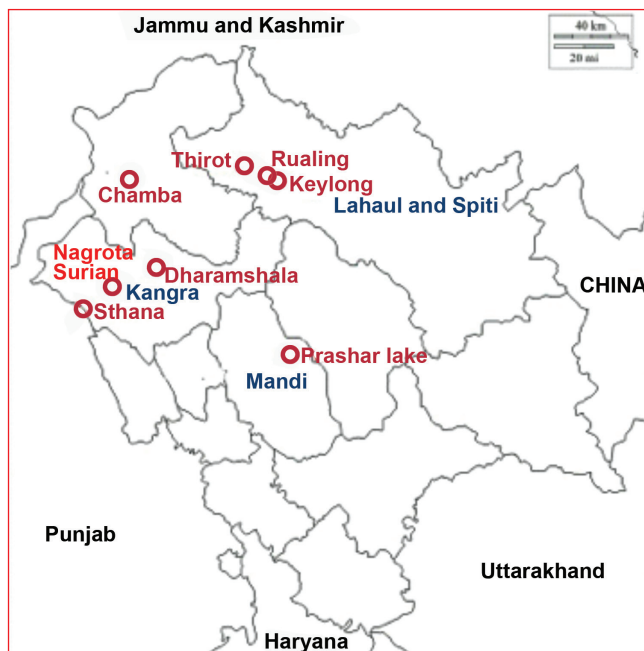


Fig. 1. Records of Red-throated Thrush from Himachal Pradesh (except Tsokang Nalla record).

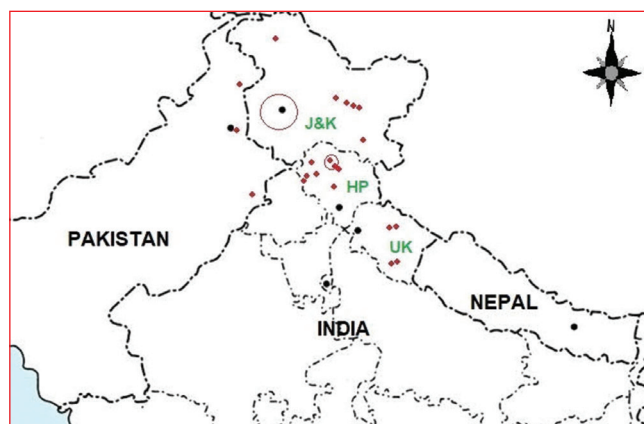


Fig. 2. Records of Red-throated Thrush from the northern Indian Subcontinent. (Red dot=individual sightings; Red circle=showing record from Kashmir Valley and Tsokang Nalla; J&K=Jammu and Kashmir; HP=Himachal Pradesh; UK=Uttarakhand).

## Discussion

Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) mention its regional range and status as, 'Himalayas from Nepal to Arunachal, South Assam Hills; rather common from Bhutan east and scarce elsewhere,' and describe it as a 'straggler, further west to eastern Afghanistan (pushut)'. Grimmitt *et al.* (2011) show only two records, west of Nepal, in the distribution map; one from Lahoul and the other one is perhaps Whistler's (1930) Kallar, Rawalpindi record. Grimmitt *et al.* (2011) do not show any record from

Uttarakhand, and Jammu & Kashmir. Roberts (1992) mentioned only two records from Pakistan, and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, one by Biddulph (1881), and another by Whistler (1930). Both of these specimens are presently in The Natural History Museum (Roberts 1992). The records given in Table-1 provide a more wholistic picture of the distribution of this species in the region, clearly indicating that it frequents appropriate habitats all along the western Himalayas.

Red-throated Thrush has been listed for Uttarakhand by Mohan & Sondhi (2017). This inclusion was based on Sharma *et al.* (2003) and on the broad distribution range given by Ali & Ripley (1987) (Sanjay Sondhi *in litt.* e-mail dated 28 Mar 2018). Ali & Ripley (1987) do not specifically mention Uttarakhand region while describing the species' range but mention its distribution as "Winter visitor to the Himalayas from N.W.F.P. eastwards through Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh; the plains of the Brahmaputra, the Garo and Khasi hills, Bangladesh, Nagaland and Manipur." Sharma *et al.* (2003) included it on the authority of Grewal & Sahgal (1995), which is largely based on unconfirmed sightings and best ignored (Manoj Sharma *in litt.* e-mail dated 30 May 2018). Thus all the above inclusions of the species, do not represent any confirmed sighting from Uttarakhand. Perhaps for the same reason, contemporary works of Indian ornithology (Grimmett *et al.* 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012) do not mention any records of the species from Uttarakhand. This makes the previously unpublished record by Pfister (2004), from Sitabani, the first confirmed record for Uttarakhand.

There has been an eruption of Red-throated Thrush sightings from Uttarakhand in 2019, as almost all (except one) records from the state occurred during February and March 2019; after the region experienced heavy snowfall on multiple occasions in winter. Few other sightings (Marshall 1884; Whistler 1926) also occurred after snowfall, as many species descend to lower elevations after snowfall. The Red-throated Thrush generally winters at high altitudes, e.g., between 2,400 and 3,900 m asl in Nepal (Clement & Hathway 2000). Most of the records from the region are also from an altitude of more than 1,500 m asl. However, birds may occur in the foothills, or even plains (Clement & Hathway 2000; Collar 2019), as in the case of the birds recorded from Pong Lake and Pakistan. Neither Dhadwal (2011) nor by den Besten (2004) mention the Red-throated Thrush from Pong Lake, and this record from Sthana, is the first record of this species from Pong Lake and the lowest altitude record from Himachal Pradesh. These two recent records reported by us, are an addition to the handful of records of this species from Himachal Pradesh.

As the Red-throated Thrush has been described as occasional winter visitor in Ladakh (Williams & Delany 1986; Pfister 2004) and Kashmir Valley (Ward 1906), and there are multiple records of this species from the Indian Subcontinent, west of Nepal, it is perhaps not a vagrant to the region, as described by Grimmitt *et al.* (2011), and Rasmussen & Anderton (2012), but a more frequent visitor. Some records of Red-throated Thrush might have been missed because they were reported as Dark-throated Thrush. It could also be an overlooked species, as females, or first winter males can be confused with Black-throated Thrush, or easily missed if seen in a flock of Black-throated Thrush. Furthermore, higher altitudes, which are preferred by the species, are less frequently birded during winter. The presence of hybrids between Red-throated Thrush and Black-throated Thrush complicates the situation as they are difficult to identify and our knowledge regarding hybrids is limited.

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