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43/2 Varadarajulu Nagar, 5th Street West, Ganapathy, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu 641006, India
Registered Office: 3A2 Varadarajulu Nagar, FCI Road, Ganapathy, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu 641006, India
Ph: +91 9385339863 | www.threatenedtaxa.org
Email: sanjay@threatenedtaxa.org

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Cover: Orange Oakleaf *Kallima inachus* with colour pencils and watercolor wash by Elakshi Mahika Molur adapted from a workshop by Lenin Raj.



First sighting record of Western Reef-Heron *Egretta gularis* (Bosc, 1792) (Aves: Pelecaniformes: Ardeidae) from Jammu & Kashmir, India

Parvaiz Yousuf¹ , Semran Parvaiz² , Nisheet Zehbi³ , Sabia Altaf⁴ , Showkat Maqbool⁵ , & Mudasir Mehmood Malik⁶

^{1,3,4} Department of Zoology, Central University of Kashmir, Ganderbal, Jammu & Kashmir 191201

² Department of Environmental Science and Management, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi 110025, India

^{1,2} Wildlife Conservation Fund, YPK, Pampore, Jammu & Kashmir 192121, India.

^{5,6} Wular Conservation and Management Authority (WCMA), Srinagar, Jammu & Kashmir, 190001, India.

¹ saleemparvaiz444@gmail.com (corresponding author), ² semranparvaiz@gmail.com, ³ nisheet.zehbi@gmail.com,

⁴ sabiaaltaf1994@gmail.com, ⁵ showketmaqbool123@gmail.com, ⁶ pcwucma@gmail.com

The Western Reef-Heron or Western Reef-Egret *Egretta gularis* is a medium-sized heron that was formerly considered a subspecies of the Little Egret *E. garzetta*. In addition, the dimorphic subspecies of the Little Egret from Madagascar was previously regarded as a subspecies of the Western Reef Heron (del Hoyo et al. 2020). This heron exhibits a slender physique, medium size, and occurs in white or dark plumage. It possesses a long and slender neck, along with a thin bill, dark legs, yellow feet, and notable plumes on the head, breast, and back. Notably, the male individuals are larger in size compared to the females (Dubois & Yésou 1995; Willoughby 2001).

Two distinct morphs can be identified in the Western Reef-Heron. The dark morph is characterized by its dark gray coloration, featuring a white chin and throat. On the other hand, the white morph often leads to confusion with Little Egret and can be differentiated primarily by bill color and structure. Western Reef-Heron is widely distributed in coastal regions across Africa, predominantly near muddy flats, sandy shores, and

mangroves (del Hoyo et al. 2020). It is also increasingly appearing as a vagrant species in southern Europe (Dubois & Yésou 1995). It is primarily distributed in coastal regions, with its presence almost exclusively confined to these areas. In western Africa, it can be found from Mauritania to Gabon. It is also observed along the eastern African coast, ranging as far south as Kenya and Tanzania and extending northwards to the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf (del Hoyo et al. 2020). Furthermore, it is found along the western, southern, and southeastern coasts of India. In India, the species has been previously spotted at numerous locations such as Rajasthan (Sharma et al. 2015; Chhangani & Charan 2015) and peninsular India (Byju et al. 2023). During the non-breeding season, it can also be found along the coast of Sri Lanka (Dies et al. 2001; De Juana 2002; Dowsett et al. 2008; del Hoyo et al. 2020). Hybrids between Little Egret and Western Reef-Heron have also been spotted in India and Sri Lanka (Koparde & Yésou 2017). This heron primarily forages in shallow waters, utilizing a slow walking technique to search for fish, amphibians, and

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Image 1–4. Photographic evidence of Western Reef-Heron in Wular Lake. © Showkat Maqbool.

invertebrates (Dubois & Yésou 1995).

On 18 June 2023, the first-ever documented sighting of a Western Reef-Heron was reported from Jammu & Kashmir. The fifth author of this article, spotted the bird at Wular Lake at 34.3436° N, 74.3837° E at 1357 h in the Saderkoot Payeen area. This sighting expands the avifaunal diversity of Jammu & Kashmir, adding another species to the region.

Remarkably, the Western Reef-Heron remained in the vicinity of Wular Lake until 13 July 2023, providing ample time for observation and study. It stood out distinctly from other avian inhabitants of the lake

and could be easily observed feeding along the lake's bank. This particular bird belonged to the adult dark morph category, displaying identifiable characteristics as depicted in Image 1–4. This sighting serves as a noteworthy contribution to our understanding of the avian population and ecological dynamics of the region.

The dark morph of the Western Reef-Heron exhibits a range of coloration, varying from gray-black to pale charcoal gray. Most individuals possess a white chin and throat, along with occasional white markings on the leading edge of the wing and variable white patches on the upper wing. Conversely, the white

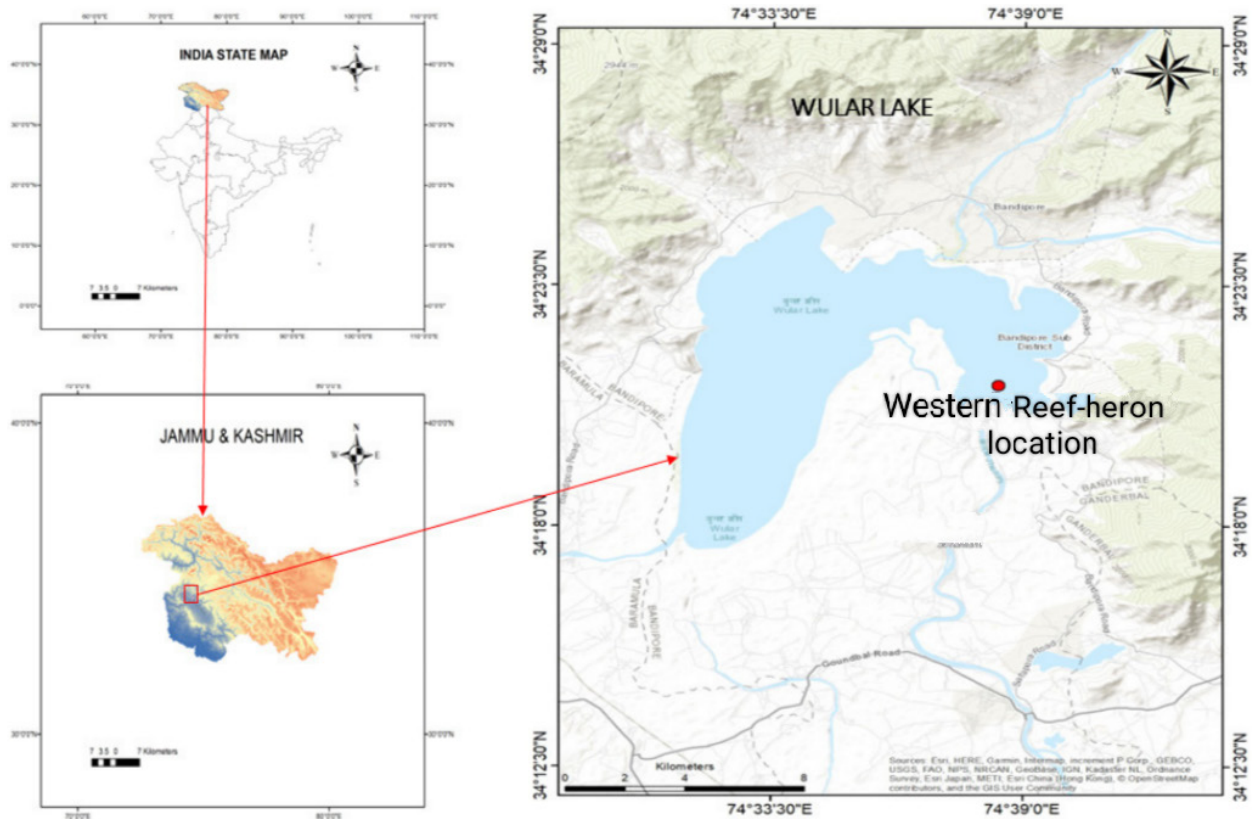


Image 5. Map of Wular Lake with pinpoint location where the Western Reef-Heron was sighted.

morph is rare within the nominate subspecies, with an estimated occurrence of less than 1% in Senegambia. It is predominantly found in the southern part of the species' range and on São Tomé, with these individuals typically displaying scattered gray feathers (Dubois & Yésou 1995). While records of intermediate plumage between both morphs exist, it appears to be more frequently observed in the *E. g. schistacea* subspecies. During the breeding season, both morphs develop long plumes on the nape, scapulars, and breast (Dubois & Yésou 1995; Kushlan & Hancock 2005).

Previously, no documented sighting of the Western Reef-Heron had been recorded in the diversity-rich region of Wular Lake. However, for the first time, it was spotted at Wular Lake in the Saderkoot Payeen area (Image 5). Situated at an elevation of 1,580 m, Wular Lake is one of Asia's largest wetlands, its location is centred on the coordinates 34.3334° N, 74.6354° E. The lake is formed by the convergence of the flowing River Jhelum, its major feeding route, and its tributaries. It takes the form of an oxbow lake in the northwestern part of Kashmir, approximately 35 km away from Srinagar city. Functioning as a vast absorption basin for floodwaters, the lake plays a vital role in maintaining

the water flow necessary for agriculture, hydropower generation, and recreational activities such as kayaking and rafting in the Kashmir valley. The deepest section of the lake is located on its western side, opposite the hills of Baba Shakur Din, reaching a maximum depth of 5.8 m. The sole outlet of the lake is the river Jhelum, situated towards the northeast. The catchment area of the lake consists of sloping hills from the Zaskar ranges in the western Himalayas, with runoff flowing through various nallahs, including Erin and Madhumati. The low-lying regions of Sonawari can be found on the eastern and southern banks of the river, which were prone to frequent flooding before the construction of multiple embankments along the Jhelum. Historically, farmers cultivated paddy fields and maintained willow, poplar, and fruit tree plantations in the reclaimed lake area. Paddy fields have been established in the low-lying areas on the western side, along the Sopore-Watlab corridor. The area where this bird species was spotted is a marshy area with no deep waters. This may be the reason why the bird occupied and lived in such a part of Wular Lake. Herons usually prefer shallow areas where they can wait for long hours to catch prey (mostly fish) as they need a substrate to settle on. This explains the bird species

favouring this particular area for feeding for over 25 days, as such an area is optimum for the bird's survival. In 1986, the Indian government recognized Wular Lake as a wetland of national importance, followed by its designation as a wetland of international significance by the Ramsar Convention in 1990 (Bhat & Pandit 2014).

The lake has emerged as a significant hotspot for its diversity of bird species. Many species have been recently sighted in Wular Lake that were previously absent from the Kashmir valley. Earlier this year, Long-tailed Ducks *Clangula hyemalis* and Smew *Mergellus albellus* were observed in the Kashmir valley after a gap of 84 and 116 years, respectively (Yousuf et al. 2023b, inpress). At the same time, Horned Grebes *Podiceps auratus* were sighted for the first time in the Wular Lake of Jammu & Kashmir in early 2023 (Zargar et al. 2023). Similarly, in 2022, the White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* was sighted in Wular Lake for the first time from Jammu & Kashmir (Yousuf 2023a). We hope and predict the arrival of numerous other bird species at this exquisite Ramsar site in the Kashmir valley in the years to follow.

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Tamil Nadu 641006, India
ravi@threatenedtaxa.org



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