

local and erratic winter visitor with just one summer record (Inskipp and Inskipp 1985). However, recent observations in the Annapurna Conservation Area indicate that Ghorepani in particular is a regular wintering area for small numbers, with a maximum count of 11 during February 2001 (Basnet 2002), and there is evidence it may also breed there (Rossetti 1978, Inskipp and Inskipp 2003, Martin Naylor pers. comm.).

In addition there have been several recent records within the extreme east of the species's known winter range. On 31 December 2007 four males and four females were observed in conifers c. 8 km from Lava on the Alghara–Lava road (J. W. den Besten Orientalbirding message 9691); a flock of c.20 was photographed at the Darjeeling Botanical Gardens on 12 February 2008 (Manjula Mathur pers. comm. to Sumit Sen, 22 February 2008), and on 21 March 2008 a male was photographed near Yuksam, West Sikkim (Dipankar Ghose pers. comm.). The latter is the only record for Sikkim since that of Stevens (1925). Clement *et al.* (1993) state that movements of this species are poorly known or understood and probably only of short distance or altitudinal range. Observations presented here show that this species occurs more regularly and further to the east in winter than was earlier thought. Why it moves so far east in winter is unclear. Some observers have suggested that this is in response to exceptionally heavy snow conditions, especially in the north-west of the subcontinent, or possibly to food scarcity in its 'normal' winter range or to food abundance in the form of bumper crops of conifer seeds. Probably it is a combination of these factors and that it has been overlooked owing to the lack of observers at higher elevations during winter.

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## Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* and Black-headed Bunting *Emberiza melanocephala*: new records for Vietnam

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As explained elsewhere (Pilgrim *et al.* 2009), no formal records have been kept of the distribution and status of bird species in Vietnam, and the status or distribution of a number of species, particularly migratory ones, is unclear. In the last few years, a small number of resident expatriate birdwatchers have focused considerable attention on migratory birds, particularly in northern Vietnam. This has resulted in a better understanding of the status of a number of species (Pilgrim *et al.* 2009), including records of three species not previously reported for the country. One of these will be discussed elsewhere (Bijlmakers and Köhler in prep.) and two are detailed below.

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COMMON RINGED PLOVER *Charadrius hiaticula*  
On the morning of 21 February 2007, a Common Ringed Plover was seen near the mouth of the Red River, just north of Xuan Thuy National Park in Nam Dinh Province (c. 20°29'N 106°55'E). The bird was flushed towards AC, JDP and GC by a farmer from a muddy field that had been flooded in preparation for planting rice. The observers had been watching the field for a few minutes previously, and had noted snipe *Gallinago* sp., Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus*, Common Greenshank *T. nebularia*, Wood Sandpiper *T. glareola* and Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*. When most of these birds flew from the field, a small plover flew towards the observers,

landing for less than a minute in the field of bare earth and grass where the observers were standing, before flying off to the south-east. While in this field, the bird was only about 50 m from the observers. It was subsequently searched for in the area it was thought to have landed, but was not refound. At this time, shorebirds were widely distributed across the area's rice paddies, many of which were in the early stages of planting and therefore offered suitable habitat.

It was immediately obvious that this bird was a breeding-plumaged adult *Charadrius* plover, and not a Little Ringed Plover *C. dubius*, since it had a strong wing-bar in flight, clearly bicoloured bill and no yellow around the eye. The only real confusion species with Common Ringed Plover is Semipalmated Plover *C. semipalmatus*, a species which has been expanding its (tiny) breeding range in far north-eastern Russia (Syroechkovskiy 2004) and has been recorded as far west as Japan (Hashimoto 2007), the Marshall Islands (VanderWerf 2006), and New Zealand (D. Bakewell *in litt.* 2008). JDP is very familiar with both species from extensive time spent in Europe and North America. The key features noted on the Red River bird were a deep black breast-band that looped down evenly to become deepest at the front, a long, clear white supercilium extending above and behind the eye, and a thick, robust bill. These features, though variable and somewhat subjective, are all strongly indicative of Common Ringed Plover. Unfortunately, in the brief period that this bird was present, it was not heard to call and views were too brief to gain an objective assessment of other more subtle features supporting separation from Semipalmated Plover (e.g. extent of toe webbing, wing-bar prominence, and differences in bill and overall structure).

Common Ringed Plover does not appear to have been previously recorded in Vietnam, and is rarely reported across South-East Asia (MacKinnon and Phillipps 1993, Coates and Bishop 1997, Kennedy *et al.* 2000, Robson 2005). In Myanmar, it is known from just a single observation of four individuals in April 1944 in the north-west of the country (Smythies 1986), and there are only three records from the Philippines (the first in 1969, and then in 2002 and 2004; A. Jensen *in litt.* 2008). The first record for peninsular Malaysia was in 1984, but there are now several records from there and several from Sabah since 2005 (Wells 1999, D. Bakewell pers. comm. 2008), as well as several confirmed or likely records from Brunei (Smythies and Davison 1999). The species has also proved to be an annual visitor in small numbers to Singapore (Mauro 2000) and was first recorded in Thailand in January 1997 (Mauro 2000) but has since proved to be a regular, though rare, winter visitor to northern Thailand, with the first record from Thailand's Central Plain in February 2000, at Khok Kham (P. Round/BCST Records Committee *in litt.* 2007). The geographic and temporal pattern of records presented above, particularly those from Thailand, suggest that greater observer coverage in Vietnam may reveal that Common Ringed Plover is a rare annual visitor to at least the north of the country.

#### BLACK-HEADED BUNTING *Emberiza melanocephala*

On the morning of 9 April 2006, two male Black-headed Buntings were seen by JDP and AWT on an island in the Red River in Hanoi (c.21°06'N 105°85'E). The birds were seen briefly but clearly at a distance of about 20 m,

in old rows of tomatoes growing on canes, a habitat that has also attracted Little Bunting *E. pusilla* and Black-faced Bunting *E. spodocephala* on this island. In both cases, the combination of unstreaked yellowish underparts and dark face and crown eliminated all other possible *Emberiza* buntings. One bird appeared to be in almost full breeding plumage, whereas the other was still heavily in moult, with only patches of solid black on the face.

Subsequently, on the morning of 15 October 2006, a female Black-headed Bunting was seen on Con Lu, an island just offshore of Xuan Thuy National Park in Nam Dinh Province. Soon after arriving on the island PB, TDB and JDP observed a bunting perched at the top of a small *Casuarina equisetifolia* tree for just over five minutes, at a distance of about 12 m from the observers. The bird was also photographed by PB. Like many other birds that land on this small island with poor habitat, it then flew west towards the mainland. The bunting had a uniform pale yellowish wash across the underparts, noticeably more yellow on the undertail-coverts. The underparts showed no obvious streaking or spotting. The upperparts were a warm pale brown, darker on the wings, with brown (not very dark) streaking on the mantle and crown. The wings were long, with a long primary projection suggesting a relatively short tail. The bill was noticeably long and relatively heavy.

The combination of unstreaked, yellow-washed underparts and no visible white in the tail eliminates all but female Black-headed and Red-headed *E. bruniceps* Buntings. These are very similar in appearance, a situation so complicated by the possibility of hybrids showing any combination of features of the two species that identification requires extreme caution. The two species have a unique moult strategy among buntings (Byers *et al.* 1995): juveniles undergo a partial moult into first-winter plumage within a few weeks of fledging, and another partial moult into adult plumage on the wintering grounds. Adults moult partially between the breeding season and migration to the wintering grounds. The moult is variable and may be very restricted in females. It is followed by a rapid complete moult on the wintering grounds, from September (Svensson 1992) or October (Cramp and Perrins 1994) onwards.

A bird observed in October in Vietnam is thus most likely to be in worn plumage. A worn first-winter bird would normally show streaking or spotting on the breast, unlike this individual. Instead, our bird's plain breast and obvious white fringing to the median and greater coverts suggest it was a worn adult female. Such clear white fringing is usually indicative of Black-headed (rather than Red-headed) Bunting but, in such worn plumage, it is certainly not conclusive. Other features indicative of Black-headed Bunting were the noticeably yellowish wash across the underparts, particularly on the undertail-coverts, brown mantle streaking, clear brown crown streaking, long wings and primary projection, and long, relatively heavy bill (Porter *et al.* 2004, Shirihai and Gantlett 1993, Cramp and Perrins 1994, Byers *et al.* 1995, Dernjatin and Vattulainen 2007). None of these features is diagnostic but, taken together and in the absence of features supporting Red-headed Bunting, they strongly suggest that this bird was an adult female Black-headed Bunting.

Black-headed Bunting breeds in south-eastern Europe and Asia Minor, wintering in western and central India.

Birds arrive in India from August–September, leaving in March–April (Ali and Ripley 1974). Overall, the species appears to have a propensity for overshooting during migration, with the most distant records in Asia coming from Japan and Sabah, Borneo (Byers *et al.* 1995, Dymond 1999). The species does not appear to have been previously recorded in Vietnam (Robson 2005). The first record from Laos was in a lowland dry harvested paddyfield at Vangviang (Vientiane Province), in late November 1994 (Thewlis 1995). Two males were also recorded in legumes among rice and grass stubble at Bung Gnai-Kiatngong, Xe Pian, Laos in 2008 (Duckworth 2008). Although there have been some clear records of Black-headed Bunting in Thailand (e.g. an adult male at Choe Lae, Mae Taeng, January 2005), others have been of females or immatures not identifiable to species (e.g. at Rangsit, Pathumthani, in December 2004) or with feather damage possibly indicative of captive origin (e.g. a Black-headed Bunting in extremely worn female or immature plumage at Cho Lae, Mae Taeng, Chiang Mai, in October 2004). The first record of Black-headed Bunting in Thailand was of a specimen from a market in the south. Although neither Black- nor Red-headed Bunting has been recorded in recent bird market surveys in Thailand, they apparently both ‘occur in the cagebird trade in some neighbouring countries’ (Bird Conservation Society of Thailand 2005). This includes one record of each species in trade for merit releases in Cambodia (M. Gilbert and R. Thomson *in litt.* 2008). In Thailand, Black-headed Bunting is thus retained on the Thai list in Category D (‘species... for which the possibility of escape or release from captivity cannot satisfactorily be excluded’: Round 2000). Nonetheless, Red-headed Bunting was accepted as a Category A (wild occurring) vagrant to Thailand on the basis of a record of two females or immatures in December 2004 in the north of the country.

The possibility of captive origin also haunts the records of Black-headed Bunting presented here from Vietnam. This is particularly true of the male birds recorded in Hanoi, on an island where—although significant numbers of buntings and other migrant and wintering species are regularly observed—other species likely to be of captive origin have been recorded (e.g. Black-throated Laughingthrush *Garrulax chinensis* and Baya Weaver *Ploceus philippinus*: JDP pers. obs.). However, we know of no records of Black-headed Bunting in trade in Vietnam (pers. obs., BirdLife International-Vietnam Programme unpublished data, Franklin 2005, Brooks-Moizer 2007). Furthermore, the season, location, sex and behaviour of the second record detailed above are strongly suggestive of wild origin. Owing to a widespread trade in cagebirds and birds for merit releases, the possibility of captive origin will rarely be completely excluded in records of vagrant passerines in South-East Asia. Nonetheless, the records of Black-headed Bunting presented here, the trajectory of its migration route and its well-known tendency for vagrancy all suggest that it is likely to be a genuine vagrant or rare winter visitor to Vietnam.

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## First breeding record of the Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides* in alpine habitats, southern Tibet

XIN LU

The Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides* is a medium-size (9 g) Old World leaf warbler. Its breeding range covers northern Eurasia, but there are two reproductively isolated forms that are connected to the south by a long chain (Baker 1997). Through this chain of populations, traits in morphology, ecology, behaviour (Irwin 2000, Irwin *et al.* 2001) and genotype (Irwin *et al.* 2005) change gradually, providing an interesting example of 'speciation by force of distance'. However, it seems that the species's distribution as currently recognised does not include high-altitude populations in the Tibetan plateau.

Over the Tibetan plateau, data on breeding ecology of this species have been collected in a few sites, including Himalayan Kashmir (Price and Jamdar 1991) and southern Gansu in China (Bi 2004). On 20 July 2006, I found a Greenish Warbler nest in an alpine scrub-covered valley (Xiongse, 29°27'N 91°40'E) near Lhasa, southern Tibet. In the Lhasa area, alpine scrub has suffered heavy degradation outside the valleys owing to long-term human activity, but it persists inside the valleys like my study site so that some birds vulnerable to vegetation degradation, such as the Tibetan Eared Pheasant *Crossoptilon harmani*, are able to breed there (Lu and Zheng 2003).

The domed-shape nest (external diameter 118 mm, internal diameter 60 mm, depth 87 mm) was located at 4,100 m a.s.l. in alpine willow woodland near a stream on a north-facing slope. As with congeners in other areas (Price and Jamdar 1991, Bi 2004), it was placed on the ground with small bushes for shelter, and had moss and thin grass but no feathers as its main construction materials. This differs from the sympatric Tickell's Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus affinis*, which always uses feathers to line its nest (Lu 2008). The nest held three nestlings. They weighed 7.9–8.9 g, had dull upperparts and light yellow underparts, and received food (green caterpillars

and flies) from both parents. The male parent (identified by lack of a brood-patch) was trapped and measured in mm: body length 118.0, tail 54.2, wing 61.3, tarsus 21.0 and bill 8.5. The species normally shows one wing-bar but this individual showed two.

Typically, the Greenish Warblers are adapted to nest at high altitudes. In Kashmir, they were observed to occur in birches close to the treeline (3,300–3,600 m: Price and Jamdar 1991); in southern Gansu they prefer to nest in conifer forests at 2,000–2,500 m (Bi 2004). My alpine site (4,100 m) represents the highest breeding record of the species. I have carried out fieldwork on alpine breeding birds in this area over the past decade. Relative to Tickell's Leaf Warbler, for which more than 50 nests have been observed over 10 breeding seasons, Greenish Warbler is rather scarce at this site, with this nest being my only breeding record of this species there. Ticehurst (1938) noted Gyantze near Lhasa as the site of a breeding record (altitude 14,000 feet), but he also stated that the record was uncertain as the specimen that was shot could not be traced and no one has met with the species there since.

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