

of reed buntings at the Reserve and elsewhere in eastern China deserves further study.

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David S. Melville, WWF Hong Kong, GPO Box 12721, Hong Kong

Li Yu-xiang, Shuangtaihekou National Nature Reserve Management Office, 132 Oil Street, Xinlongtai District, Panjin City, Liaoning Province 124010, China.

# The eggs of the Grey-crowned Prinia

## *Prinia cinereocapilla*

MICHAEL WALTERS

The Grey-crowned Prinia *Prinia cinereocapilla* is said to occur commonly in the eastern Himalayan foothills, but little is known of its habits. Of its nidification almost nothing is known, and the accounts that exist appear to be suspect. Ali and Ripley (1973) merely quote two accounts by Stuart Baker, and nothing seems to have been discovered subsequently. The earlier of the two accounts was from a paper on the birds of Cachar (Baker, 1894, p. 15):

'Very rare indeed. I have taken five nests which were quite indistinguishable from those of *F[ranklinia] gracilis* and the eggs were all a pure skim-milk blue, rather lighter in shade than those of *F. gracilis* and also less glossy. In shape they are rather broad regular ovals, one or two being lengthened. My last specimen was taken in July 1890, and since then I have seen no others. Ten eggs average .59 x .42.'

However, Baker does not seem to have had much faith in the authenticity of these eggs for he retained none of them. The only eggs of this species in Baker's collection when it was received by The Natural History Museum are two referred to in Baker (1933). Since he said that these were the only known eggs of the species, Baker had apparently forgotten the eggs he previously collected and attributed to this species. These earlier eggs were

presumably collected in Cachar in 1890, and a single egg which is almost certainly one of them, was received in The Natural History Museum with the collection of J. Davidson: the whereabouts of the remaining eggs does not seem to be known. (The Davidson collection contained one other egg attributed to this species which will be discussed later). The Cachar egg was apparently given by Baker to Lieut. H. E. Barnes; on Barnes's death his entire collection was purchased by Davidson and incorporated with his own. This egg is stated to have been collected in 1890 at Dunjunmakh, Gurjong, N. Cachar, and Barnes in his MS catalogue described it as 'pale, unspotted blue in colour. Damaged.' The egg is indeed slightly damaged, and to my eyes very pale blue in colour, paler than the two eggs in Baker's collection.

According to the MS catalogue of Baker's collection, these latter were collected by Mr J. Shillingford in the 'Nepal terai, Bengal, India', but his published account (Baker 1933) stated that they were collected in the 'Bhutan Dooars' in Assam/West Bengal. The eggs were collected with the nest and the bird, Baker commenting, in manuscript, in his catalogue: 'The very tattered remains of the bird were, I think, correctly identified as of the species.' From this it

would appear that the identity of the bird was, at best, unproven, and that all three eggs are of uncertain identification. Baker's account (1894) was accepted by Roberts (1992), but he unfortunately misprints the date as 1984!

The other Davidson egg is quite unlike the others, being smaller, white with a cap of light sienna spots round the large end. It is said to have been obtained in north Cachar at an unspecified date, and Davidson obtained it from the collection of Col. Rattray. As there is no other authentication for its identification, it cannot be accepted unless other similar eggs are found. I think it is probably spurious, but as both the egg types attributed to this species occur in others of the genus, no definite statement can be made on this point.

Michael Walters, Bird Group, Natural History Museum, Tring, Herts HP23 6AP, U.K.

Thus, it appears that there is no authentic description of the nest and eggs of this species, and if a field worker in the area were able to provide one, it would be a most important addition to the literature.

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# Finn's Weaver *Ploceus megarhynchus* and Singing Bushlark *Mirafra cantillans*: two new species for Nepal

HEM SAGAR BARAL

## FINN'S WEAVER *Ploceus megarhynchus*

Sukila Phanta Wildlife Reserve (28°53'N 80°11'E) lies in the far west of Nepal and is the westernmost protected reserve of Nepal. The reserve has three different kinds of vegetation namely Sal forests, riverine forests and grasslands, the last being the most interesting and of the greatest ecological interest. Grasslands constitute almost half of the reserve's vegetation. Sukila Phanta proper is the largest protected patch of continuous grassland in Nepal. It is approximately 16 km<sup>2</sup> in area. There are other phantas (open patch of short grasslands) in the reserve which are smaller but equally important for birds. These are Singhpur Phanta, Karaiya Phanta, Dudhiya Phanta, and some smaller phantas near Jhilmila.

In the eastern half of Sukila Phanta the grassland is damp and has large areas of marshes and pools. It remains inaccessible for most of the year but in the driest months a domesticated elephant can take one through some parts. A big area (4.5 km<sup>2</sup>) of marsh in the northeast corner is not penetrable by any means of surface transportation. Thus there are still areas in the reserve which have not been visited by any ornithologist.

While carrying out my field work on grassland birds of Sukila Phanta Wildlife Reserve I spent a few weeks in the reserve. On 8 May 1996 I joined the reserve's patrol team, with their elephants, which were passing through an area which had not been visited by any ornithologist before. While going towards the southeast sector of the grasslands at Sukila Phanta, I observed five weavers perched on tall grass reeds. These birds were more thick-set than Baya Weaver *Ploceus philippinus*, and all had completely yellow underparts. In the flock at least two birds were brighter

yellow than the others. The brighter ones were obviously adult males and duller individuals either immature males, or more likely, females.

While going further east I spotted another flock of six birds of which three had bright yellow underparts, forehead and rump, with contrasting dark ear-coverts and brown back and wings. The other three were duller like the birds in the previous flock. I provisionally identified them as Finn's Weavers *Ploceus megarhynchus*. Both flocks were observed for roughly five minutes from the top of an elephant. I was using 8 × 30 at 25 m range in the second observation. Sketches were made for further consultation.

Later reference to Ali and Ripley (1987) confirmed the identification of the species. The sketch fully agreed with the Finn's Weaver illustration. The all-yellow underparts, forehead and rump are salient characters of Finn's Weaver. I am quite familiar with the other three species of *Ploceus* which occur in Nepal and in Sukila Phanta. The Baya Weaver *Ploceus philippinus* does not have a yellow chin and throat in any plumage. These were observed in large numbers (c. 2,000) going to roost in the evening at the same site. Black-breasted Weavers *Ploceus benghalensis* do not have any yellow extending below the breast. They have a dark breast-band in all plumages. Streaked Weavers *Ploceus manyar* do not have yellow underparts in any of their plumages. Finn's Weaver also occurs at Kaladhoongi, Uttar Pradesh only 50 km west of Sukila Phanta (Ali and Crook 1959).

The habitat was dominated by vast grasslands of *Saccharum* with associated Narkat *Phragmites karka*. The grassland was dotted with medium-sized trees and termittaria as tall as 3 m. Ripley (1982) describes 'pure terai country where marshes, sarpat grass and *Saccharum* are