

Status of *Sylvia* warblers in Himachal Pradesh, India

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Himachal Pradesh is rich in avifauna due to the presence of a diverse range of habitats. At one end of the state, there is the dry, cold desert of Trans-Himalaya in Spiti, and at other end, there is Pong Lake, which is rich in avian diversity and density. There is significant altitude variation in the state, which provides suitable habitats for various birds. Six species of *Sylvia* warblers are found in India: Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*, Lesser Whitethroat *S. curruca*, Asian Desert Warbler *S. nana*, Eastern Orphean Warbler *S. crassirostris*, Barred Warbler *S. nisoria*, and Garden Warbler *S. borin* (Grimmett et al. 1998; Praveen et al. 2018). The last two species are considered vagrants to India (Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). All of these *Sylvia* warblers, except the two vagrants, have been recorded in Himachal Pradesh.

The Lesser Whitethroat comprises several subspecies: Hume's Whitethroat *S. c. althaea*, Desert Whitethroat or Small Whitethroat *S. c. minula*, *S. c. curruca*, *S. c. blythi*, *S. c. halimodendri*, and *S. c. margelanica*, all of which, except the nominate, occur or are presumed to occur in South Asia (Aymí & Gargallo 2019). Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) considered Hume's- and Desert Whitethroat as different species as did the Clements et al. (2018) Checklist (v2018). But in the latter's recent checklist (Clements et al. 2019), Desert- and Hume's Whitethroat have been lumped back into Lesser Whitethroat, following Shirihai & Svensson (2018).

In this note we provide new records and discuss the status of the *Sylvia* warblers of Himachal Pradesh (henceforth, HP).

Asian Desert Warbler *Sylvia nana*

The Asian Desert Warbler is a winter visitor to the drier plains of Pakistan and adjacent parts of north-western India including Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Gujarat (Grimmett et al. 1998; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). In HP's neighbouring hill state of Uttarakhand, the Asian Desert Warbler is a rare passage migrant (Sharma & Sondhi 2019). It was not reported from the Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir (Grimmett et al. 2011) until Kumar P., (2017) photographed it at Tawi, near Jammu, on 11 October 2017. It has not been recorded in the Union Territory of Ladakh (Pfister 2004; Grimmett et al. 2011).

On 10 October 2015 at 1140 h, CA visited Nagrota Surian, a prominent birding area around Pong Lake, Kangra District. While scanning the scrub in the flats around the lake (32.039°N, 76.066°E; c.420 m asl), he saw a warbler on the ground. It had sandy brown upperparts, whitish underparts, and a prominent yellow iris. There was rufous on rump and tail. It was immediately identified as an Asian Desert Warbler. During the following autumn migration, CA saw two Asian Desert Warblers

on 12 October 2016 at two different locations, a kilometer apart, in Nagrota Surian. One bird had a missing tail [1]. Both sites comprised scrubland predominated by drying plants of *Senna multiglandulosa*. At one site there were a few bushes of *Lantana camara*, and a *ziziphus* sp. On 27 October 2016, at 1120 h, CA saw one individual at one of the previous sites.

The Asian Desert Warbler has also been reported from other parts of the state. CA saw one near Kahan, along the Kumarhatti-Sarahan-Nahan Road, Sirmour District (30.703°N, 77.200°E; c.1,590 m asl) on 16 October 2016, in a dry area with shrubs and a few small trees. Fellow birders were able to photograph it (Cheema 2016).



1. Asian Desert Warbler on 12 October 2016 at Nagrota Surian.

The Asian Desert Warbler was seen on multiple occasions in the same patch of scrub at Nagrota Surian during the winter of 2017–2018. The habitat was similar to the above description. The bird was first seen and photographed on 20 October 2017 (Kumar V., 2017). Subsequently, CA saw it on 09 November 2017, 03 December 2017, and 01 February 2018 at the same place. All these records were probably of the same individual, which was, perhaps, wintering at Pong Lake.

Grimmett et al. (2011) do not record the Asian Desert Warbler on its distribution map, from HP. den Besten (2004a) recorded it twice, during its migration, at Pong Lake between 2001 and 2003. He also photographed it in September 2004 at Nagrota Surian (den Besten 2004b). Dhadwal (2011) did not mention this species from Pong Lake. The Asian Desert Warbler was also photographed at Bilaspur, Bilaspur District, on 21 October 2016 (Rajput 2016). All these records are listed in Table 1.

The 2017–2018 record of the Asian Desert Warbler, around Pong Lake, is the first wintering record of the species from HP. All other records from HP occurred during migration; thus it seems

that it is mainly an uncommon autumn passage migrant in the state, but a few individuals might be spending winter here.

Eastern Orphean Warbler *Sylvia crassirostris*

The Eastern Orphean Warbler is a summer visitor to Baluchistan and north-western Pakistan, and winters in plains, from southern Pakistan, south-western Gujarat, almost entire Indian Peninsula, and northern Plains to about Bihar (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). There are a few records from Uttarakhand and Punjab, the neighboring states of HP (Grimmett et al. 2011; Mohan & Sondhi 2017; Panwar 2019a).

At 0900 h on 12 December 2015, at Villa Round Park, Nahan, Sirmaur District (30.558°N, 77.303°E; c.900 m asl), AV heard calls of multiple *Sylvia* warblers from a small area with a mix of non-native trees. In no time, an unmistakable male Eastern Orphean Warbler showed up. The all-black crown and mask, and robust build were diagnostic. Soon, sightings of three more males followed, which kept moving around in this patch. Their calls were recorded as well (Vikrant 2015). The same number of individuals was sighted on 13 and 14 December as well, keeping mostly to the *Acacia catechu* trees. Two birds were sighted on 16 December. Subsequently, only one individual remained till 19 December, beyond which it would have left for its wintering grounds.

There is only one previous record of the Eastern Orphean Warbler from HP. On 25 October 1922 Whistler (1926) saw one individual at 335 m, in the open scrub jungle of Dhamtal, Kangra District. den Besten (2004a), and Dhadwal (2011) have not reported this species.

It seems that the species is a rare passage migrant through HP.

Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*

In the Indian Subcontinent, the Common Whitethroat is fairly common fall passage migrant in Pakistan and north-western India (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). In India it is regularly seen only in Gujarat and there are only a few records from other states, including Punjab, and the Union Territories of Jammu and Kashmir, and Chandigarh, in the neighbourhood of HP (Grimmett et al. 2011; eBird 2019b; Rajiv Das *in litt.*, email dated 02 October 2019). Pfister (2004) mentioned it as a rare passage migrant in Ladakh. It has not been reported from Uttarakhand (Mohan & Sondhi 2017).

As part of a bird survey with Nature Conservation Foundation, AV was birding along the bank of the Spiti River near Rangrik

(32.250°N, 78.039°E; c.3,610 m asl), Spiti, Lahaul & Spiti District, on 14 September 2016. At 1530 h, a *Sylvia* warbler with prominent brownish upperparts, greyish crown, and white tips to the tail, was seen flitting within dense clumps of *Hippophae* sp. It was identified as a male Common Whitethroat. Further, single individuals were sighted at 1545 h and 1630 h, and a group of three birds was seen moving within a small area at 1600 h.

On 21 September 2016, CA saw a whitethroat in Nagrota Surian at 1000 h [2]. It was hopping on the branches of a bare tree, on a bund, which was surrounded by few low bushes, inside cultivated fields. It had brownish upperparts with distinct rufous brown borders to the greater coverts and tertials. The underparts were whitish, and it had orange-brown legs. These features pointed towards a Common Whitethroat. The bird was seen feeding in the tree, and the surrounding bushes, for an hour. CA again saw a Common Whitethroat, probably the same individual, at the same spot on the mornings of 24 and 25 September. Most of the times, the bird was seen resting in the tree. It was not seen on 30 September, thus it remained there for at least six days.



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2. Common Whitethroat on 21 September 2016 at Nagrota Surian.

On 24 September 2016, at 0900 h, CA saw a loose flock of four birds at another location of Nagrota Surian, one kilometer away from the previous location [3] in scrub with ample growth of *Senna multiglandulosa* and *Lantana camara*. One of these individuals had prominent grey on its head, suggesting a male. On 15 September 2017, at 0800 h, CA saw one Common Whitethroat at the same location. On 28 September 2019, CA photographed one individual (Abhinav 2019) at Sthana, Kangra District, in the outflow area of Pong Dam (31.960°N, 75.901°E; c.325 m asl). It was seen alongside the ponds near the Shah

Table 1. Records of Asian Desert Warbler from Himachal Pradesh

Sr. No.	Date	Location	Remarks	Observer/ Reference
1	2001-2003	Pong Lake, Kangra District	Two records, Photographed	den Besten 2004a
2	September 2004	Nagrota Surian, Pong Lake, Kangra District	Photographed	den Besten 2004b
3	10 October 2015	Nagrota Surian, Pong Lake, Kangra District	Photographed	CA
4	12 October 2016	Nagrota Surian, Pong Lake, Kangra District	Two individuals seen	CA
5	16 October 2016	Near Kahan, Sirmaur District	Photographed	CA, Cheema 2016
6	21 October 2016	Bilaspur, Bilaspur District	Photographed	Rajput 2016
7	27 October 2016	Nagrota Surian, Pong Lake, Kangra District	Photographed	CA
8	20 October 2017 to 01 February 2018	Nagrota Surian, Pong Lake, Kangra District	Photographed on multiple dates	CA, Kumar V., 2017

Nehar Barrage Lake, in the outflow area of Pong Dam, in a patch of *Lantana camara*, *Senna multiglandulosa*, and *Ziziphus* sp., which was surrounded by *Pomea* sp., and tall *Saccharum* sp.



3. Common Whitethroat on 24 September 2016 at Nagrota Surian.

There is only one previous record from HP. Koelz (1937) collected a juvenile male on 01 September 1933, a few miles above Losar, in Spiti, Lahaul & Spiti District. den Besten (2004a), and Dhadwal (2011) have not mentioned this species from Pong Lake. We list these records of the Common Whitethroat from HP in Table 2.

These records from the Pong Lake are a first for lower HP, and are the first photographic records from the state. The present records also add to the scarce records of this species in India outside the drier regions of north-western India. We conclude that it is an uncommon autumn passage migrant in HP.

Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*

The Lesser Whitethroat is a common winter visitor throughout the northern half of the Indian Subcontinent up to 1,500 m, reaching West Bengal in east; there are also few records from peninsular India (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Grimmett et al. (2011) show a more extensive range for it, in southern India, but less extensive in eastern India. Both works show its range reaching the south-western border of HP in northern India. Grimmett et al. (2011) show only one record from Spiti, on their distribution map. It is a winter visitor in the lower regions of Uttarakhand (Mohan & Sondhi 2017; Manoj Sharma *pers comm.*, dated 30 September 2019). The distribution map in Grimmett et al. (2011) showed it as a migrant in Ladakh. We describe Hume's

Whitethroat separately below, excluding its records in the details of distribution of the Lesser Whitethroat, as Hume's is the only one of its races that breeds in the Indian Subcontinent.

The Lesser Whitethroat is the most common *Sylvia* warbler in HP (Fig. 1). CA has recorded it several times during winter, in the lower regions of HP, most frequently on the flats around Pong Lake [4], and in the hills up to 1,700 m. AV has recorded this birds frequently in winter, up to 1,300 m, in Sirmaur District. We have also recorded it frequently during migration. In one such sighting, CA recorded c.15 individuals on 28 September 2019 at Sthana, Kangra District, near the ponds around Shah Nehar Barrage Lake. It most commonly found in open areas with sparse tree cover, and tends to avoid dense forests. The records from higher altitudes, in Sirmaur, were mostly in disturbed habitats at the edges of pine forests.

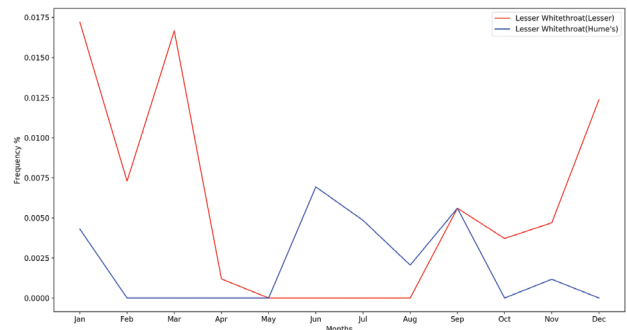


Fig. 1. Frequency of sightings of Lesser Whitethroat and Hume's Whitethroat.



4. Lesser Whitethroat on 24 September 2016 at Nagrota Surian.

All: C. Abhinav

Table 2. Records of Common Whitethroat from Himachal Pradesh

Sr. No.	Date	Location	Remarks	Observer/ Reference
1	01 September 1933	Near Losar, Spiti, Lahaul & Spiti District	Specimen collected	Koelz 1937
2	14 September 2016	Near Rangrik, Spiti, Lahaul & Spiti District	Sight record	AV
3	21–25 September 2016	Nagrota Surian, Pong Lake, Kangra District	Photographed	CA
4	24 September 2016	Nagrota Surian, Pong Lake, Kangra District	Four birds photographed	CA
5	15 September 2017	Nagrota Surian, Pong Lake, Kangra District	Sight record	CA
6	28 September 2019	Sthana, Kangra District	Photographed	CA

In Kangra District, Whistler (1926) found it fairly common at Indaura at the end of October 1922, and also observed it at Bera on 20 February 1921. Koelz (1937) obtained two specimens on 25 September 1933 from Dankhar, Spiti, and saw several individuals of this species at same place. Jones (1948) mentioned it as a rare winter visitor in Kalka at c.760 m. den Besten (2004a) recorded 17 birds around Dharamsala, Kangra District, between 250 m and 1900 m during 1997 to 2003, and 80 birds around Pong Lake between 2001 and 2003. Piyush Dogra saw one bird at Bangotu Village, near Dharamsala, Kangra District, at 2,100 m asl on 26 December 2016 (Piyush Dogra *pers comm.*, dated 04 October 2019). Buner & Ranganathan (2016) ringed six individuals in January 2015 and ten in February 2016 at Pong Lake. A few more reports have been published, e.g., Saikia et al. 2008 recorded it in the high altitude Pangri Valley, Chamba District and Marshall (1884) recorded it at Chamba, Chamba District. eBird (2019c) also shows its sightings throughout the state, mostly from low altitude regions. Kumar S., (2017) recorded it twice in October 2017 at Udaipur, Lahaul & Spiti District. We are not trying to be exhaustive in its records from HP, as these above mentioned records are enough for assessment of its status in the state.

To conclude, the Lesser Whitethroat is a fairly common winter visitor and passage migrant, mainly to the lower altitude regions of HP, contrary to the distribution suggested by Grimmett et al. (2011), and Rasmussen & Anderton (2012). It can also be seen at higher altitudes (up to 2,100 m) in HP, and much higher up (including in the Trans-Himalayas) during migration.

Hume's Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca althaea*

Hume's Whitethroat is a summer visitor to the mountains of Balochistan, the Safed Koh range (Afghanistan), and the inner Himalayas from Chitral to Ladakh. Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) considered it doubtful that it bred east of Ladakh and Garhwal. Grimmett et al. (1998, 2011), and Aymí & Gargallo (2019) also mention its breeding range only till Kashmir and Ladakh. Grimmett et al. (2011) do not show any record of Hume's Whitethroat from HP, and show it as a passage migrant in western and northern India (in the sates of Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Gujarat, and the western parts of Madhya Pradesh), till the boundary of HP in the north. It has not been reported from Uttarakhand (Mohan & Sondhi 2017).

There have been multiple records of Hume's Whitethroat from HP.

Sirmaur District: AV saw single birds on 12 and 23 January 2016 at Villa Round Park, Nahan, Sirmaur District. They were identified by their dark crowns, which blended seamlessly with their black eye masks. These were the only occasions when they were sighted in deep winter. On 28 September 2017, one bird was sighted at Villa Round at 0735 h. This bird also had the diagnostic dark crown concolourous with the eye mask. A third individual was observed on 02 November 2017 near Ramadhon Road (30.576°N, 77.304°E; c.730 m asl) at 0845 h, which lies lower in the valley, northwards of Nahan. The habitat here consisted primarily of *Acacia catechu* interspersed with *Eucalyptus* sp., and a dense understory of *Lantana camara* next to a small stream.

The districts of Lahaul & Spiti, and Kinnaur: CA saw one whitethroat near a stream at Lari, Spiti, Lahaul & Spiti District (32.083°N, 78.417°E; c.3,350 m asl) on 12 June 2015. It was

identified as Hume's Whitethroat by its dark ear coverts, which were almost as dark as the crown, larger bill, and greyer mantle. AV observed one Hume's Whitethroat near Dumla in Spiti, Lahaul & Spiti District (32.346°N, 78.001°E; c.4,010 m asl) on 21 July 2016 at 0610 h near a small stream that had dense thickets of willow *Salix* sp. During another birding stint at Rangrik, on 28 August 2016, two birds were seen moving within clumps of *Hippophae* sp. On 05 June 2019, CA saw two birds at Pooh, Kinnaur (31.765°N, 78.578°E; c.3,060 m asl), on the rocky slope of a hill near an apple orchard. On 06 June 2019, CA counted five birds on a two-kilometer stretch of the road alongside the same hill [5], with many bushes of *Rosa webbiana*, widely separated from each other. The birds were mostly seen moving from one bush to another but sometimes they also entered the orchard. CA did not see any nesting activity. On 12 August 2019, CA saw one bird feeding in thickets of *Hippophae* sp., on the western bank of the Spiti River, near Rangrik. On the other side of the river, near Rangrik there is a two-and-a-half kilometer long patch of vegetation with *Hippophae* sp., and with a few willow trees, which is fed by multiple water channels branching off from the Spiti. On 18 August 2019, CA observed a presumed pair of Hume's Whitethroat feeding near the southern-most part of this vegetation patch for ten minutes. Four more birds were seen in other parts of this patch that morning.



5. Hume's Whitethroat on 06 June 2019 at Pooh, Kinnaur District.

Records of Hume's Whitethroat by other observers: Koelz (1933a) collected one male Hume's Whitethroat in Dankhar, Lahaul & Spiti, on 25 September 1933; one male in Chala, Kinnaur District (32.000°N, 78.608°E; c.3,783 m asl) on 02 October 1933 (Koelz 1933b); and one female in Chango, Kinnaur District (31.977°N, 78.595°E; c.3,000 m asl) on 03 October 1933 (Koelz 1933c).

Waite collected two specimens of Hume's Whitethroat in May, in the Sutlej Valley, one from Urni, and another from Kanam, Kinnaur District (Jones 1948). There is one undated sight record from Pong Lake by den Besten (2004a) without any details. Dhadwal (2011) mentioned its status from Pong Lake as 'not common winter visitor', but provided no photograph, or details of identification. Manjunath (2015), and Nitin (2015) photographed one bird on 10 June 2015, on the same hill in Pooh, Kinnaur District. Buner & Ranganathan (2016) ringed three birds at Pong Lake in January 2015. Panwar (2019b) photographed one individual at Chitkul, Kinnaur District on 06 June 2019. On 18

Table 3. Records of Hume's Whitethroat from Himachal Pradesh

Sr. No.	Date	Location	Remarks	Observer/ Reference
1	25 September 1933	Dankhar, Spiti, Lahaul & Spiti District	Specimen collected	Koelz 1933a
2	02 October 1933	Chala, Kinnaur District	Specimen collected	Koelz 1933b
3	03 October 1933	Chango, Kinnaur District	Specimen collected	Koelz 1933c
4	May	Urni and Kanam, Kinnaur District	Two specimen collected	Jones 1948
5	2001-2003	Pong Lake, Kangra District	Sight record	den Besten 2004a
6	January 2015	Pong Lake, Kangra District	Three individuals ringed	Buner & Ranganathan 2016
7	10 June 2015	Pooh, Kinnaur District	Photographed	Manjunath 2015; Nitin 2015
8	12 June 2015	Lari, Spiti, Lahaul & Spiti District	Photographed	CA
9	12 and 23 January 2016	Villa Round Park, Nahan, Sirmaur District	Sight record	AV
10	21 July 2016	Dumla, Spiti, Lahaul & Spiti District	Sight record	AV
11	28 August 2016	Rangrik, Spiti, Lahaul & Spiti District	Two individuals seen	AV
12	28 September 2017	Villa Round Park, Nahan, Sirmaur District	Sight record	AV
13	02 November 2017	Ramadhon road, Sirmaur District	Sight record	AV
14	06 June 2019	Chitkul, Kinnaur District	Photographed	Panwar 2019b
15	18 June 2019	Lingti Village, Spiti, Lahaul & Spiti District	Photographed	Kirola 2019
16	05-06 June 2019	Pooh, Kinnaur District	Five individuals seen/photographed	CA
17	12 August 2019	Rangrik, Spiti, Lahaul & Spiti District	Photographed	CA
18	18 August 2019	Rangrik, Spiti, Lahaul & Spiti District	Six individuals seen/photographed	CA

June 2019 Kirola (2019) photographed a bird at Lingti Village, Spiti. All records of Hume's Whitethroat are listed chronologically in Table 3.

Spiti is adjacent to Ladakh, where Hume's Whitethroat is common during summer, and is known to breed from May to July (Pfister 2004); and both have similar topography. Although no direct evidence of Hume's Whitethroat nesting in Spiti or adjacent areas of Kinnaur has been reported, it was observed on multiple occasions in these regions during June and July (breeding season), in suitable habitats; hence we suspect that the species is probably breeding in Spiti and in adjacent regions of Kinnaur. In the lower regions of HP it is, probably, a rare passage migrant. But sometimes it is seen during winter, e.g., the Villa Round and Pong Lake sightings in January. Similarly, in the Delhi region, Ganguli (1975) considered them to be spring passage migrants, but Vyas (2019) mentioned a few through the winter, between October and April. There is always the possibility of confusion with the Lesser Whitethroat, thus further confirmed records from the lower regions (including Pong Lake) of HP would help to ascertain its exact status during winter.

To conclude, we are reporting new records of Common Whitethroat and Eastern Orphean Warbler, which were previously recorded only once in HP, and reporting several new records and the possible wintering of the Asian Desert Warbler, which was only recorded on a few occasions earlier. We recorded Hume's Whitethroat on many occasions, mainly during summer, and are suggesting its possible breeding in HP. In addition to these, we are suggesting a correction in the distribution range of Lesser Whitethroat. The Desert Whitethroat is also expected from the state, as Grimmett et al. (2011) showed its wintering range up to the boundary of HP with Punjab, and it might be migrating through HP. As *Sylvia* warblers are small, drab birds and most of them are shy and difficult to observe properly, they could easily

be overlooked and, furthermore, uncommon whitethroats could be erroneously reported as Lesser Whitethroat.

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