Whispering Wings®

Newsletter of the Chandigarh Bird Club®

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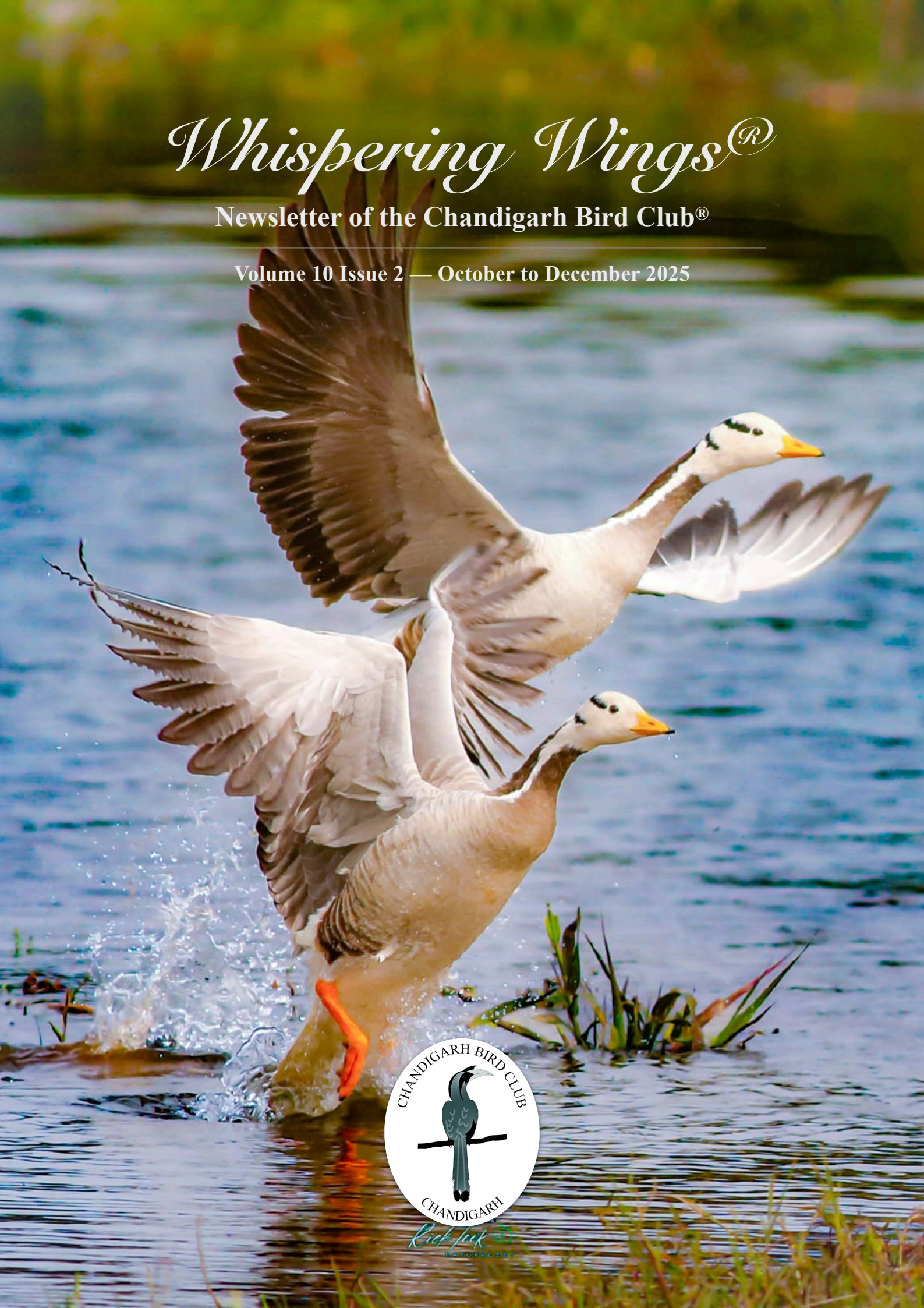

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Front Cover - Bar-headed Geese *(Anser indicus)* by Rick Toor



Asian Barred Owlet *(Glaucidium cuculoides)* by Amandeep Singh Channa

From the Editor's Desk

Rima Dhillon



Recent news from across the country offers both warning and witness to what birdwatchers have been sensing in the field. Reports of shrinking wetlands, declining waterbird numbers and expert concerns over unchecked urbanisation erasing natural habitats underline how rapidly landscapes are changing beneath migratory flyways. It seems that South Asia itself is becoming increasingly inhospitable to migratory birds, through the steady loss of feeding grounds, safe stopovers, and insect-rich habitats

Field observations from Punjab's wetlands echo a growing unease among birdwatchers. Reports of fluctuating water levels, pollution, and encroachment at sites such as Harike Wetland, Shala Pattan and Kanjli, besides numerous village ponds across the state, mirror national concerns about the wetlands and declining waterbird numbers. While mid-winter censuses occasionally bring encouraging counts, eutrophication, unchecked tourism, fishing pressure, and infrastructure creeping ever closer to wetland margins, are very visible stresses. The loss of shallow feeding areas, insect life, and undisturbed roosting sites turn once-reliable winter refuges into uncertain stopovers.

Unexpected sightings in a village pond, or the absence of a once-regular visitor is no longer incidental; it is a signal that these wetlands, so vital to both birds and humans, are fraying quietly in full view, yet rarely with enough urgency.

Birds serve as early messengers of environmental stress, noticed first by those who watch closely, and often too late by those who decide.

Happy Birding!

Secretary's Report

Amandeep Singh Channa



A very Happy New Year to all our readers. This last quarter ended with much jubilation for the club. These last months of the year are some of the best times for birdwatchers in the Tricity, with winter migrants arriving at our local hotspots.

In November, CBC found another hotspot. Palheri village is home to a pond that hosts a vibrant waterfowl presence. The pond and its environs are filled with a variety of birds - Bar-headed Geese, Indian Spot-billed Ducks, Mallards, Gadwalls, Common Teals, Eurasian Coots, Common Moorhens, Grey-headed Swamphens, Little Grebes, Black-winged Stilts, Red-wattled Lapwings, and more. November is also the month when we celebrate Dr Salim Ali's birth anniversary. As such, CBC conducted its Annual Dr Salim Ali Waterfowl Census and Species Count. This year, it was spread over two days, with teams covering Mote Majra, Siswan, and Dhanas on 11 November, and Sukhna Lake on 12 November.

In December, the field trip was undertaken to Chakki Morh. Due to the incessant rains during the monsoons, the road was in a dilapidated state. The field trip was curtailed un to Tarol village because the road was swept away in a landslide. Even then, the participants were not disappointed due to some sightings of White-crested Laughingthrushes and Red-billed Blue Magpies, among other species. CBC also released its calendar for the new year, which was distributed free of cost to our members.

This quarter ended on a high note with regard to Palheri pond. The next quarter, in the new year, promises to be even better, with CBC expected to participate in the Asian Waterfowl Census, and the WWF India census in Punjab, and its own annual Bird Race. Much is to be expected from the Club for the next quarter, including observation of World Wetland Day in February, and World Sparrow Day in March.

Bird in Focus
House Sparrow *(Passer domesticus)*

Rima Dhillon



Unpretentious yet ubiquitous, once an inseparable part of everyday life in the plains of Punjab, the House Sparrow was so common that its presence was taken for granted. Its cheerful chirping from rooftops, courtyards and grain stores symbolised close coexistence between people and birds. 'Clouds' of these little birds descended on washed wheat grain spread out to dry on charpais, their lively squabbling an inseparable part of the rythm of daily life. Alas! Over the past few decades, however, this familiar neighbour has quietly vanished from many towns and villages, prompting concern among birdwatchers and scientists alike.

Passer domesticus, as its latin name suggests, is one of the most human-dependent bird species in the world. Unlike many birds, it rarely inhabits forests or remote natural areas. Instead, it thrives in urban, suburban, and rural landscapes shaped by human activity. Traditional Punjabi homes with mud walls, tiled or thatched roofs, open

eaves, and ventilation holes, and even kindling stored against walls, provided ideal nesting and roosting sites. Livestock sheds and grain-handling areas ensured a steady supply of food. Modernisation has altered this relationship.

House Sparrows are secondary cavity nesters. They do not excavate their own nests, but rely on holes and crevices in buildings, roofs, walls, pipes and bridges, Nests are loosely constructed using dry grass, straw, feathers, hair, string, and other soft materials.

Breeding occurs between April and August. A pair may raise two to four broods in a season, laying 2-7 eggs per clutch. Incubation lasts about 10-14 days, and chicks fledge within 14-16 days of hatching. Sparrows often nest in loose colonies, with several nests located close together, reflecting their social nature.



Parenting is a shared responsibility where both males and females participate in nest building, incubation, and feeding the young. While adults are mainly seed and grain eaters, nestlings depend heavily on insects for protein during early growth

House Sparrows are highly social birds. They live, feed, bathe, and roost in groups throughout the year. Their constant chirping serves as social communication and social bonding. Communal dust-bathing and water-bathing are common sights where sparrow populations thrive.

Despite their sociable nature, House Sparrows can be aggressive around nest sites, defending their cavities fiercely, even against larger birds.

The species is largely non-migratory. Most individuals remain close to their birthplace. Only limited local movements occur, such as juvenile dispersal or minor seasonal shifts. Their decline in Punjab is therefore not due to migration but to changing local conditions.

Globally, the House Sparrow is classified as Least Concern due to its vast distribution and large overall population. However, this status masks severe regional declines. Across many Indian cities and agricultural plains, including Punjab, sparrow numbers have fallen dramatically.

Local studies and long-term observations indicate that in several urban and semi-urban areas of Punjab, sparrows have declined to near absence, surviving only in small pockets where traditional buildings, vegetation, and insect life is abundant.

Why Have Sparrows Disappeared from Punjab? A question that plagues everyone - birders and non birders alike. Scientific studies and field observations point to multiple causes.



Loss of nesting sites due to modern architecture has long been the main suspect in declining house sparrow populations. Reinforced cement concrete buildings, sealed windows, smooth façades, air-conditioned interiors, and glass structures offer few cavities for nesting, drastically reducing suitable habitat for sparrows in the plains.

Another major reason behind the decline is the reduction in insect populations caused by the intensive use of pesticide and insecticide in agriculture. This deprives nestlings of essential protein during critical growth stages, and also affects adult fertility while weakening eggshell strength, and reducing hatching success.

Reduced food availability, due to disappearance of traditional grain storage, spillage, and open courtyards, urbanisation, and loss of green spaces, hedges, and native vegetation, air and noise pollution, increased predation by cats and crows, and constant human disturbance, are all contributing factors. While factors like electromagnetic

radiation from mobile towers are sometimes suggested, scientific evidence remains inconclusive. Research across India has consistently shown that sparrow abundance correlates strongly with the availability of nesting cavities, insect-rich surroundings, and low pesticide use. Habitat and food loss remain the most strongly supported causes.

Despite their modest appearance, House Sparrows display remarkable adaptability and complex behaviour. Their close evolutionary association with humans makes them valuable indicators of environmental health.

The disappearance of the House Sparrow from the plains of Punjab is not merely the loss of a bird species - it reflects a breakdown in the traditional harmony between people, architecture, agriculture, and nature. With small changes at household and community levels, it is still possible to welcome this familiar neighbour back into our lives.

When sparrows return, it is often a sign that our living spaces have become healthier for all.



Palheri Pond

Rima Dhillon



Popularly known as Palheri Pond to the birding community of Chandigarh, this location is actually a low-lying area between the two villages of Palheri and Bhagat Majra. Although it is still surrounded by agricultural land, part of it on one side has been acquired by a Developer, and a few houses are already under construction. Like most such natural catchment ponds close to cities or villages, this too is in danger of disappearing soon.





Common/Green-winged Teal *(Anas crecca)* by Sarbjeet Kaur

However, it is a great birding spot during the winter months. Migratory as well as domestic ducks can be seen in substantial numbers. Recently, the little waterbody became a subject of excitement with the sighting of a single Northern Lapwing *(Vanellus vanellus)*. Though a regular winter visitor in larger wetlands such as Pong Dam, Harike Wetlands, and Keshopur Community Reserve, its presence so close to home caused an



Black-winged Stilts *(Himantopus Himantopus)* by Sarbjeet Kaur

excited flutter amongst birders and bird paparazzi alike. Surely, ‘Palheri’ became the most searched location on Google Maps!



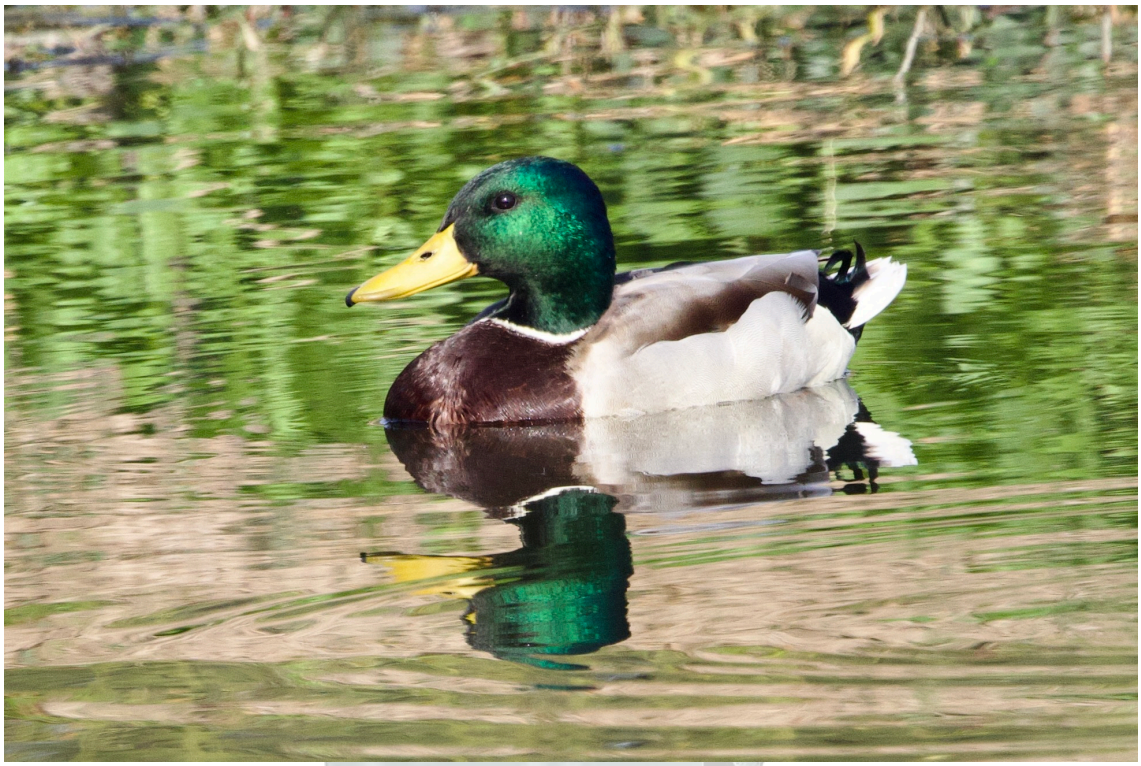
Northern Lapwing *(Vanellus vanellus)* by Sarbjeet Kaur

The Northern Lapwing is a bird of open wet meadows, agricultural fields, marshes, and riverbanks. It breeds in the northernmost regions of Europe, Russia, and Asia.



Common/Green-winged Teal *(Anas crecca)* by Sarbjeet Kaur

Its migration of 3,000-4,000 km begins in autumn from September through November, with populations moving southwest towards their wintering grounds. While many



Mallard *(Anas platyrhynchos)* by Sarbjeet Kaur

flocks settle for the winter in the warmer parts of Europe, many more use the East Atlantic Flyway to winter in both West and East Africa, as well as the Central Asian



Indian Roller *(Coracias benghalensis)* by Rima Dhillon



Plain Prinia *(Prinia inornata)* by Rima Dhillon

Flyway to reach Northwest India after crossing Iran and Afghanistan. Thus, these birds remain connected to this region.



Red-naped Ibis *(Pseudibis papillosa)* by Rima Dhillon

With its iridescent shades of green, a majestically plumed crest, and graceful bearing, the Northern Lapwing is a perennial muse for nature photographers.

Though the Northern Lapwing may be the showstopper this season, there are many other species in this winter extravaganza that equally deserve appreciation.

Photographs by CBC Members



Bar-headed Geese *(Anser indicus)* by Pushkar Bali



Mallards *(Anas platyrhynchos)* by Pushkar Bali



Gadwalls *(Anas strepera)* by Pushkar Bali



Yellow-footed Green Pigeon *(Treron phoenicopterus)* by Vikas Sharma



Great Myna *(Acridotheres grandis)* by Gurdip Singh Boparai



Indian Nightjar *(Caprimulgus asiaticus)* by Janinder Rana



Crested Kingfisher *(Megaceryle lugubris)* by Rick Toor



The State Bird of Chandigarh
Indian Grey Hornbill *(Ocyceros Birostris)* by Vikas Sharma



Gadwall *(Mareca strepera)* by Amandeep Singh Channa



Black-throated Bushtit *(Aegithalos concinnus)* by Amandeep Singh Channa



Little Ringed Plover *(Thinornis dubious)* by Aseem Kalia



Pied Avocet *(Recurvirostra avosetta)* by Amandeep Singh Channa

Rajgarh - A Birder's Paradise

Amandeep Singh Channa

Rajgarh and Nohradhar are two towns in Himachal Pradesh that have become synonymous with birding. Many birders have visited these towns to explore the various avian species that are found there. I wasn't to be left behind, and neither were my friends - Mitinderpal Singh Sekhon, Sarbjeet Kaur, and Rima Dhillon. In the second weekend of November, we decided to visit Rajgarh and Nohradhar to see for ourselves. In this endeavour, we were fortunate that CBC member and bird guide, Rick Toor was available to guide us in that area.



Professor Sekhon with our bikes at Churdhar Wings

On 14 November, at 0600 hours, Professor Sekhon and I rode our bikes to meet Rima ma'am and Sarbjeet ma'am at the latter's home. I had already arranged for Prof. Sekhon's and my camera bags to be placed in Rima ma'am's car the day before, and we only carried our spare clothes on our bikes. We took the Ochghat route, which begins just before Kumarhatti and bypasses Solan. On the way, we stopped for tea and breakfast, and birded as well.

We reached our destination, Churdhar Wings homestay in Nohradhar, by lunchtime. After lunch we drove to a nearby hotspot for afternoon birding. The location was the mountain ridge, which we walked along. Of the many species seen, some highlights were the Spotted Nutcracker, Coal Tit, Green-backed Tit, Black-throated Bushtit, Bar-

tailed Treecreeper, and Blue-capped Rock-Thrush. On the way back, we spotted a Wallcreeper.



First day's afternoon birding

The next day, 15 November at 0600 hours we drove further to Talangana village for Red-headed Bullfinches. After parking our cars, we walked a trail around the village, through the forest and then fields. It is a very lovely location, and it didn't disappoint us when it came to birds. We saw flocks of Snow Pigeons, Alexandrine



Birding in Talangana village

Parakeets, Slaty-headed Parakeets, Himalayan Griffons, Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler,

White-cheeked Nuthatch, Rufous-backed Redstart (a lifer for me), Plain Mountain Finches, and the pièce de résistance: Red-headed Bullfinches. After lunch at a local resident's house, we returned to our homestay.



Our Lunch spot in Talangana village

After a quick rest and a cup of tea, we again went for evening birding along the main road. Here, next to a field on the road, we saw the Buff-barred Warbler, Lemon-rumped Warbler, and Pink-browed Rosefinch, among other species. We must have utilised a good 10 GB of memory card storage on the Rosefinch alone.

On our last day, 16 November we had a few hours of morning birding at the same field on the main road. This time, we climbed up into the field and our efforts were rewarded. Among many species, we saw the Asian Barred Owlet, Brown-fronted Woodpecker, Grey-headed Woodpecker, White-browed Shrike-Babbler, Spotted Nutcracker, Scaly-breasted Cupwing, Western-crowned Warbler, Chestnut Thrush, Blue-fronted Redstart, Pink-browed Rosefinch, and Plain Mountain Finch.

After breakfast and a spot of tea, we left for home, Rima ma'am and Sarbjeet ma'am in the former's car, and Prof Sekhon and I on our bikes. We left at around 1200

noon and reached home at around 1900 hours. The trip was both a personal success as it was my first motorcycle trip, and a birding success as we saw over 60 species.

1. Alexandrine Parakeet *(Psittacula eupatria)*
2. Asian Barred Owlet *(Glaucidium cuculoides)*
3. Bar-tailed Treecreeper *(Certhia himalayana)*



Rufous-backed Redstart/Eversmann's Redstart *(Phoenicurus erythronotus)*

4. Black Francolin *(Francolinus francolinus)*
5. Black Redstart *(Phoenicurus ochruros)*
6. Black-chinned Babbler *(Cyanoderma pyrrhops)*
7. Black-headed Jay *(Garrulus lanceolatus)*

8. Black-throated Tit (Black-throated Bushtit) *(Aegithalos concinnus)*
9. Blue Whistling-Thrush *(Myophonus caeruleus)*
10. Blue-capped Redstart *(Phoenicurus coeruleocephala)*
11. Brown-fronted Woodpecker *(Dendrocoptes auriceps)*



Rock Bunting *(Emberiza cia)*

12. Buff-barred Warbler *(Phylloscopus pulcher)*
13. Chestnut Thrush *(Turdus rubrocanus)*
14. Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrush *(Trochalopteron erythrocephalum)*
15. Cinereous Tit *(Parus cinereus)*

16. Coal Tit *(Periparus ater)*
17. Common Sandpiper *(Actitis hypoleucos)*
18. Crested Kingfisher *(Megaceryle lugubris)*
19. Eurasian Jay *(Garrulus glandarius)*
20. Eurasian Sparrowhawk *(Accipiter nisus)*
21. Great Barbet *(Psilopogon virens)*
22. Green Sandpiper *(Tringa ochropus)*
23. Green-backed Tit *(Parus monticolus)*



Wallcreeper *(Tichodroma muraria)*

24. Grey Bushchat *(Saxicola ferreus)*
25. Grey Treepie *(Dendrocitta formosae)*
26. Grey-headed Woodpecker *(Picus canus)*
27. Grey-hooded Warbler *(Phylloscopus xanthoschistos)*
28. Himalayan Bulbul *(Pycnonotus leucogenys)*
29. Himalayan Griffon (Himalayan Vulture) *(Gyps himalayensis)*
30. Himalayan Prinia (Striated Prinia) *(Prinia crinigera)*
31. Indian White-eye (Oriental White-eye) *(Zosterops palpebrosus)*

32. Kalij Pheasant *(Lophura leucomelanos)*
33. Large-billed Crow *(Corvus macrorhynchos)*
34. Lemon-rumped Warbler *(Phylloscopus chloronotus)*
35. Mistle Thrush *(Turdus viscivorus)*
36. Pink-browed Rosefinch *(Carpodacus rodochroa)*
37. Plain Mountain Finch *(Leucosticte nemoricola)*
38. Plum-headed Parakeet *(Psittacula cyanocephala)*
39. Red-billed Blue-Magpie *(Urocissa erythroryncha)*



Red-headed Bullfinch *(Pyrrhula erythrocephala)*

40. Red-headed Bullfinch *(Pyrrhula erythrocephala)*
41. River Lapwing *(Vanellus duvaucelii)*
42. Rock Bunting *(Emberiza cia)*
43. Rufous Sibia *(Heterophasia capistrata)*
44. Rufous-backed Redstart (Eversmann's Redstart) *(Phoenicurus erythronotus)*
45. Rufous-breasted Accentor *(Prunella strophiata)*
46. Russet Sparrow *(Passer cinnamomeus)*
47. Rusty-cheeked Scimitar-Babbler *(Erythrogenys erythrogenys)*

48. Scaly-breasted Cupwing (Scaly-breasted Wren-Babbler) *(Pnoepyga albiventer)*
49. Slaty-headed Parakeet *(Psittacula himalayana)*
50. Snow Pigeon *(Columba leuconota)*
51. Spotted Nutcracker (Southern Nutcracker) *(Nucifraga hemispila)*
52. Streaked Laughingthrush *(Trochalopteron lineatum)*
53. Striated Laughingthrush *(Grammatoptila striata)*
54. Variegated Laughingthrush *(Trochalopteron variegatum)*
55. Wallcreeper *(Tichodroma muraria)*



Scaly-breasted Cupwing (Himalayan) *(Pnoepyga albiventer albiventer/pallidior)*

56. Western Crowned Warbler *(Phylloscopus occipitalis)*
57. White-browed Shrike-Babbler *(Pteruthius aeralatus)*
58. White-capped Redstart *(Phoenicurus leucocephalus)*
59. White-cheeked Nuthatch *(Sitta leucopsis)*
60. White-throated Fantail *(Rhipidura albicollis)*
61. White-throated Kingfisher *(Halcyon smyrnensis)*
62. Yellow-breasted Greenfinch *(Chloris spinoides)*



Pink-browed Rosefinch *(Carpodacus rodochroa)*



Chestnut Thrush *(Turdus rubrocanus)*

Ladakh - A Winter Wonderland (11th – 20th December, 2025)

Mandeep Kang



Tibetan Argali *(Ovis ammon)*



Tibetan Gazelle *(Procapra picticaudata)*

Though the seeds were sown when I was visiting Ladakh two years ago, it was only in July-August of 2025 that the plan for the trip fructified, when I happened to see pictures of the Snow Leopard in Lobsang's office. I casually asked him about the odds of spotting the elusive cat, and he informed me that the chances of seeing one really increases if one visits in December and January, as opposed to during the summer. The idea kept simmering in my brain, and burst to the front when I visited Leh in the summer. I had discussions with Lobsang and with Rigzin, and eventually booked Rigzin for the first half of December. After asking my birding friends with whom I had travelled before, it was eventually decided that four of us: Sandeep, Amit, Anup and myself would travel in one car with Rigzin, which turned out to be great fun and for the best.



Tibetan Sandgrouse *(Syrrhaptes tibetanus)*

I then started reading about suitable attire for the cold, followed by trips to Columbia stores, discussions with Anup regarding what to buy and what we had already bought. The shopping at Columbia did not inspire too much confidence in me, and I had grave doubts and qualms about the cold and the sanity of the entire trip, but then I would think of seeing the Snow Leopard and all doubts would be washed away in a rush of excitement. Flight tickets were booked. I wondered how all the stuff I had bought would fit into a 15 kg bag, and I again had misgivings about the cold.

Day 1 started with our arrival in Leh from Chandigarh. Rigzin was waiting outside the airport to drive us, and we were soon in the hotel where we discovered that we were the only guests. The day was bright and sunny, with the temperature around 2° C. We were given rooms next door to each other with a shared balcony, and the next hour

flew by with hellos and hugs, introductions, lunch and lots of picture taking. After resting in the afternoon, we all had a thukpa dinner, and then off to bed. I had a very restless night, mostly due to the AC playing up, while Sunny snored on in oblivious slumber.



Common Merganser *(Mergus merganser)*



Himalayan Red Fox *(Vulpes vulpes montana)*

The Day 2 plan was for morning birding in the Shey Marshes at 7.30 am. Anup's gizmo announced that it was -5°C at night. Boy, was it cold in the marshes. I donned cap and gloves within minutes, but my feet were soon freezing. Eurasian Magpies *(Pica pica)* were everywhere, as were House Sparrows *(Passer domesticus)*. We sighted a group of European Starlings *(Sturnus vulgaris)* just off the road, their iridescent colours glinting incredibly in the morning sunlight. White-winged Redstarts *(Phoenicurus erythrogastrus)* were everywhere, in contrast to the summer, when we only saw them in the higher reaches.

The Spituk Marshes, with the monastery outlined against the incredibly blue sky, contrasted sharply with the white-limbed Poplar trees and the yellow grasses. We spotted two White-browed Tit-Warblers *(Leptopoecile sophiae)*, their drab winter



Tibetan Ibex *(Capra sibirica)*

appearance in contrast to their brilliant summer plumage. A Black-throated Thrush *(Turdus atrogularis)* was poking around in the roots of an enormous willow. A group of Grey-crowned Goldfinches *(Carduelis caniceps)* were feeding on the grasses on both sides of the road, while a Common Buzzard *(Buteo buteo)* glided against the blue sky. It was an incredible morning.

The post-breakfast birding in the same area was abandoned when Rigzin called about a sighting of a Eurasian Lynx with two cubs at Wari La. There was just a sprinkling of snow on the mountain tops as snowfall was late this winter. Plenty of Chukar and large flocks of Red-billed Choughs were seen on both sides of the road. The location of the Eurasian Lynx was soon crowded with over a dozen vehicles carrying local wildlife

enthusiasts, and we were the only tourists there. A long wait followed, enlivened by a cup of hot tea from the ever-present flask in the boot of the car. As the sun set it became colder and windy. Just when I thought that the Lynx may have moved unobserved, it moved to the left, followed by a flurry of people rushing for their cameras and scopes. What a beautiful creature. As I watched, it stretched just like a cat then sauntered back to its original rock, where it was joined by the two cubs. We had barely a few minutes with it before the light gave out altogether, but those few minutes were so exhilarating, so incredibly joyous, and so amazing. All we could talk about on the drive back was how beautiful the animal was, and how incredibly lucky we were to see it, and that too on our first day.



Solitary Snipe *(Gallinago solitaria)*

Day 3 dawned bright and fair as we started towards West Ladakh. We had barely cleared Leh town and the army units, when we encountered a herd of over 40 Ladakh Urials grazing along the hill, barely 50 mts away. Ladakh Urial *(Ovis Vignei vignei)*, also known as Arkars, Shapo or Shepa, is a sub-species of the Urial, a wild sheep that's native to Central and South Asia, seen up to an elevation of 4,500 mts. The dominant male was huge, with massive sweeping horns and the characteristic black along the chest and on the flanks. He was on the hill-top and came down to investigate our presence while the rest of the flock remained unconcerned. We watched them for at least 10-15 minutes, clicking away to our heart's content.

At Gurdwara Pathar Sahib the water in the trough for washing feet was freezing. The JCO in charge introduced himself and got us hot, sweet tea. At the Sangam of the Indus and the Zanskar rivers, the colours of the waters were awesome. By then it had clouded over with a chilly wind blowing. The drive beyond Nyoma along the Indus was through stunning landscapes and jagged mountains, and we saw leafless white trunks of poplar trees, now joined by the reddish branches of the willow trees, with varying hues of brown, rust, red and an occasional green. The majestic old fortress, now a monastery built on a commanding height, kept our gaze riveted. Rooms at Shapo lodge in Uleytokpo had only a pillar heater, but the bathrooms were functional with running hot and cold water. The owner had 7 ensuite tents and some chalets under construction. There were flocks of Rock Pigeons, Cinereous Tits and the ubiquitous Eurasian Magpies in the



Snow Leopard *(Panthera uncia)*

garden. Lunch was in the dining room, which was heated by a bukhāri. For company we had the resident dog, Booboo and a male cat named Munni, accompanied by its beautiful mother, named Munni ki Mummy. Rigzin had set up his spotter scope and he was busy scanning for the elusive Shaan, but all he got was a pair of Golden Eagles, very high up and far away.

Afternoon birding was along a stream near our lodge, towards Shukpachan village, named after the massive ancient Juniper tree/Ladakh Shukpa *(Juniperus semiglobosa)*, the State tree of Ladakh since 2023. A rare native species in Ladakh's cold deserts, its leaves, twigs and branches are burnt during religious rites, social gatherings

and when welcoming guests. During the festive season of Losar, the demand skyrockets, leading to unsustainable harvesting and smuggling.

We spotted Plain Mountain Finches, White-winged Redstarts, Robin Accentors and a Brown Dipper. Beyond the tree line the landscape was bleak but awe-inspiring. We saw another herd of Ladakh Urial and a beautiful Himalayan Red Fox just beside the road. Its coat was really heavy for the winter and its thick long tail with the characteristic white tip, and this sighting more than made up for the less productive afternoon birding session.

On the fourth day our first sighting was of a majestic Golden Eagle *(Aquila chrysaetos)* perched on some rocks. It is known to be able to lift up a Himalayan



White-winged Redstart *(Phoenicurus erythrogastrus)*

Red Fox. We saw more Plain Mountain Finches and the occasional White-winged Redstarts, Robin Accentors, Chukars and Red-billed Choughs. We walked along the road to keep warm, startling a Robin Accentor *(Prunella rubeculoide)* and we saw a Wallcreeper *(Tichodroma muraria)* flashing its beautiful red colours. Towards Ulley we came upon a Lammergeier *(Gypaetus barbatus)*, some more Choughs and three Ibex.

For the afternoon session, Rigzin decided to explore another valley to the south of the river Indus, where we saw a large herd of Ibex grazing peacefully in the grass just above the road. The dominant male was immediately christened “Big Daddy” because of his immense horns and flowing black beard. The Himalyan Ibex *(Capra sibirica sakeen)* is a majestic and resilient mountain goat which thrives in rugged alpine terrain and is recognised for its impressive horns, sturdy build and remarkable climbing abilities.

The sunny weather broke on the 5th day and we woke up to an overcast sky with the temperature hovering around -5°C. On our drive towards our homestay in Sakti village, Gadwalls, Mallards, and Northern Pintails were seen feeding in the ponds. Blue Whistling Thrush and some Fire-fronted Serins aka Red-fronted Serins were seen close to the village. As reports came in of the sighting of a Snow Leopard in Hemis, we headed immediately to Hemis National Park. After passing the super glamping camp at Lungmar (cost: Rs 1 Lakh per person/night) we reached the site, where a row of spotter scopes, bins, and super huge lenses were lined up. There was also a crew making a film on the Snow Leopards. Hot tea and ginger water was being served along with biscuits. The atmosphere was electric. The crew for the film shoot was way too calm and blasé about the sighting, whilst I was hopping about with excitement. For the next couple of hours we



Common Starling *(Sturnus vulgaris)*

kept observing the Snow Leopard, sometimes hidden from sight and at times moving anout. A Bharal appeared on the same slope as the Snow Leopard. It seemed to freeze in alarm, making us hold our breath in anticipation of a chase and a kill, but it relaxed and started grazing instead. A second Snow Leopard was spotted on a different slope about 1.5 Km away. As I watched through the scope, it sprang down from a ledge and disappeared from sight, and then showed up elsewhere. Within minutes, all scopes and cameras were picked up and everyone rushed down to their vehicles and drove hell for leather to the new site. From here, the Leopard was clearly visible with binoculars. It sat just below the ridge-line with its back to us, its long bushy tail hanging down the slope, regally posing for a few minutes before finally disappearing from sight. We headed back - feet, hands and noses frozen, but we were full of excitement and totally thrilled to bits

at having spotted a herd of Bharal drinking at the stream, after having seen two Snow Leopards in the same afternoon. It was the proverbial cherry on top of the icing on the cake. Still high on adrenalin, we reached the homestay to find the radiators already running in our rooms, with the temperature turned up to a comfortable +8°C. Our host had placed an immersion rod in the water storage tank in the verandah, so we had warm water to wash with. This was followed by a superb hot dinner beside a cozy bukhāri, with multiple carpets, fabulous chinaware, and antiques adorning the dining area.

The overcast sky of the previous day had given way to a bright and sunny day with a chilly breeze. After a breakfast of Ladakhi bread with eggs and homemade apricot jam, we headed up towards Wari La. We came across Woolly Hares, Chukars galore, and umpteen flocks of Red-billed Choughs, Robin Accentors, and Horned Larks. A hot lunch



Black-throated Thrush *(Turdus atrogularis)*

of a variation of thukpa was enjoyed in the verandah of the homestay, with the sun pouring in. Another report of a Snow Leopard sighting in Hemis sent us hurrying back to the same spot that we had visited the previous day. After a long wait while repeatedly scanning around the rock behind which it had disappeared, we had several cups of hot tea, hot ginger water, and snacks. The Snow Leopard moved out to saunter across the slope, and crossed a small stream, walked along the skyline for some time, and then disappeared on the other side.

We breakfasted slightly later than usual, then bid farewell to our hosts before leaving for the last leg of the trip. We went back to the Indus at Karu, and then drove along it to Upshi and thence Chumathang where we halted for a coffee break. As we headed upstream, the Indus showed ever increasing ice along its banks, with Common

Mergansers floating among the ice floes in the river. Beyond Mahe, Rigzin stopped at a place where the Indus had a wider valley with plenty of side streams. Some nomads were setting up camp by the riverside. There was a Citrine Wagtail *(Motacilla citreola)* in the small stream, whilst some Mallards flew overhead. We crossed the first stream and we were wandering up and down, trying to see the Solitary Snipe when it flew out from literally beneath Rigzin's feet. We chased after it, only to see it fly again and then a third time. While crossing the stream back to the road, my foot slipped, and in an effort to keep my camera above the water I found myself knee deep in icy cold water. As I was floundering around, the unashamed paparazzo, Anup was clicking away! The water was icy cold and when I took off my shoes, litres of Indus water flowed out of them. A fresh pair of socks and dry sneakers were a life saver. Despite all the time taken over this little



White-browed Tit Warbler *(Leptopoecile sophiae)*

drama, the Solitary Snipe *(Gallinago solitaria)* was still sitting pretty beneath the rock, trusting its perfect camouflage. What a lifer, and what we went through in its pursuit!

After crossing the Indus at Loma, we arrived at Nyoma and stopped for lunch. The Hanle river was mainly frozen over. About 30 Km from Hanle, Rigzin spotted the Pallas's Cat, but before we could get out of the car, it went to ground and we couldn't spot it again.

Next morning we left the homestay in Hanle at 7.30 am in the hope of spotting the Tibetan Wolf. The temperature had fallen to -15°C. The morning was bitterly cold as we drove around trying to spot the wolf. We saw several Kiang, a flock of Tibetan Sandgrouse *(Syrrhaptes tibetanus)* foraging by the roadside, a female Common Kestrel

(Falco tinnunculus) on the ground, and scores of Horned Larks *(Eremophila alpestris)* hopping about, feeding among the grasses. However, there was no sight of the Tibetan Wolf. Rigzin decided to try for the Pallas's Cat again, and he spotted it at the same location as the previous day. Being a skittish animal it was gone in the blink of an eye. Disappointed, we returned to Ruthpa home stay for lunch.

A short cut to Nurbu La top which involved crossing the river, gave us a few heart-stopping moments. Northern Ravens, Horned Larks, Black-headed Mountain Finches, and Kiang were in plenty along the road. The moment we crested the rise to Hanle plateau, we saw a group of Tibetan Gazelles, and the young ones took to their hooves at the sight of the car. So beautiful and graceful, it was sheer poetry in motion.



Grey-crowned Goldfinch *(Carduelis carduelis caniceps)*

The Tibetan Gazelle *(Procapra Pieticaudata)* also known as Goa, is a small antelope with a slender and graceful body It is native to the Tibetan plateau, inhabiting terrain between 3,000-5,750 mts elevation, with tiny populations in the Ladakh and Sikkim regions in India. The population in Ladakh comprises of less than 100 individuals, and is declining.

A couple of Golden Eagles and a Lammergeier were soaring overhead. With its massive neck ruff and huge horns, a male Argali aka Mountain Sheep *(Ovis ammon)* stopped to give us some lovely photo opportunities.

Night temperatures had again fallen to around -15°C, though Anup's gizmo remained stuck at -10°C.

Our host Tashi's adorable children, Urgen Stobden and Stanzin Pachos, came running to knock on my door and inform me that breakfast was ready.

Sightings of Horned Larks and Red-billed Choughs *(Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax)*, with an Upland Buzzard *(Buteo hemilasius)* soaring lazily above us, and the majestic peaks of Chalung Kangri and Ribil in the distance, seemed like a great start to the penultimate day of our trip. We stopped for lunch at Chumathang, and ate the biggest Aloo Paratha I have ever seen. We went up the valleys of some tributaries of the Indus, in search of the White-throated Dipper but could only see a Brown Dipper, and Common Mergansers swimming serenely in the Indus, a Lammergeier overhead, and a Eurasian Wren.



Urial Ram and Ewe *(Ovis vignei)*

After crossing Upshi and Karu, Rigzin drove us straight to Chuchot Marshes to see a lone Greater White-fronted Goose *(Anser albifron)*, spotted amidst a flock of Greylag Geese *(Anser anser)*, Great Egrets, Eurasian Wrens, and a lone Grey Heron. Intense scrutiny and loads of patience were finally rewarded by one goose which appeared smaller in size than the others allowing us to identify the white patch above the mandible: the Greater White-fronted Goose. It was a lifer for Anup and Amit. Frozen to the bone but ebullient, the group of birders and wildlife enthusiasts drove back to Hotel Tsokar, rejoicing in the sightings Mother Nature had seen fit to bestow upon us.

Back to heated rooms, running hot and cold water, and long-awaited baths. Such luxuries! I made another blunder by locking myself out of my room. Our last meal together was predictably soup and momos.

The return trip to Chandigarh was not without incident. I made the Mother of all Blunders, becoming a "Gama in the land of the Lama". While taking the flight from Chandigarh, I had added my boarding pass to the Digi Yatra app, so that I wouldn't need a photo ID. While checking in at the hotel, I unwittingly handed over my car registration card instead of my Driving Licence. At the airport, I realized to my dismay that I had carried the wrong ID from Chandigarh. A Photo ID was required, and when I offered to show a photo of my Aadhaar Card which was saved in my phone, it was not accepted, as the original physical card was required. I could not find the same in my Digilocker app.



Golden Eagle *(Aquila chrysaetos)*

Eventually, I located it in the Digi Yatra app, and I was permitted to enter the airport. The flight was on time, the pilot set off on a westward course over the Indus, and banked south over the Sangam. Passengers seated in Row A got good views from the windows, while I could just see the ribbon of the Zanskar river below. However, within minutes we encountered thick clouds which obscured the views.

What a trip: fantastically lucky sightings, a lot of banter and camaraderie, loads of fun, good food, great weather.

A fantabulous trip, to say the least!

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

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Back Cover - Indian Rollers *(Coracias benghalensis)* by Amandeep Singh Channa

