



Whispering Wings®

NEWSLETTER OF THE CHANDIGARH BIRD CLUB®

Volume 10 Issue 1 — July to September 2025



What's Inside

1 From the Editor's Desk	Rima Dhillon	1
2 Secretary's Report	Amandeep Singh Channa	2
3 Bird in Focus - Jacobin Cuckoo	Rima Dhillon	4
5 Whispering Wings - A Decade of Glorious Service	Amandeep Singh Channa	7
6 Juvenile Bird Photography Competition		8
7 Bulbul	Geeta Goswami	12
8 Feathered Guests at Saketri	Rima Dhillon	14
9 Borneo Birding Trip	Sarbjeet Kaur	17
10 Lost and Found - Long-billed Bush Warbler	Bhupesh Kumar Goyal	29

Front Cover - Black-winged Stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*) by Gurjeet Virk
Winner of Juvenile Birds Photography Competition



Indian Peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*) by Amandeep Singh Channa

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Rima Dhillon



We celebrate the 10th anniversary of our newsletter, Whispering Wings. We are grateful to all the members who, by their invaluable contributions, have made it possible to get this far. I would like to thank Bhupesh K Goyal, Kunal Bamby, and Aryan Bhalla for their regular contributions. Wonderfully informative articles and field trip reports from not only domestic but also international trips, along with the excellent photographs, have made the newsletter a worthy read.

The world over, the landscape is changing, and with it, the rhythm of birdlife we have long taken for granted. The ‘disappearance’ of House Sparrows from our homes is a glaring example.

Just when we fear that the wild is retreating, it can surprise us with dramatic suddenness. The first recorded sighting of a Golden-fronted Leafbird, *Chloropsis aurifrons*, and a vagrant Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, *Monticola saxatilis*, in the periphery of Chandigarh remind us that the pulse of the wild still beats through our changing landscape.

Amidst the transformation, nature shows its resilience. Birds adapt to their surroundings amid city dwellings; winter migrants still return to our lakes, though maybe in fewer numbers, reminding us that the cycle of life can be fragile yet enduring at the same time.

As birdwatchers, we are both witnesses and chroniclers of these changes, so let us continue to watch, to care, and to speak for the habitats that have no voice.

Happy Birding!

SECRETARY'S REPORT

Amandeep Singh Channa



End of September is always a great time for 'Whispering Wings' as it marks the end of the last volume and the beginning of the next one. This time, however, it is made even more special as this issue marks 10 years of 'Whispering Wings'. On this occasion, I join President Rima Dhillon in expressing our thanks to all those who have contributed to the growth of the newsletter.

This quarter has been very fruitful. Sightings of previously unseen species like the Golden-fronted Leafbird and Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush have sent the birding community aflutter. CBC played host to birders flocking to see them.



Torrential rains in the last quarter have led to large-scale damage to lives, livelihoods, and property. Punjab and Himachal Pradesh have been devastated by floods and landslides. This has prevented CBC field trips to the mountains. Instead, field trips were taken to Jawaharpur and Morni in July and September.

The Club is also looking forward to celebrating Dr Salim Ali's 129th birth anniversary on 12th November 2025, with a bird count as we have done every year since 2017. A staple event for the club, it has helped us track winter migrants and we have shared this data with the forest departments, national and international organisations. This year, the count will be held on 15th and 16th November 2025. Details will be released closer to date.

The Club has also begun working on its calendar for 2026. The President has declared the theme for the calendar to be 'Raptors'. As was done last year, this year too, the selections will be made by eminent photographers of the club.

To celebrate CBC's ninth anniversary on 3rd March 2026, the Club will work to release its field guide of birds of Chandigarh.

With much to look forward to, the Club is very excited for the next quarter of the year. Winter brings its migrants and we are ready to welcome them with open arms and raised binoculars.



BIRD IN FOCUS - JACOBIN CUCKOO

Rima Dhillon



Few birds are as closely linked with India's South-West monsoon as the Jacobin Cuckoo (*Clamator jacobinus*) — also called the Pied Cuckoo. For ages, its arrival from Africa has been celebrated in poetry and folklore. Farmers traditionally see it as a harbinger of rain. From May to June, the beautiful trilling songs of the Jacobin Cuckoo can be heard all around. If the Jacobin is here, then the monsoon can't be far behind—bringing a sense of relief that it will end of the dry, searing heat of the summer.

Field notes from birders show a trend of seeing the early arrival of these migrants, which could be linked to shifts in monsoon onset due to climate change. However, all the Jacobin Cuckoos seen in the country do not come from Africa. In India, there are two main populations of this bird— a resident population (mainly in the South and in Sri Lanka) and a migratory population that flies in each year from East Africa. In appearance too, there are slight differences between the two populations.

The African (migratory) race, *Clamator jacobinus pica*, leaves East Africa around April–May and reaches India in late May or early June, exploiting the strong pre-monsoon tail winds to cross the Arabian Sea. They migrate singly or in very loose groups. As very few stopover points have been documented en route, it is possible that these birds fly the distance of approximately 4000 km in a single flight. As they breed in India, therefore, their arrival timing ensures that the food supply (insects) for their chicks will peak at this time.

Jacobin Cuckoos are brood parasites. In India, they often lay their eggs in the nests of Babblers and other breeders, letting the host parents rear their chicks at the cost of their own. The breeding period for this population is from late May to July. These Cuckoo chicks never interact with their biological parents. They are genetically programmed to migrate without adult guidance. Young birds fledged in India are thought to migrate to Africa later in the season, then return as adults the following year. By October, most migrants leave the Indian subcontinent, crossing the Arabian Sea back to East Africa, this time riding the retreating monsoon winds. The resident population breeds on a different schedule. The southern Indian and Sri Lankan race (*C. j. jacobinus*) breeds locally, often earlier or later in the year than the migrants.

Africa too has its own resident population of Jacobin Cuckoos. Across much of western, central and southern Africa there are resident or locally nomadic populations, which time their breeding to the rainy seasons of their region: In East Africa the period from March to June is called the Long Rains, which is the breeding season for most of the local birds, including Jacobin cuckoos, and sometimes again in October–December during the Short Rains. Other parts of Africa have their own breeding seasons coinciding with the rains in that area – Southern Africa: October–February. West Africa: June–October. Observations from birdwatchers — such as arrival dates, vocal behaviour, and interactions with local species — can provide valuable clues to the Jacobin Cuckoo's annual migratory cycle.

Beyond all the well-documented facts, there are tantalising possibilities about the Jacobin Cuckoo's life cycle:

- When migratory birds return to East Africa in October–November, they overlap with the resident birds. Both populations are hormonally active in March–April. Can this open the possibility of cross-breeding before the migrants depart again for India?
- As it is biologically possible, does the migratory population that breeds in India during the monsoon, then returns to East Africa, recover, and breed again during the long rains (March–June)?

- As Cuckoos don't raise their own chicks, their energy costs per breeding event are lower than most birds. Can this make two annual breeding cycles conceivable?
- Is there a mixing of resident and migratory populations?

All these scenarios are plausible but not proven. They represent exciting directions for future research.



WHISPERING WINGS

A DECADE OF GLORIOUS SERVICE

Amandeep Singh Channa

It was on a mildly cold Saturday in the first week of September, a decade ago in 2015, in Sector-24, Chandigarh, when Navjit Singh, a veteran birder and founder of Avian Habitat and Wetland Society, suggested that the Club start publishing a newsletter. The idea was wholeheartedly seconded by other senior birders. I, as the youngest member at the time, was tasked with its compilation. Professor Mitinderpal Singh Sekhon was chosen unanimously to be the editor. Under his watchful eye, the first issue was released two weeks later, with articles ranging from birds to cameras, tips for birdwatching to tricks for bird photography. The name ‘Whispering Wings’ was suggested by Navjit Singh.

It was decided that the newsletter would become a quarterly publication, to ease the burden on the editorial team and to give members a more comprehensive edition. In its ten-year history, there have only been a handful of instances that a full newsletter has not been published. Even then, the editor’s letter and secretary’s report were published.

The newsletter has undergone many design changes and updates. It was inevitable that it would happen, for as the editorial team gained more experience, our confidence grew. The two-man army that was Professor Sekhon and I experimented with the software to make the newsletter more refined in every new edition.

In March 2017, after a resolution by the Club members, Chandigarh Bird Club was registered with the Registrar of Societies. Professor Sekhon, who had done most of the legwork, was elected the inaugural President and Narbir Kahlon, the Vice President. Since then, the Editor of the ‘Whispering Wings’ and President of Chandigarh Bird Club have held the positions together. After a successful seven years at the helm, Professor Sekhon retired from the posts and Rima Dhillon was elected president. I, too, left the editorial team to take charge of creating CBC’s website and social media accounts. Under her leadership, the newsletter changed to become more of an e-magazine. It became more colourful and resplendent with photographs, which were received for various photo-competitions. When I was elected Secretary, I returned to the editorial team as compiler.

In the first decade of its publication, ‘Whispering Wings’ has served as the Club’s mouthpiece. It has carried CBC’s voice to all corners of the world. Our readership is far wider than just our members, but also national and international organisations whose interest in Chandigarh and its environs has increased since the first publication. ‘Whispering Wings’ is the pride and joy of the Club. And as we celebrate its decade of glorious service, we wish for many more decades of continued publication.

JUVENILE BIRD PHOTOGRAPHY COMPETITION



Brahminy Starling (*Sturnia pagodarum*) by Gurdip Singh Boparai



Brahminy Starling (*Sturnia pagodarum*) by Gurdip Singh Boparai



Indian Pied Myna (*Gracupica contra*) by Gurdip Singh Boparai



White-breasted Waterhen (*Amaurornis phoenicurus*) by Gurdip Singh Boparai



Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*) and Black-winged Stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*) by Gurdip Singh Boparai



Asian Koel (*Eudynamys scolopaceus*) and House Crow (*Corvus splendens*) by Rima Dhillon



Indian Peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*) by Gurjeet Virk

BULBUL

Geeta Goswami

Sometimes, the most vivid moments are best captured not with a camera, but with words. Though I'm not a photographer, I appreciate the art of painting scenes through storytelling—inviting you to experience life's small incidents by imagining them vividly. Today, just flow with me in not a moment of stillness captured by the lens but by moving in the lanes of imagination and words.

Same time last year, we had a nest of Bulbuls on our terrace, which egged me into writing about the special bond and behaviour between adult Bulbuls and their juveniles. Fortunately, this year too the Bulbuls chose to weave a nest in the rose creeper on our terrace. All of us, including the gardener, were unaware of this nest. I visit my terrace daily, but unfortunately, during these days when the most important moments were unfolding, I was out of town. It was probably for the best for the bird. Had I been around more often, this incident might never have occurred.

One day, humming a tune and talking to myself, I made my way toward the terrace when suddenly, a bird flew over my head, very close... and I mean very, very close!!! It was so close that I could hear the fierce flutter of its wings, beating fast and wild—then it vanished into thin air. Just seconds later, as I leaned in to admire the vibrant blooms of my water lilies, another bird streaked overhead with a sharp, swooshing sound, disappearing before I could even blink. I was left bewildered, unable to grasp what had just unfolded or which species of the bird it was as I was lost in the mesmerising beauty of the lilies.

Just moments later, chaos erupted right above and around my shoulders—swishing wings, frantic fluttering, and sharp, angry chirps filled the air! Then, I caught sight of the Bulbul parents, fierce and fearless, their protective rage palpable. One even lunged toward my face, pecking fiercely as if to warn me, insisting that I pay attention to the urgent commotion. It was only then that I realised, with a sudden jolt, how dangerously close I had come to their hidden nest.

I saw a juvenile trying to flap its wings and it fell right into the lily tub. I was left in a dilemma, whether to save the juvenile or save my head.

Call it the instinct of a mother, or the experience of a bird watcher, my hand had already reached the water tub, gently taking hold of the drowning little one. I placed the little crying chick on the parapet, trying to calm it with soothing words. But in the background were two angry, worried, loud, anxious new parents.

Not wanting to linger and disturb the birds any further, I quietly stepped back and watched from my window. I witnessed the tender moment when a parent gently

returned a little fledgling to the nest, where its sibling waited—both covered in soft, fluffy feathers, fragile yet full of life. I didn't return to the terrace, but soon spotted the family in my neem tree, where once again, the Treepies tried to intimidate the chicks. Yet, other birds like the Jungle Babblers and more Bulbuls stood steadfast, courageously defending the young ones and keeping danger at bay. It deeply moved me to see such sensitivity and cooperation amongst these birds, a beautiful reminder of the delicate balance of care and protection in nature. While I have no photographs to share, I offer my own humble sketch of the Bulbul, hoping. Thank you for reading, and I hope that these words capture a fragment of this heartfelt story, and that the imagined sketch in time fills your heart with the same compassion and care it brought to mine.



In whispered wings and tender care,
A fragile world blooms bright and fair.
Through nature's watchful, loving eyes,
Life's quiet miracles arise.

May this gentle tale you've read inspire,
A heart that guards and lifts higher.

FEATHERED GUESTS OF SAKETRI

Rima Dhillon

The village of Saketri behind the Sukhna Lake has for many years been a birding hotspot for local birdwatchers. Located between Chandigarh and the Kansal & Nepli forests, it has hosted many seasonally migrating birds: Paradise Flycatchers and Indian Golden Orioles flying up from South India during the spring breeding season and small songbirds like Black Redstarts and Wheatears from Ladakh, which winter here. A vast tract of uncultivated land stretching from Saketri to Chandigarh I.T. Park has been a great habitat where over a hundred species have been recorded over the past many years.

The Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush (*Monticola saxatilis*), a rarely seen migrant in India, was the star of Saketri for six days before moving on in its migratory journey to Africa. The birding community of Chandigarh felt blessed and happy to play host to this incredible bird during its once-in-a-lifetime stopover as this habitat will soon disappear forever.



Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush (*Monticola saxatilis*)

This is a bird of Alpine and sub-Alpine zones of Southern Europe, Central Asia, and Northern China, breeding at an elevation between 1500-3000 m. Its typical habitat is rocky and stony mountain slopes with sparse scrub vegetation, often above the tree line. The nest is built on rocky ledges during May and June. A Myna-sized bird, the male is recognised by its bright blue and rufous (rusty red) plumage while the female is earthy and inconspicuous. Unfortunately, in the Indian Subcontinent, the vivid breeding

plumage of the male has already moulted and it arrives looking as dull and streaky as the female, though retaining the bright rufous colour of its tail feathers.

In typical thrush-like behaviour, the Rock Thrush can be spotted atop a rocky outcrop close to the ground or even a heap of rubble scouring the surroundings and pouncing on unsuspecting insects or small reptiles. As its name suggests, it is fond of perching on rocky mounds and serenading the females with a full-throated song. In their wintering grounds, they prefer the open, rocky habitat of their natural home.

Unlike Waterfowl and Starlings, which are easily visible as they migrate in large flocks, these birds fly solo and prefer their own company. The migration route for the European populations leads them to travel south to spend the winter in sub-Saharan Africa, while Asian breeders move across Central and South Asia. It is during these long migrations that the Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush occasionally appears in India. Its sightings have been few and far between, with documented records from Ladakh and Kashmir, Pong Lake (Himachal Pradesh), Kachchh (Gujarat), Jaisalmer (Rajasthan), and Bangalore (Karnataka). Its presence has also been noted in neighbouring Nepal, Pakistan, and Western China.



Golden-fronted Leafbird (*Chloropsis aurifrons*)

Golden-fronted Leafbird (*Chloropsis aurifrons*) is a bird draped in brilliant leaf-green plumage and a golden halo. The name itself is a perfect description of this jewel-toned bird— Chloro-opsis from Greek, meaning green appearance, while aurifrons literally means golden-fronted. If the male is flamboyantly coloured emerald green with a golden halo and a turquoise blue moustache stripe, the female, though less brilliant, is the epitome of elegance.

Feeding on fruit, nectar, and insects, they flit around in the canopy, hiding in plain sight! Leafbirds play an important role in sustaining the forest's rhythm of renewal by helping in the process of pollination. Equally fascinating is their talent for mimicry: they can imitate calls of Drongos and Bulbuls, perhaps to defend their territory or confuse rivals. In many parts of rural India, their presence in orchards is considered a good omen, believed to signal a rich harvest. Its bright colour and cheerful song have long been thought to bring good luck, life, and renewal, making it the forest's own messenger of harmony.



Shikra (*Accipiter badius*) by Amandeep Singh

BORNEO BIRDING TRIP

Sarbjeeet Kaur

Borneo, the third largest island in the world, lies at the geographic centre of maritime Southeast Asia. It's one of the Greater Sunda Islands and is crossed by the equator. The island is divided amongst three countries: Brunei, Indonesia, and in the North by the Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak.



Kinabatangan River Safari

It was Neeraja's initiative that gave me the opportunity to visit this paradise of the bird kingdom. I was overjoyed. It felt surreal to finally be going to such a bird kingdom where Hornbills glide over the canopy, Pittas flash brilliant colours, and endemic species are found nowhere else. Borneo's diverse habitats: lowland forests, wetlands, and mountains, support equally rich birdlife. Beyond birds, Borneo's wildlife is a wonder in itself: Proboscis Monkeys with comical noses, gentle Bornean Elephants, elusive Clouded Leopards, and Sun Bears, the smallest of bears.

What struck me most during the trip was the harmony of everything, how the landscapes, the wildlife, and the people blend into one unique rhythm of life. The sounds of the jungle at dawn, the thrill of spotting a rare bird, the kindness of our guides, and the joy of sharing those moments with fellow travellers, all of these made the journey deeply personal.

24th July – Departure

Leaving Delhi at 11:00pm, excitement buzzing within me, Neeraja and I boarded the Malaysia Airlines flight. We reached Kuala Lumpur at 6:55 am on 25th July. We rushed to catch the aero-train to reach Terminal 1 for our connecting AirAsia flight to Kota Kinabalu. The flight left Kuala Lumpur at 9:15 am and landed around noon at Kota Kinabalu airport.

Arka Sarkar, a passionate and well-travelled birder and our guide, was already there waiting for us. Other birders also joined us at the airport. After checking into the hotel for a night's stay, we had some rest. As birding was scheduled to begin the next day, we decided to visit the local market to buy some souvenirs.

26 July – Banjaran Crocker Range



Crimson-headed Partridge (*Haematortyx sanguiniceps*)

Another birding guide, Mirwan Mustafa, a local from Sandakan and a great birding enthusiast, joined us with his vehicle. Our group of eight, including both the guides, left the hotel at 5:45 am. After having coffee and biscuits at a petrol station, we drove through Panampang village and reached Banjaran Crocker Range (Gunung Alab Station). Outside a building, we spotted about 10-12 Plume-toed Swifts nesting under the ceiling ledge. We also sighted three Ashy Drongos nearby, and we walked towards the hides where Mirwan scattered some worms to lure the birds. The first morning of birding felt magical. Soon, Crimson-headed Partridges, Red-breasted Partridges, and some other birds appeared. We spent two hours birding here and along the roadside, where a fleeting sight of the Fruit Hunter thrilled us, though no one managed a photo. En route to Gunung Alab Restaurant & Motel, we stopped at a point

and joined other birders (including a Japanese team carrying massive lenses) to watch Bornean Shortwings and Snowy-browed Flycatchers. We stayed only for 30 minutes and reached Gunung Alab at 1:30 pm. After lunch, we took our positions and set our tripods in a long verandah facing the forest. We birded for three hours before heading to our homestay. Almost 18 species, including the Bornean Treepie, Bornean Bulbul, Little Pied Flycatcher, Chestnut-crested Yuhina, etc., were spotted.

27th July – Mount Trusmadi

After an early drive, we reached Mount Trusmadi and walked down a narrow track to Hide-2. The hide was dark but bustling with birders. I felt like part of a global family bound by the same passion. Bulwer's Pheasant and Crested Partridges stole



Bulwer's Partridge (*Lophura bulweri*)

the show, while the warm tea and simple snacks kept our spirits high in the cool mountain air. We recorded five species before moving uphill to Hide-1. The hides are well maintained, offering tea, coffee, and snacks. By 2:45 pm, we had sighted 30 species, including several endemics. In the evening, we checked into Strawberry Garden Hotel, a small hilltop property with valley views. Dinner was simple: soup and chicken fried rice.

28th July – Kinabalu National Park

At 6:05 am, we entered Kinabalu National Park. Mount Kinabalu, the highest mountain in Borneo, attracts trekkers and nature lovers alike. Birding at the park headquarters and Timpohon Gate rewarded us with Whitehead's Broadbill, Chestnut-hooded Laughingthrush, Sunda Cuckoo Shrike, Chestnut-crested Yuhina, Bornean Green

Magpie, and Bornean Whistling Thrush. Later at Kiau View Trail, we spotted the Whitehead's Trogon. We recorded 30 species in that area, and we visited the Botanical Garden to see the world's largest flower, the Rafflesia in full bloom. It was a reminder that patience and persistence bring the best rewards.

29th July

We birded near Hill Lodge & Timpohon Gate, sighting 14 species including Mountain Black-eyed Fruit Hunter & Pale-faced Bulbul. By 2:40 pm we set off for Telupid, a hotspot famous for the Bornean Peacock Pheasant. After a long journey, we checked into the IPL Telupid Rest House.



Bornean Peacock Pheasant (*Polyplectron schleiermacheri*)
Above: male and below: female



30th July – Telupid

We started at 4:30 am with breakfast en route, and in a 4WD for the rough track through the shallow streams. After reaching a point, we started trekking through the forest, uphill to the hide. We took our positions and set up our tripods and cameras. Seeing the Bornean Peacock-Pheasant along with its mate, cameras clicking non-stop, was nothing short of magical, a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Other sightings included the Asian Emerald Dove, Bold-striped Tit-Babbler, Fluffy-backed Tit-Babbler, Short-tailed Babbler, Ferruginous Babbler, and White-crowned Shama. On our return, we birded briefly in Ulu Telupid Forest Reserve, spotting Maroon and Rufous Woodpeckers, Long-billed Spiderhunter, and Little Spider-hunter. In the evening, near the Rest House lake we discovered large flocks of Green Imperial Pigeons & Pink-necked Pigeons in a tall tree.

31st July – Sandakan & Kinabatangan



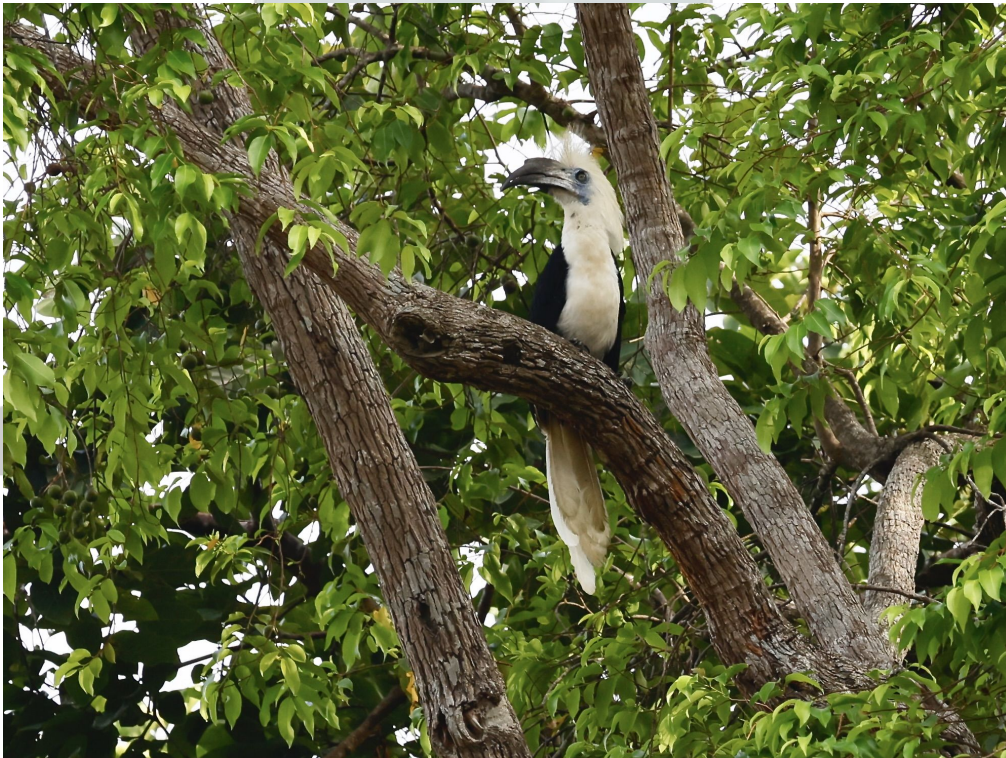
Banded Broadbill (*Eurylaimus javanicus*)

Birding en route to Sandakan and Lahud Datu, we added Bornean Crested Fireback, Sabah Partridge, Banded Broadbill, Red-eyed and Yellow-bellied Bulbul, and Wreathed Hornbill. At Gomantang cave, we endured the strong stench of guano while exploring the vast limestone chambers filled with thousands of Swifts and Swiftlets. Outside, we spotted Wallace's Hawk Eagle, Oriental Pied Hornbill, Crested Serpent Eagle, Rufous-backed Dwarf Kingfisher, Bat Hawk, and others. By nightfall, we

reached Proboscis Lodge on the Kinabatangan River, after a memorable boat ride in pitch darkness.

1-2 August - Kinabatangan River

The boat safari at dawn was breathtaking. The calm waters mirrored the forest, perfect for photography, and each sighting, from Storm's Stork to Hornbills, felt like nature unveiling its secrets just for us. Since morning till 5:30 pm, we spotted 12 species including Storm's Stork, Oriental Darter, Blue-eared and Stork-billed Kingfishers, Lesser Fish Eagle, White-crested Hornbill, Black Hornbill, Pied Hornbill, and later after lunch we added Bornean Crested Fireback, Scarlet-rumped Trogon, and Rhinoceros Hornbill. Besides birding, we also sighted several mammals during the river safari: the Long-tailed and Pig-tailed Macaques, the distinctive Proboscis Monkey with its long nose, and the Silver Lutung, also known as Silvered Leaf Monkey, gracefully swinging on the branches, a delightful sight to witness.



White-crowned Hornbill (*Berenicornis comatus*)

2nd August

Another river safari brought Collared Kingfisher, Brown Barbet, Storm's Storks, Oriental Pied Hornbills and White-breasted Woodswallows perching on high power lined, and more. After breakfast at Proboscis Lodge, we left for Sepilok.

2nd August - Rainforest Discovery Centre, Sepilok

Located within Sepilok Forest and managed by Sabah Forestry Department, RDC is a premier birding and education centre. Its high canopy walkways and towers gave us a bird's-eye view of the rainforest. We birded for three hours in



Black-sided Flowerpecker (*Dicaeum monticolum*)

the afternoon , spotting Wallace's Hawk-Eagle, White-Black Hornbill, Black Crowned Pitta, Fiery Minivet and others.

3rd August

Early birding on skywalks and trails gave us 18 species including Pink-necked Green Pigeons, Red-billed Malkoha, Black and Red Broadbill, Crimson Sunbird, Ashy



Bornean Black-capped Babbler (*Pellorneum capistratoides*)

Tailorbird, and Dusky Minivet. Watching Hornbills from above the towers, spotting Pittas on the trails, and even seeing a Flying Squirrel at night, all made me feel deeply connected to this magical world, and the night walk with a Ranger revealed Red Giant Flying Squirrel, Bornean Slow Loris and a Bornean Keeled Green Pit Viper.

4th August

On our final day, we recorded 17 species in the morning, including Olive-winged Bulbul and Rufous-tailed Tailorbird near the guesthouse. After lunch and the last round of birding, we left for Sandakan airport, took a midnight flight to Kuala Lumpur and left Kuala Lumpur for Delhi by a morning flight at 9:00 am on Malaysia Airlines, and reached Delhi at 12:30 pm.



Charlotte's Bulbul (*Iole charlottae*)

Borneo was a truly unforgettable birding experience. From iconic Hornbills and elusive Pheasants to river safaris and night walks with rare mammals, every moment was special.

Our Guides

1. Arka Sarkar – Enthusiast, nature lover, and seasoned traveller, based in Kolkata. M: +919830479671
2. Mirwan – Local guide from Sandakan, deeply passionate about birding. M: +6012837741

Total species observed - 155



Crested Partridge (*Rollulus rouloul*)

Endemic Birds of Borneo – Spotted on the Trip

1. Bornean Peacock-Pheasant - Telupid (Kanau hides)
2. Bulwer's Pheasant - Mount Trusmadi (Hide 2)
3. Crimson-headed Partridge - Banjaran Crocker Range (hide)
4. Red-breasted Partridge - Banjaran Crocker Range (hide)
5. Sabah Partridge - Between Sandakan & Lahad Datu



Diard's Trogon (*Harpactes diardii*)

6. Bornean Crested Fireback - Sandakan region, Kinabatangan River
7. Whitehead's Broadbill - Kinabalu NP (HQ, Timpohon Gate)



Blue-throated Bee-eater (*Merops viridis*)

8. Whitehead's Trogon (M & F) - Kinabalu NP (Kiau View Trail)
9. Bornean Green Magpie - Kinabalu NP
10. Bornean Whistling Thrush - Kinabalu NP
11. Mountain Black-eye - Kinabalu NP (Hill Lodge)



Greater Green Leafbird (*Chloropsis sonnerati*)

12. Chestnut-crested Yuhina - Kinabalu NP



Hairy-backed Bulbul (*Tricholestes criniger*)

13. Fruit Hunter - Crocker Range, Kinabalu NP

14. Bornean Shortwing - Gunung Alab Restaurant & Motel



Bornean Crested Fireback (*Lophura ignita*)

15. Black-crowned Pitta - RDC, Sepilok, Sandakan

16. Bornean Treepie - Gunung Alan Restaurant and Motel

17. Dusky Munia - Near RDC



Sunda Scimitar-babbler (*Pomatorhinus bornensis*)

18. Bornean Bulbul - Gunung Alan Restaurant and Motel

19. Bornean Barbet - Forest Reserve, near Gomantong Caves

20. Penan Bulbul - Kinabulu NP

21. Bornean Black-capped Babbler - Hides, en route to Sandakan and Lahsd Datu

22. Bornean Balck Magpie - Ulu Telupid



Sabah Partridge (*Tropicoperdix graydoni*)

LOST AND FOUND: LONG-BILLED BUSH WARBLER

Bhupesh Kumar Goyal



Long-billed Bush Warbler (*Locustella major*)

In 1977, a Southampton University team last documented a confirmed sighting of the Long-billed Bush Warbler (LBBW) in India in the Suru Valley of Ladakh. Even though prior records from the early part of the 20th century reported the bird to be present in abundance, there were no sightings of the LBBW in India after 1977, despite many focused attempts by enthusiastic birders and researchers in the ensuing years. The bird was considered ‘lost’ to the Indian subcontinent.

Sustained efforts to rediscover this bird by James Eaton, both on the Indian and Pakistan sides of the line of control (LOC), eventually proved successful in 2022, in the Naltar Valley of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, where a solitary individual has been sighted successfully for three successive years.

The above reports kindled hope for finding this bird on the Indian side of LOC too, said Harish Thangaraj from Mumbai, a hobbyist birder with a research-oriented mind. He went deep into every possible report available on the Internet about the LBBW,

spoke to James Eaton as well as other birders from Pakistan who had sighted this bird in the recent past, checked all possible details of the habitat where it was being seen and zoomed deep on Google Earth to find similar habitats on this side of the LOC. After 60 long hours of research over three weeks, Harish had a clear plan for his Mission LBBW. Gurez and Tulail Valleys in Kashmir and Dras and Suru Valleys in Ladakh emerged as



the most likely spots, with very similar habitats as in POK, where this elusive warbler was rediscovered.

On 19 June 2025, Harish got in touch with me and spoke about his plan for the LBBW. Frankly, it was only then that I realised for the first time that the LBBW, mentioned matter-of-factly on the same page of Grimmett as the West Himalayan Bush Warbler, was in fact a ‘lost bird’ and that we were contemplating a proper ‘Search Mission’ to rediscover it. Gurez and Tulail Valleys were not accessible to civilians due to security reasons those days and my intervention was therefore needed.

On 12th July, the team for Mission LBBW came together in Srinagar - Manjula Desai flew in from Bengaluru, Harish arrived from Mumbai, Rigzin Norboo drove from Leh, Irfan Jeelani from Kangan (in Kashmir), and I came from Delhi. We drove past the beautiful Wular Lake and climbed across the even more scenic Razdan Pass to drive into Gurez Valley, discussing the habitat and the call, sharing videos and pictures, and familiarising ourselves with its machine-like song. We were all quite clear that we had to look out for terraced fields, and the warbler was likely to be found in the weeds and shrubs like the seabuckthorn, rumex, and gooseberry that hedge the fields.

It was early afternoon of the 12th, and we were yet short of the military camp location in Gurez when we found a potential habitat near a bridge. Five of us spread out in different directions and looked out for our target bird for almost two hours without success, but we got familiar with the shrubs and weeds where this bird was likely to be found. We moved further and around sunset we reached the Officers Mess of the military camp, which provided a very comfortable stay for us for two nights.

The next morning we started the day with hope in our hearts and combed vast stretches of seabuckthorn bushes and every possible terraced field that we could find on our way. We got to see Ibisbills near the riverbank, a few Sandpipers, but no LBBW. We interacted with a number of local Dardi people and asked them if they had ever seen this bird, that we showed them on our phones, or had they ever heard the machine-like call, that we made them hear. A number of them did confidently say that they had seen



such a bird or heard such a call, that would reinvigorate our hope, but you can trust a layperson about identifying a Warbler only so much, when even the most seasoned birders are likely to fall short when it comes to Warblers.

When we could not find any sign of the LBBW, except for a couple of false alarms, we moved on to Tulail Valley a few kilometres further east, located at about 2800 metres altitude. Once again, we split into teams of two or three and searched all possible habitats in the Tulail Valley, but to no avail.

It was getting dark by then. Looking for the Boreal Owl, while we were on the LBBW mission, was also on our agenda. We looked at all the willow trees on the way, where it is known to nest, but unsuccessfully.

Back in the Officers Mess, we revisited our strategy over dinner. Should we search these same valleys for another day, or should we move out for the Dras and Suru Valleys? Considering our next halt would be Suru Valley, which was a long drive of 11-12 hours, and considering that our extensive search during the day came a cropper in these valleys, we decided to check out of Gurez early the next morning.

The Scorpio N is such a comfortable car, we realised, for the long drives that we were undertaking, across mountain passes and bumpy roads. We cruised past Zojila Pass around noon and were into the Dras Valley. The habitat on the other side of the river, around Dandal Village, looked very interesting, so we chose to spend a couple of hours looking around there. The local Balti children were fascinated to see ‘aliens’ like us, and the adults were completely intrigued and amused to learn that we had come all the way looking for some ‘bird’. They joined us in our search most enthusiastically, but once



again, after a few hours, we had only captured some nice landscape pictures and some videos of the children chanting ‘Long-Billed-Bush-Warbler’ with us, invoking heavenly intervention to make our mission successful.

As we were contemplating taking another detour towards Mushkew Valley, we happened to cross the Kargil War Memorial. We could not go past it without paying a visit, such was the magnetic attraction of this war memorial. We thought we would make short work of this visit, but the tales of valour and sacrifice of Indian soldiers during the Kargil War of 1999, and the visit to the sensitively curated War Museum moved us to tears. We ended up spending more than an hour at the memorial. A beautiful value addition to our Mission LBBW.

It was almost 9 p.m. by the time we reached the military camp in the Suru Valley. Another comfortable place for our stay, that helped us to recover from the day-long drive and get up refreshed the next morning - the morning of 15th July.

Harish and I got into one team and went along the Suru River, combing every field and every weed for the warbler. For four long hours, we searched on either side of the river, occasionally taking inputs from locals without success. Manjula and Rigzin went in another direction and searched extensively but with the same result.

It was like looking for a needle in a haystack that was probably not there. I must admit that my hope for the Warbler that had gone missing for 48 long years was beginning to fade by now. I was now counting on the sighting of Pale Rosefinch and Red-fronted Rosefinch in the Nubra Valley and the Changla Pass respectively, also kept as part of our itinerary, more as consolation in case the LBBW remained elusive.

Harish decided to move to Sankoo Village and search at higher altitudes than we had been searching so far. We moved up a few hairpin bends and reached 3200 metres altitude. This time, Harish and Manjula went together, whereas Rigzin and I formed one team. Another couple of hours passed without result.

The roadhead was another 2 km further from where our car was parked. I suggested to Rigzin that we drive to the Chumikchin village on the roadhead, to get closer to Harish and Manjula who had gone still further away in their search for the target bird. Once there, a couple of locals from the village started walking with us on the stretch of road under construction. Just then, Rigzin said that he had heard the LBBW call from the terraced fields below. We initially wondered whether it was the playback by Harish that we were hearing. When the call persisted, Rigzin chose to go down to investigate, while I was still chatting and taking selfies with the locals on the roadside. Harish called after a few minutes saying that Rigzin seemed to have got the bird and that I should also go down to verify. Mehndi, the local man from the village, accompanied me through the fields and then we saw Rigzin, looking very excited and very nervous, both at the same time, thanks to the adrenaline rush. The 'machine-like call' was unmistakable! The LBBW was right there, singing away, hidden in the willow bush about 12 feet from where I sat. I recorded the soundtrack and called up Harish and made him hear it. He was thrilled. And then the LBBW showed itself for the very first time in India, after 48 long years, as it took a short flight from one bush to another. And started calling again and again and again. What excitement for both Rigzin and me! We were hugging each other and giving high fives to each other. Manjula and Harish joined up with us in another 20 minutes. We soon cajoled the bird to come out in the open and sing for us. Cameras swung into action and when the cameras had had their fill, the mobile phones were pressed into service - to make mobile videos of the singing beauty. What a Eureka moment for our team on this thrilling success of Mission LBBW! We were overjoyed.

Mehndi, in the meantime, dashed to his village and came back with a flask full of piping hot tea and Good Day biscuits that were much needed as it was already past 2 p.m. and we hadn't had a morsel since the morning. Harish said that it was the biggest birding day of his life, and we all agreed. It's one thing to stumble upon a long-lost bird or to accidentally chance upon a bird never seen in the country before, but to research and plan a mission to rediscover a long-lost bird that has remained elusive despite repeated attempts over the years, with only a forty percent chance to find it and THEN FIND IT is quite another! That's what this team, spearheaded by Harish Thangaraj, had done and that's why this rediscovery became a historic day for birding in India. Feeling buoyant and upbeat, we moved on to the Nubra Valley for our next target.



Soon, the media got whiff of our historic rediscovery and the story was promptly published in The Times of India, The Hindustan Times, and India Today, besides many local newspapers and news channels. The floodgates for twitching this long-lost warbler had been opened now. Dozens of birders, from all parts of the country, flocked to Suru Valley in the three weeks that followed. As many as six individual birds were sighted by one group.

Somewhere after the first week of August, when the harvest for the barley crop started, the bird disappeared again. Not to be found by the few groups that visited the valley after that. It looks like it will now be in the next breeding season, probably June-July next year, that the LBBW will be back yet again, in the same spot, singing away, and all those birders who were a little late this year, and those who had kept it for later, would catch a glimpse of this rarity. Amen!

Chandigarh Bird Club®

Chandigarh Bird Club® is a registered organisation formed by a group of local birdwatchers. The idea is to record the local avifauna, its habitats, and help make the residents of Tri-City aware of birds in our region and protect them.

Incepted in 2008, the Chandigarh Bird Club® dedicated itself to its goal of protecting the environment.

The Club owes its existence to those few dedicated and expert members who started this Club in Chandigarh Boat Club; namely Navjit Singh, Narbir Kahlon, Vikramjit Singh, Mrs Rima Dhillon, Mrs Sarbjeet Kaur, and Mrs Geeta Goswami.

The fundamental objectives of Chandigarh Bird Club® continue to be to:

- **Bring people, especially the younger generation, closer to nature through birding and help them to enjoy the outdoors while making it a fun activity.**
- **Make individuals and governments more sensitive towards the environment to create a dynamic database for analysis to focus on conservation efforts.**
- **Create a forum for birders to share information and discuss related to this activity.**



President - Rima Dhillon

Vice President - Narbir Kahlon

Secretary - Amandeep Singh Channa

Joint Secretary - Navjit Singh

Treasurer - Mahesh Garg

Editorial Team:

Rima Dhillon

Amandeep Singh Channa

Jasbir S. Randhawa

Back Cover - above: Rose-ringed Parakeet (*Psittacula krameri*) by Anuj Jain
below: Indian Spot-billed Duck (*Anas zonorhyncha*) by Anuj Jain

