

A recent record of Rooks *Corvus frugilegus* from the Jammu plains, north-western India

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The Rook *Corvus frugilegus* is a regular winter visitor from Central Asia to Afghanistan, and Pakistan while it is much more rare in the adjoining parts of India (Ali & Ripley 1987; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Madge 2017). It has been sighted in the mountains of Kashmir [=Cashmere] (Adams 1859), Gilgit (Biddulph 1881; Scully 1881), once shot (two birds) near Anchar [=Anchal] Lake (34.14°N, 74.78°E, 1584 m asl) near Srinagar by a Mr. Blunt (Ward 1906), and presumed to have occurred in Ladakh (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), though Pfister (2004) does not include it. Chanter (1887) saw a large flock of 300 birds at Ludhiana (30.89°N, 75.85°E, 251 m asl), Punjab, which he thought were Rooks, and Hume commented that he saw a specimen from Hoshiarpur (31.51°N, 75.91°E, 297 m asl), Punjab. Mrs. Wathen informed Whistler that she saw Rooks at Amritsar (31.63°N, 74.87°E, 232 m asl), Punjab in the 1921–1922 winter (Whistler 1923). A more southerly record of five, at Ohkla (28.44°N, 77.31°E, 199 m asl), Delhi, by H. Alexander ('in spring' presumably in the 1950s) is considered doubtful by both Hutson (1954), and Ganguli (1975). There are no documented records from elsewhere in India. It is included in the India Checklist (Praveen *et al.* 2016) based on the records from Gilgit.

On the sunny afternoon of 01 February 2017, while on our way to the Gharana wetland, an Important Bird Area (IBA, IN-JK-21) bordering Pakistan, southwards of Jammu, we spotted a large flock of Rooks foraging voraciously in a freshly tilled agricultural field (32.39°N, 74.70°E, 267 m asl). We identified them by their

large size, characteristic small and peaked head, whitish face, long un-feathered spike like bill, and wing tips nearly reach tail tip (Grimmett *et al.* 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). The flock had about 125 Rooks, a majority of which were adults, and a few juveniles (35). Undeterred by the human presence nearby, they continued feeding on freshly tilled fields [65, 66] pushing their bills deep into the soil, and eating insects. The group later moved towards a nearby field with freshly grown spring wheat, and foraged there for more than three hours. At dusk they moved into a nearby marshy landscape, and stayed there for a while before flying away across the border towards Pakistan. The flock was not spotted again for a few days until two groups, of 46 (Shagoo 2017a), and 11 (Shagoo 2017b) birds were sighted again in the vicinity on 20 February 2017. The local people said that these birds frequented that area during this part of the year.

Gharana, a low-lying agricultural landscape, dotted with a few marshes and ditches, is home to a number of aquatic, and terrestrial migrants throughout the year. This years' harsh winter, with heavy snow accumulation, and hence, less food availability in the Rooks' natural wintering habitats northwards of Gharana, might have forced this flock to visit the low lying nutrient rich region around Jammu.

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65. A flock of Rooks foraging in wheat fields.



66. Rook foraging in a freshly tilled field.

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First record of Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* from Tamil Nadu, India

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The Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* is a small passerine that breeds in Baluchistan and is a passage migrant to southern Pakistan, and north-western India: from Jammu and Kashmir, south to western Gujarat. We report here the first sighting of the Spotted Flycatcher in Tamil Nadu, way beyond its regular distribution range.

On 18 December 2016 we were birding at Koonthakulam Village (8.47°N, 77.75°E; Tirunelveli District). Around 1030 hrs we were birding near Papankulam tank, which is about one-and-a-half kilometers from the village. In a small copse of *Acacia nilotica* shrubs we saw a small bird, about the size of a sparrow, sitting upright on one of the lowest branches of a bush, and upon obtaining closer views we saw that it was a flycatcher. When it flew to another bush we noted that it was uniformly grey-brown in colour, with a predominantly black beak, but we could not see any eye-ring. We followed it, to get a better view, and when it perched out in the open, we clearly saw its streaked crown, and striated chest, and neck [67]. The underparts were dull greyish-white, the legs dark, and the greyish-brown tail, slightly notched. The bird was perched erect, and sallying for insects from its vantage point, but soon flew to another bush. As we followed it, we were surprised to see another individual; both were sallying for insects under the acacia shrub.

We could clearly see that this was a different individual from the first, because of the presence of a small black spot on its abdomen, and more pronounced spots on its chest, which was not seen in the other individual [68]. We had provisionally identified the bird as the Spotted Flycatcher but we're sceptical because it was way out of its known distribution range. However, since we were able to photograph it, we could confirm that it was a Spotted Flycatcher as it was more heavily streaked on the crown, and the chest (contra, the more likely, Asian Brown Flycatcher *M. dauurica*).

On subsequent visits to the same area on 20, and 25 December 2016 the bird was not seen, despite an extensive search.

The earlier southern-most records of the Spotted Flycatcher is from Goa (Dharwadkar 2017), and Pune (Iyer 2016). The bird has not been reported from Sri Lanka. Hence, this bird could have been a vagrant from its main migration route.

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