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NOTE

THE FIRST RECORD OF MONTAGU'S HARRIER *CIRCUS PYGARGUS* (AVES: ACCIPITRIDAE) IN WEST BENGAL, INDIA

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The first record of Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* (Aves: Accipitridae) in West Bengal, India

Suman Pratihar¹ & Niloy Mandal²

^{1,2} Department of Zoology, Sukumar Sengupta Mahavidyalaya, Keshpur College, Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal 721150, India.

¹pratihar_vu@rediffmail.com (corresponding author), ²niloymandal1998@gmail.com

India is the second largest home for harriers (Aves: Accipitridae: Circus) globally and harbors six harrier species of the 16 found across the world (Verma 2007). Harriers are slender, long naked-legged, long wing, and long tailed raptors with an owl-like facial ruff. The key characters to identify harriers are: under wing pattern, facial pattern, axillary pattern, body streaking, tail features and mode of flight (soaring and gliding). Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* (Image 1a,b) is widespread in India and the smallest of the country's harriers. There are, however, no previous photographic records from West Bengal. There have also been some unsubstantiated records without photographs.

On 30 December 2019, we started birding in Bonpatna Village, in Kesiari block, West Midnapore, West Bengal, India. While birding we noticed a harrier and a Black Kite *Milvus migrans* gliding over the marshes and bushes with several dead snakes (killed by a fisherman during netting) behind a local dam (used for fishing). This area (near a wetland and cultivated field) was a perfect fit as Montagu's favorite habitat (Image 1c,d). This bird species is often found at night in the open, frequently in sizeable congregations and in company with other harrier species in grassy swamp or fallow land (Ali & Ripley 2002).

The Montagu's Harrier can be confused with many harrier species that exist within the same range, e.g.,

Pallid Harrier *C. macrourus*, Pied Harrier *M. melanoleucos*, and Hen Harrier *C. cyaneus*. Distinguishing sub adults and juveniles is most confusing. We have undertaken a comparative analysis to elucidate proper identification.

On identification we found real difficulties between Pallid Harrier and Montagu's Harrier. A paper by Svensson in 1971 is still considered the most comprehensive treatment to elucidate the subject. Identification of juvenile is most difficult. Lewington also added few important aspects regarding identification (Lewington 1991). Ali & Ripley in 2002 noted underparts with chestnut shaft-stripes and a grayish rump. The juveniles of both species undergo a partial body moult in the winter, which varies between within species (Forsman 1995). Characters like underwing primaries, head pattern, upper tail coverts, rump and collar are the most important features. At the time of migration, they have acquired a slim outline and their flight is more like adults. Montagu's juveniles are identified by dark finger tips, and grayish base to outer primaries. Amount of white around eye and distinctiveness and shape of collar are other features (Forsman 1995). Forsman also supported the difference between Montagu's, Pallid and Hen Harrier with wing formula. In addition Forsman (1995) pointed out the rufous underparts and darker adult female secondaries in Montagu's Harrier (Forsman 1995). Identification is easier

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Image 1. a–b— Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* | c—grassy swamp land perfect for roosting | d—a wetland beside the roosting site.
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if the bird is aged first. When recognizing adult female Pallid with Montagu's Harrier, one must remember that female Hen Harrier is a more likely to be confusing, rather than Montagu's (Forsman 1995; Grimmett et al. 2011). The lack of white in the upper tail coverts, and white in the rump; pale lores, prominent white above the eye and presence of white collar in our specimen confirmed that it was not Pied Harrier *Circus melanoleucos*.

We have compiled ten points which confirm the identification of our specimen as follows:

1. Flat owl-like face, oval head shape, long wing and tail, small body.
2. More white round the prominent eye, though restricted not well developed dark ear-coverts patch.
3. Crescent-shaped pale collar with tapered end.
4. Ear covert extended up to the eye.
5. Under wing outer primaries with uniform grayish bases and not evenly barred. Secondary pattern is variable so less reliable.
6. Broad supercilium (narrow in case of *Circus macrourus*) with clear face.
7. No white in the upper tail covert (white upper tail covert is character of Pied Harrier).

8. Grayish-white rump present (from field note).
9. Long outermost primary p1 number and roughly equalling p5, all broad dark fingertips.
10. A very distinct, unique pattern similar to sub adult female Montagu's Harrier.

We revisited the place, in the hope of finding more individuals, and a roosting site, but were unsuccessful. As this is the first report of the species from the state, it is difficult to conclude whether it is a passage migrant, or a vagrant in West Bengal.

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