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Status of the Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* on the Indian Subcontinent: vagrant, passage migrant, or breeder?

Guy M. Kirwan, Manuel Schweizer, Robert P. Prÿs-Jones & Nicolas Martinez

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Guy M. Kirwan, Bird Group, Department of Life Sciences, Natural History Museum, Akeman Street, Tring, Hertfordshire HP23 6AP, UK; and Research Associate, Field Museum of Natural History, 1400 South Lakeshore Drive, Chicago, IL 60605, USA.

Manuel Schweizer, Naturhistorisches Museum Bern, Bernastrasse 15, CH 3005 Bern, Switzerland; and Institute of Ecology and Evolution, University of Bern, 3012, Bern, Switzerland.

Robert P. Prÿs-Jones, Bird Group, Department of Life Sciences, Natural History Museum, Akeman Street, Tring, Hertfordshire HP23 6AP, UK.

Nicolas Martinez, Hintermann & Weber AG, Austrasse 2a, CH 4153 Reinach, Switzerland.

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The nominate subspecies of the Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* breeds from Morocco, Spain, and Britain, in the west, to Lake Baikal (Siberia), northern Mongolia, and north-western China, in the east (del Hoyo & Collar 2016). A second subspecies, ‘Ehrenberg’s Redstart’ *P. p. samamisticus* (hereinafter *samamisticus*), is restricted to the south-eastern part of the species’ distribution, with its core breeding range stretching across Greece, southern Bulgaria, Turkey, the Caucasus, and the northern Middle East to south-western Central Asia (Martinez et al., 2022). The species, as a whole, spends the non-breeding season in the northernmost third of sub-Saharan Africa (north of the Congo Basin) and in south-west Arabia (Clement & Rose 2015). During work in various European museums (coupled with a systematic trawl of publicly accessible data in online databases, such as eBird and iNaturalist) designed to elucidate the precise distributional limits of the two subspecies of Common Redstart, and to evaluate levels and zones of intergradation between them, which issues have been subject to contradictory statements in the literature, we revisited

the status of *P. phoenicurus* in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India.

Vaurie (1959), Rasmussen & Anderton (2012), and Clement & Rose (2015) suggested that this subspecies may breed in Afghanistan. Note, however, that in mentioning that *samamisticus* is likely to be a summer visitor to north-west Afghanistan, Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) mentioned that the only specimen of the latter race reported to be from the Indian Subcontinent in fact emanates from Iran (their Appendix 2). We can assume that the more recent of these authors followed Vaurie (1959), but the latter’s source is quite unclear, as none of the major sources he cites for Afghan distributions (e.g., Meinertzhagen 1938a–b; Whistler 1944a–b, 1945a–c) mentions *P. phoenicurus*, and neither does Paludan (1959). Furthermore, there appears to be no specimen of this species collected in Afghanistan by Koelz, whose material would be another obvious source for Vaurie’s comment. Koelz’s specimens are held in the American Museum of Natural History (New York), Field Museum of Natural History (Chicago), and the University of Michigan Museum of Zoology (Ann Arbor). The first published record of

Common Redstart in Afghanistan appears to be that of Vielliard (1969), who collected one male and observed a second, both of which he believed to be migrant *phoenicurus*, at Adreskan (33.30°N, 62.13°E) and Herat (34.35°N, 62.20°E), both on 01 May 1969. The specimen is deposited in the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, Paris (MNHN-ZO-MO-1972-62; <https://science.mnhn.fr/institution/mnhn/collection/zo/item/mo-1972-62>) and is a second-calendar-year individual that cannot be identified with certainty to subspecies, although it definitely shows no obvious characteristics of *samamiscus*. Further, more recent records in Afghanistan are unsurprisingly (given the political situation) very few: none was found during work for the field guide to the *Birds of Central Asia* (Ayé et al. 2012; R. Ayé pers. comm.), and a search on eBird, observation.org, and iNaturalist has revealed just three sightings. All of them refer to spring and autumn migrants, e.g., Kaestner (2020), and none involves an adult male *samamiscus*. If Common Redstart breeds in Afghanistan, the most likely places are areas with Irano-Turanian deciduous forest in Herat Province: the stronghold of subspecies *samamiscus* in Iran is Hyrcanian forest in the Alborz, but

breeding has been suspected east to the Kopet Dagh (Glutz von Blotzheim 1988). In addition, various authors have mentioned *samamiscus* as a probable breeding bird in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (Glutz von Blotzheim 1988; Bukreev 1997; Ayé et al. 2012). Suitable habitat in Kunduz and Balkh provinces should, perhaps, also be searched for the species in Afghanistan.

Concerning Pakistan, Roberts (1992), in his monograph on the country's birds, considered *P. phoenicurus sensu lato* to be an occasional passage migrant through westernmost areas of the country, and listed just two records, although apparently both involved quite large numbers. However, as we will discuss below, Roberts gave a somewhat garbled and incomplete rendition of these observations. Grimmett et al. (1998: 654) considered the species to be a "very local and rare spring passage migrant to W borders" of Pakistan. Thereafter, Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) repeated the reference, from Roberts (1992), to spring migrants in Baluchistan and Chitral, and ascribed them to the nominate subspecies.

The historical record requires greater elucidation, due to some errors that were introduced by Roberts (1992). As the latter mentioned, Perreau (1910) collected three specimens at Buni, in the Mastuj Valley, Chitral (35.83°N, 71.78°E), in far north-western Pakistan, during mid-May 1904, and described the species as common 'on both my visits in the middle of May'. Roberts (1992), however, reported that the specimens are held at the Bombay Natural History Society Museum (hereinafter, BNHS), Mumbai, which is partially incorrect. Two of three are in fact held in what is now the Natural History Museum, Tring. Firstly, a G. A. Perreau specimen (NHMUK 1904.12.5.20), collected at Buni on 21 May 1904 [123], is a second-calendar-year bird and therefore cannot be confidently identified to subspecies, but it certainly shows no obvious characteristics of *samamiscus*. The second specimen is a female, collected at the same locality on the same date (NHMUK 1904.12.5.19) [123]. Females are generally unidentifiable to subspecies, suggestions being at most tentative (based on the presence/indication of a pale wing panel and overall colder/greyer tones in *samamiscus*; Small 2009). The third specimen is indeed in Mumbai (BNHS 2882) and is a (adult?) male, apparently of the nominate subspecies, that was collected on 15 May 1904 (Abdulali 1987). Unmentioned by Roberts (1992), the fact that Perreau had collected the species in Pakistan was first reported by Comber (1907). It is apparent from the Tring register and archives that a series of specimens, including NHMUK 1904.12.5.19 and 1904.12.5.20, collected by Perreau and by Capt. H. J. Fulton (the latter had also visited Chitral in 1901/02, but did not record *P. phoenicurus*; see Fulton 1904, 1905), were taken in 1904 to what was then the British Museum (Natural History) by Comber, and then presented to the museum on the authorisation of Fulton, on behalf of BNHS.

The next records from Pakistan were reported by Christison (1939), who collected one of several Common Redstarts present at Robat (29.81°N, 60.92°E), in westernmost Baluchistan, on the border with Afghanistan, on 1 April 1939, and saw others he believed to be this species at Kacha (29.48°N, 61.20°E), south-east of Robat, on 22 April 1939. In a further publication, however, Christison (1940) stated that the bird was collected at Robat on 18 April. The specimen (a second-calendar-year male, showing no obvious features associated with *samamiscus*) was sent to C. B. Ticehurst for identification, and was eventually passed with the rest of the latter's collection to Tring and became what is now



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123. Records of Common Redstart (all apparently nominate *phoenicurus*) in Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan. From top to bottom: the first record for Afghanistan, a second-calendar-year male collected at Adreskan on 1 May 1969 by J. Vielliard (Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, Paris, MNHN-ZO-MO-1972-62; P. Boussès); two of three specimens collected by G. A. Perreau at Buni, Chitral, Pakistan, in May 1904 (female, NHMUK 1904.12.5.19, and second-calendar-year male, NHMUK 1904.12.5.20; Hein van Grouw, © Natural History Museum, London); and the first record for India, a second-calendar-year male at Tikse, Ladakh, on 5 May 1982.

NHMUK (1941.5.30.3626). Its label data, however, are at variance with both of Christison's published works, instead indicating that the bird was collected on 23 April 1939, in the rest house garden at Kacha (1,372 m).

More recently, there are eight records of Common Redstart, none of them attributed to subspecies, reported on eBird, observation.org, and iNaturalist: two individuals, south-east of Kasur (31.00°N, 74.53°E), Punjab, on 24 February 2018 (Amin 2018); second-calendar-year male, Borit (36.43°N, 74.86°E), Gojal, Gilgit-Baltistan, on 30 April 2019 (Shah 2019)¹; one, Balkasar (32.91°N, 72.65°E), Punjab, on 4 January 2020 (Mosvi 2020a); three, Padhri Private Game Reserve (32.50°N, 73.17°E), Punjab, on 10 April 2020 (Mosvi 2020b); one, photographed near Khairpur (27.30°N, 68.40°E), Sind, on 5 November 2020 (Hussain Talpur 2020); an unspecified number, Sheeba Park (31.28°N, 74.22°E), Lahore, Punjab, on 17 February 2021 (Farooq 2021a); one, on the eastern outskirts of Lahore (31.33°N, 74.19°E), Punjab, on 11 March 2021 (Farooq 2021b); one, photographed, in Khirthar National Park (25.69°N, 67.52°E), Sind, on 17 October 2021 (Mursalin 2021). Only three of these records appear to be documented, two showing females and one the male mentioned above. It is worth emphasising that the separation of female Common and Eastern Black Redstarts *Phoenicurus ochruros phoenicuroides* and *P. o. rufiventris* can be extremely difficult and must rely on a combination of several characters (van Duivendijk 2010; Ayé et al. 2012; Shirihi & Svensson 2018). Nevertheless, cumulatively these records suggest that the species might not be common, but still widespread on passage across Pakistan, certainly not restricted solely to western regions, and potentially even overwintering in the country in small numbers.

Further east, the first two records for India involved second-calendar-year males trapped and photographed at Tikse (34.06°N, 77.66°E), Ladakh, on 5 and 6 May 1982, with a third seen on 25 May 1982 (Delany et al. 2014; XX 1). The immediate environs of Tikse did not appear to offer suitable breeding habitat for the species (S. Delany *in litt.* 2022). Grimmett et al. (2011) only mentioned these three records for India, but Ahmad et al. (2020) located another seven records, most of them also from Ladakh. Combining these two sources with new data from eBird, observation.org, and iNaturalist, as well as two documented records on Facebook, there are 29 reports from Ladakh, and Jammu & Kashmir (two of which actually involve male Black Redstarts). Except for the first three, all since 2015, ten are accompanied by photographs showing male Common Redstarts, of which at least two are adults of the nominate subspecies. None of those photographed shows obvious features of *samamisticus*. Interestingly, no fewer than nine of the Ladakh records are dated

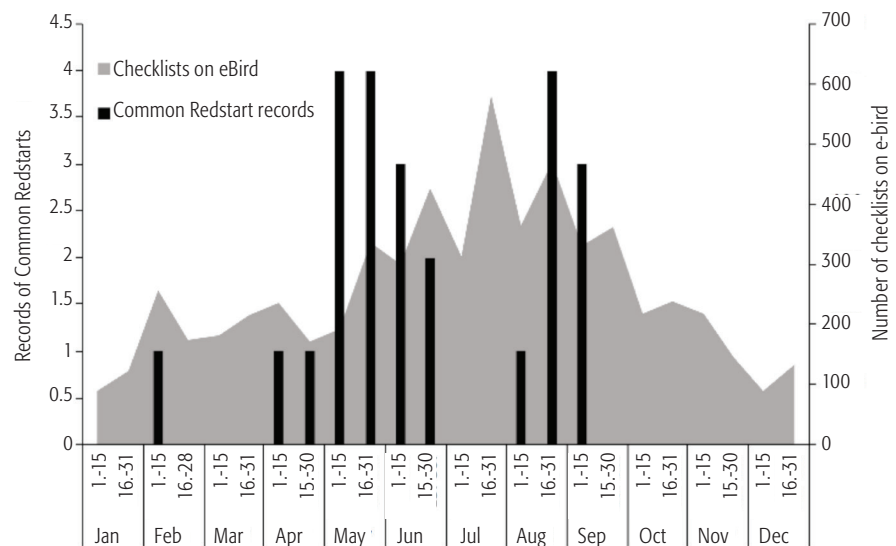


Fig. 1. Records of Common Redstarts in Ladakh. Although some birds were observed well into the species' normal breeding season, the overall pattern is typical of a passage migrant, with obvious peaks in spring and autumn. The number of checklists submitted to eBird (covering the period 1900–2021) is given as an indication of observer coverage (<https://ebird.org/barchart?byr=1900&eyr=2021&bmo=1&emo=12&r=IN-LA>).

between 17 May and 17 June, i.e., well within the species' usual breeding period (Fig. 1).

There are only six records for India away from Ladakh (a seventh on iNaturalist shows a male Black Redstart). Five lack photographs and were made by foreign observers, possibly not all of them aware of the complexity of separating female Common and Eastern Black Redstarts. The sixth concerns the only well-documented and published Indian record away from Ladakh, and Jammu & Kashmir. This involved an adult male on 16 February 2018 in north-west India, at Thol Bird Sanctuary, near Ahmedabad, Gujarat, which showed the classic features of *samamisticus* and was accepted as such (Bhatt 2018).

Based on the above, we suppose that Common Redstart is a scarce but more or less regular migrant in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Ladakh, but very rare elsewhere in India. There is no definite evidence of breeding from any of these countries, but some records are from rather late in spring, and it is important to note that ornithological coverage is still very low, especially in Afghanistan. At least further west in the species' range, 15 May–31 July can be considered the main breeding period (Glutz von Blotzheim 1988) and migration of the nominate subspecies through the breeding range of *samamisticus* should be effectively over by mid-May (Handrinos & Akriotis 1997; Kirwan et al. 2008; Martinez et al. 2022). We recommend that observers in relevant areas be alert to the possibility that Common Redstart might breed, and they should aim to always document the subspecies involved in any future observations. The closest breeding populations in Iran, Uzbekistan, and (perhaps) Turkmenistan involve *samamisticus*, but most of the documented observations to date appear more likely to have involved the nominate subspecies, which is much more likely to occur in the region solely as a migrant, given that the nearest breeding areas ascribed to *phoenicurus* are in Kyrgyzstan (Ayé et al. 2012).

We do not believe that any changes in the breeding or wintering ranges of this species can explain the apparently increased incidence of records in the Indian Subcontinent

¹ We treat the record from Gilgit-Baltistan here in continuity with Roberts (1992), but seek to underline that we take no political view as to the claims of China, India, and Pakistan concerning this territory.

in recent decades. Rather, we suspect that the increasing number of birders in the region with better optical equipment, and frequently cameras too, are principally responsible for the perceived upsurge in reports, along with, potentially, a greater interest in identification issues among hobby birdwatchers. As already noted, in certain plumages Common and Eastern Black Redstarts are not necessarily easy to separate, which could have led to the first-named species being more frequently overlooked in India and Pakistan in the past. However, it also bears mention that not all the records mentioned here are documented, and therefore not unequivocally ascribable to one species or the other. Given that most Indian records of Common Redstart are from Ladakh, it perhaps bears mention that as recently as the mid 1990s Pfister (2001) was able to add eight new species to the avifauna of the territory, as well as making many other novel observations there, indicative of the relative lack of previous ornithological work in that region.

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