

# Notable bird records from Mizoram in north-east India

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The state of Mizoram (21°58'–24°30'N 92°16'–93°25'E) is located in the southern part of north-east India (Fig. 1). Formerly referred to as the Lushai Hills of southern Assam, it covers an area of 21,081 km<sup>2</sup>. Mizoram falls in the Indo-Burma global biodiversity hotspot (Myers *et al.* 2000) and the Eastern Himalaya Endemic Bird Area (Stattersfield *et al.* 1998). The entire state is hilly and mountainous. The highest ranges are towards east with the peaks of Phawngpui (2,157 m; the highest point in Mizoram) and Lengteng (2,141 m). The lowest elevation, <100 m, is in the riverbeds near the borders with Assam and Bangladesh border. The climate is tropical monsoon-type with a hot wet summer and a cool dry winter. Temperatures range from 7° to 34°C; annual rainfall ranges from 2,000 to 4,000 mm.

The original vegetation type is tropical evergreen forest, typically including *Dipterocarpus turbinatus*, *Palaquium polyanthum* and *Artocarpus chaplasha* trees. Owing to logging and *jhum* (slash-and-burn shifting cultivation), large areas have been replaced with bamboo, especially in older abandoned *jhums*. The least-disturbed forests are found in the southern part of the state in Lawngtlai and Saiha districts. In the higher areas of the east, subtropical broadleaf forest occurs, including *Tetrameles nudiflora*, *Gmelina arborea* and *Bombax ceiba*, with *Quercus* spp. and *Rhododendron* sp. at higher altitudes.

The existing protected area network covers c.4.5% of Mizoram. The main protected areas are Dampa Wildlife Sanctuary and Tiger Reserve (500 km<sup>2</sup>), Murlen National Park (150 km<sup>2</sup>), Ngengpui Wildlife Sanctuary (110 km<sup>2</sup>), Lengteng Wildlife Sanctuary (80 km<sup>2</sup>) and Phawngpui National Park (50 km<sup>2</sup>).

Owing to insurgency from the 1960s to 1987, Mizoram has been relatively little studied in recent decades. The few published works include Koelz (1954), Rao and Zoramthanga (1976), Choudhury (1996), Katju (1996), and Ghose and Thanga (1998), with unpublished field reports by Kaul *et al.* (1996), Robertson (1996) and Shankar Raman (1995), and more general information available in Ali and Ripley (1987) and Islam and Rahmani (2004).

## METHODS

During fieldwork, I surveyed birds using direct observations (with 10×40 binoculars and a 10×46 telescope), noting calls (for some species only) and by interviewing local forest staff, villagers and hunters. Direct observations were made on foot along existing and newly cut paths, and from vehicles along roads and tracks (particularly to spot birds kept as pets, and preserved specimens such as hornbill casques and feathers which are often displayed outside huts). I carried out a total of 41 days fieldwork in Mizoram during 1986–2001. This included fieldwork in Aizawl, Kolasib and Mamit districts,

northern Mizoram, in March 1986 (five days), February 1987 (seven days) and April 1988 (5 days) while based in southern Assam. During 2–17 April 2000, I visited parts of Aizawl, Kolasib, Lawngtlai, Lunglei, Mamit, Saiha, and Serchhip districts and surveyed Dampa Sanctuary and Tiger Reserve, Ngengpui Wildlife Sanctuary, Phawngpui National Park and the fringe of Khawnglung Wildlife Sanctuary. This included 61 km of foot transect along paths and streams, 2.5 km of boat transects along the Ngengpui River and Palak Dil, and 1,847 km of road transects. During 15–22 February 2001, I visited parts of

Table 1. Details of sites mentioned in the text.

Site (district)	Coordinates	Altitude (m)
Artlang (Champhai)	23°27'N 93°12'E	1,500–1,950
Bhairabi (Mamit)	24°11'N 92°33'E	100
Blue Mountains (Phawngpui NP)	22°37'N 93°01'E	1,000–2,100
Chamdur (Lawngtlai)	22°15'N 92°42'E	200–300
Dampa WS (Mamit)	23°35'N 92°23'E	300–1,100
Jamalur (Cachar, Assam)	24°26'N 92°53'E	60
Khawnglung WS (Serchhip)	23°10'N 93°0'E	600–1,000
Kolodyne bridge (Lawngtlai and Saiha)	22°26'N 92°57'E	200
Lailapur (Cachar, Assam)	24°30'N 92°48'E	80
Lamzawl (Champhai)	23°50'N 93°09'E	1,000–1,200
Lawngtlai (Lawngtlai)	22°30'N 92°55'E	1,100–1,200
Lengteng WS (Champhai)	23°50'N 93°13'E	1,000–2,100
Lunglei (Lunglei)	22°54'N 92°46'E	1,200–1,300
Lurh Tlang (Champhai)	23°03'N 93°15'E	1,000–2,100
Mampui (Lawngtlai)	22°30'N 92°50'E	1,000
Mawmatlang (Saiha)	22°18'N 93°06'E	1,200–2,100
Murlen NP (Champhai)	23°37'N 93°18'E	1,000–1,600
Ngengpui WS (Lawngtlai)	22°20–27'N 92°46–49'E	400–1,100
Ngopa (Champhai)	23°42'N 93°13'E	1,100–1,150
Ngur (Champhai)	23°32'N 93°22'E	1,300–2,070
North Diltlang (Champhai)	23°37'N 93°22'E	1,300–1,960
Pakuwa (Teirei) Nullah (Mamit)	24°05'N 92°28'E	100
Phura (Saiha)	22°15'N 92°54'E	350
South-west of Rabung (Champhai)	23°38'N 93°07'E	>1,000
Rawlbuk (Saiha)	23°40'N 92°59'E	1,200
Saiha (Saiha)	22°27'N 92°59'E	1,300
Sairang (Mamit)	23°49'N 92°39'E	500
Sangau (Saiha)	22°43'N 92°02'E	1,400
Surh Tlang (Champhai)	23°57'N 93°13'E	1,100–2,200
Tantlang (Champhai)	23°09'N 93°15'E	1,000–2,100
Thingfal (Lunglei)	22°37'N 92°55'E	900–1,000
Tipaimukh (Aizawl)	24°12'N 93°0'E	150
West Phaileng (Mamit)	23°42'N 92°30'E	500

Aizawl, Kolasib and Champhai districts and surveyed Lengteng Wildlife Sanctuary and Murlen National Park. This included 30 km of foot transects and 943 km of road transects. Localities are detailed in Table 1.

## SIGNIFICANT RECORDS

Details are provided for the more interesting and significant records, including five threatened and seven Near Threatened species. Records of galliformes and large raptors are included, given the high hunting pressures on these species in the region. IUCN Red List status follows BirdLife International (2004) and restricted-range status follows Stattersfield *et al.* (1998).

**WHITE-CHEEKED PARTRIDGE** *Arborophila atrogularis*  
Near Threatened. This common species was frequently encountered in forest in Mamit, Kolasib and Aizawl districts, near the Assam border, especially in Inner Line reserve forest during 1986–1988.

**MOUNTAIN BAMBOO PARTRIDGE** *Bambusicola fytchii*  
I observed a covey of at least six birds at Farpak, Phawngpui National Park, on 13 April 2000, heard calls from four sites around Farpak on the mornings of 13 and 14 April 2000, and also recorded the species at three sites in Champai district in February 2001: near the south-western boundary of Lengteng Sanctuary, c.4 km south-west of Lengteng sanctuary towards Lamzawl, and 5 km west of Champhai. Large populations probably occur in Mizoram given the abundance of bamboo brakes throughout the state.

**BLYTH'S TRAGOPAN** *Tragopan blythii*  
Vulnerable. Restricted-range. This species is known in Mizoram only from Phawngpui National Park, where I recorded five males calling within a 3 km<sup>2</sup> area at Farpak on 12 April 2000. I estimate that there is c.20 km<sup>2</sup> of potential habitat for the species in the park. Local villagers in Lengteng Wildlife Sanctuary and Murlen National Park did not recognise images of the species.

**KALIJ PHEASANT** *Lophura leucomelanos*  
I recorded many sightings of this species in northern areas of Mizoram, especially near the Assam-Mizoram border in Mamit, Kolasib and Aizawl districts during 1986–1988. It was seen as low as c.70 m near Bhairabi, Kolasib district, in March 1987. Elsewhere, a male and a female were seen crossing a road c.15 km north-west of Sairang, Mamit district, on 4 April 2000, and the species was reported by villagers to be snared and shot fairly frequently in abandoned *jhums* around Bhairabi, Vairengte, Sangau, Lawngtlai and Phura.

**MRS HUME'S PHEASANT** *Syrmaticus humiae*  
Vulnerable. A recent survey showed that this species appears to be widely distributed in the higher hills of eastern Mizoram, especially in Champhai and Saiha districts, and possibly occurs in Lunglei and Serchhip districts (Choudhury 2002a, 2005). In addition to the previously known localities of Murlen and Phawngpui National Parks, hunters' specimens were recorded at Lengteng Wildlife Sanctuary, North Diltlang, Surtlang, Arhtlang and Ngur, all in Champhai district, and it was

reported by local people at twelve additional sites (Choudhury 2005).

**GREY PEACOCK PHEASANT** *Polyplectron bicalcaratum*  
I recorded this species in: the Inner Line reserve forests, Aizawl and Kolasib districts (heard 1987–1988); Ngengpui Wildlife Sanctuaries (April 2000); Lengteng Wildlife Sanctuary (February 2001); Murlen National Park (heard in February 2001); Dampa sanctuary (heard in April 2000); at five sites between Rawlbuk and Ngopa, Champhai district (heard in February 2001); and Lamzawl, Champhai district (snared bird seen in February 2001).

**GREAT HORNBILL** *Buceros bicornis*  
Near Threatened. This species was presumably once commoner, given the number of preserved casques I saw in villages (e.g. >20 seen between Lunglei and Lawngtlai), but it has now become extremely rare and locally extirpated owing to hunting and habitat loss. I only recorded two birds in the field: between Ngopa and Rabung, Champhai district, in February 2001.

**BROWN HORNBILL** *Anorrhinus tickelli*  
Near Threatened. This species was not seen in the field. Only a single casque was seen in Vapar village, Champhai district; it was probably more than a decade old and was reportedly shot near Murlen National Park. In 1987, I saw one in flight south-west of Jamalpur, Assam, very close to the Mizoram border (Choudhury 2000).

**WREATHED HORNBILL** *Rhyticeros undulatus*  
Like other hornbills, this species was previously commoner in the state, but is now extremely rare and locally extirpated. I did not record any in the field, but saw a casque of a fairly recently killed bird from near or inside Dampa Wildlife Sanctuary at Teirei. Old casques dating from the 1980s or early 1990s were seen in Vapar near Murlen National Park, and Sangau and Thaltlang near Phawngpui National Park in February 2001.

**ORIENTAL PIED HORNBILL** *Anthracoceros albirostris*  
Preserved casques and feathers of this species were seen in most of the villages surveyed in or near: Dampa, Ngengpui, Khawnglung and Lengteng Wildlife Sanctuaries; Murlen and Phawngpui National Parks; Inner Line and Ngengpui reserve forests; and the forests of Lawngtlai and Saiha districts. In April 2000, birds were seen in Ngengpui Sanctuary (three), Palak Dil (one), and between Laty and Phura (at least ten), and were heard calling in Phawngpui National Park.

**DARK-RUMPED SWIFT** *Apus acuticauda*  
Vulnerable; restricted range. This species was recorded in Lengteng Wildlife Sanctuary on 20 February 2001 and in Phawngpui National Park on 13 April 2000. On both occasions, at least three and one individual respectively were identified and watched for 20–25 minutes in mixed flocks of Fork-tailed Swift *A. pacificus* and Brown-backed Needletail *Chaetura gigantea* flying around cliff-faces. They were dark brownish below, with a greyish-white throat, darker fine scaly marks on the underparts below the upper breast, darker lower belly, and brownish underwing, with glossy black upperparts, with a slaty-bluish hue on the back seen on at least one bird. They differed from Fork-tailed Swift by their lack of white rump

and lack of contrasting white throat, but it was difficult to discern any differences in the shape of the tail-fork, wing-length or overall size. Common Swift *A. apus* (which has not yet been recorded in Mizoram) lacks strong markings on the underparts.

**BLACK BAZA** *Aviceda leuphotes*

One was seen in flight in Ngengpui Sanctuary on 9 April 2000 giving a loud *cheew cheew* call.

**WHITE-RUMPED VULTURE** *Gyps bengalensis* and  
**SLENDER-BILLED VULTURE** *G. tenuirostris*

Critically Endangered. Both species were recorded in Bhairabi in March 1996, February 1997 and April 1998, in mixed flocks of 7–10 soaring birds, but were not recorded subsequently.

**BLACK EAGLE** *Ictinaetus malayensis*

Singles were observed in Ngengpui Wildlife Sanctuary on 8 April 2000, at Sangau on 12 April 2000 and in Phawngpui National Park on 12 and 13 April 2000; two were seen between Kolodyne bridge and Saiha on 11 April 2000 and between Rawlbuk and Sangau on 12 April 2000.

**SHORT-TOED SNAKE EAGLE** *Circaetus gallicus*

A single bird was observed soaring near Thingfal, Lunglei district, at 1,050 m on 8 April 2000. This was the first record of the species for Mizoram (it was not listed by Ali and Ripley 1987 or Grimmett *et al.* 1998). Its white underparts and underwings, which were narrowly barred pale brown, grey-brown upper breast, and almost square-cut tail were conspicuous when seen overhead.

**RUFIOUS-BELLIED EAGLE** *Hieraaetus kienerii*

One immature was seen in flight in Ngengpui Wildlife Sanctuary on 8 April 2000. An adult was observed perched in a tree near Ngopa, north-west of Lengteng Wildlife Sanctuary, in February 2001.

**PEREGRINE FALCON** *Falco peregrinus*

One seen perched in a shrub on a cliff near Farpak, Phawngpui National Park, on 13 April 2000. It was identified as *F. p. peregrinator* by its dark-grey upperparts, black hood and moustache, rufous breast and whitish cheeks, throat and sides of neck.

**DARTER** *Anhinga melanogaster*

Near Threatened. One was seen at Palak Dil on 11 April 2000. Habitat for this species in Mizoram is very restricted because of the scarcity of wetlands (Choudhury 2002b).

**BURMESE SHRIKE** *Lanius colluriooides*

Singles were seen along roadsides throughout the state in April 2000 and February 2001. The seasonal status of this species is not clear in north-east India (Ali and Ripley 1987, Choudhury 2000). It may be resident with local movements as well as a passage migrant. It is considered a passage migrant elsewhere in the region (Grimmett *et al.* 1998).

**LARGE-BILLED CROW** *Corvus macrorhynchos*

This species was recorded on three occasions: single birds seen at Ngengpui, Phura and near Phawngpui, in April 2000. It is rare owing to persecution, particularly in the vicinity of human habitations.

**PURPLE COCHOA** *Cochoa purpurea*

Near Threatened. A male was seen at c.2,050 m between Farpak and Blue Mountain peak, Phawngpui National Park, on 13 April 2000. The species was also recorded in the same area in March 1998 by Sangha (2001).

**STRIPED LAUGHINGTHRUSH** *Garrulax virgatus*

Near Threatened. I saw a group of at least three individuals near Farpak, Phawngpui National Park, on 14 April 2000. Kaul *et al.* (1996) recorded this species in Murlen National Park.

**GREY SIBIA** *Heterophasia gracilis*

Near Threatened. Groups of 2–3 birds were seen in Murlen and Phawngpui National Parks in February 2001 and April 2000, and at least one individual was identified in a mixed-species flock in Lengteng Wildlife Sanctuary in February 2001. Kaul *et al.* (1996) found it to be common in Murlen National Park and frequent in Phawngpui National Park.

**FOREST WAGTAIL** *Dendronanthus indicus*

I observed at least ten singles on a dirt road between Kolodyne bridge and Phura village (at 200–300 m) on 10 and 11 April 2000, and near the road between Rawlbuk and Sangau on 12 April 2000. These were the first records of the species for Mizoram.

**HOUSE SPARROW** *Passer domesticus*

This species is very rare in Mizoram, where Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* is the common sparrow in most places. Small numbers were observed in and around Bhairabi in February 1987 and north of Vairengti (near Lailapur) in April 2000.

## CONSERVATION

Habitat destruction through *jhum* agriculture, logging, clearance for settlements and cultivation in valleys, and poisoning and blasting in the rivers for fishing are major threats to Mizoram's fauna. Closed-canopy forest (canopy cover =40%) covered 62.6% of Mizoram in 1972–1975, but deforestation decreased this to 52.9% in 1980–1982 and 20.6% in 1995 (NRSA 1983, FSI 1997). It increased to 42% in 2001 owing to development of plantations (FSI 2003). The ultimate cause of habitat destruction is the very rapid growth of human population which increased from 0.33 million in 1971 to 0.89 million in 2001 (Government of India 2001). While some species (e.g. Kalij Pheasant, Red Junglefowl *Gallus gallus* and Mountain Bamboo Partridge) can survive in degraded forest and abandoned *jhums*, others cannot and have consequently declined.

Owing to intensive hunting, some species (e.g. Mrs Hume's Pheasant and several hornbill species) have disappeared from large parts of Mizoram. Species such as the Grey Peacock Pheasant, Blyth's Tragopan, Mrs Hume's Pheasant, hornbills, and Peregrine Falcon are accorded the highest protection under the Schedule I of Wild Life (Protection) Act of India. Most villagers are, however, not aware of this legal status, and the legislation is poorly enforced.

New protected areas should be designated in part of Inner Line reserve forest (250 km<sup>2</sup>), Palak Dil (40 km<sup>2</sup>) and Parva (50 km<sup>2</sup>). Smaller community-run sanctuaries



should be established near Ngur, North Diltlang and Artlang. Existing protected areas should be extended at Murlen, Ngengpui, Lengteng and Phawngpui. Within protected areas there needs to be better control of poaching, *jhum* cultivation and human-induced fires. Environmental awareness programmes are needed in villages surrounding protected areas. In view of the high rate of literacy (90%), conservation awareness has better chances of succeeding in Mizoram than in many other parts of India.

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## Plain-backed Thrush *Zoothera mollissima*: first record for Bangladesh

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On 29 January 2006, at 16h00–16h30, Enam Talukder, Zahangir Alom, Samiul Mohsanin and Dilip Das and I observed a Plain-backed Thrush *Zoothera mollissima* at Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Dhaka, Bangladesh (23°52.58'N 90°16.19'E, 14 m).

For most of the duration of our observation, the thrush was seen pecking on the ground around a narrow water

drain, at a distance of 15 m. We observed it using 10× Nikon binoculars and photographed it. It then flew and perched in a *Ziziphus* tree (6 m high), and then moved to a rain tree *Albizia* sp. (8 m high) before finally flying away. The drain kept this area relatively wet and hence it was covered by herbs (dominated by *Tridax procumbens*) and shrubs. The weather conditions were sunny and calm.