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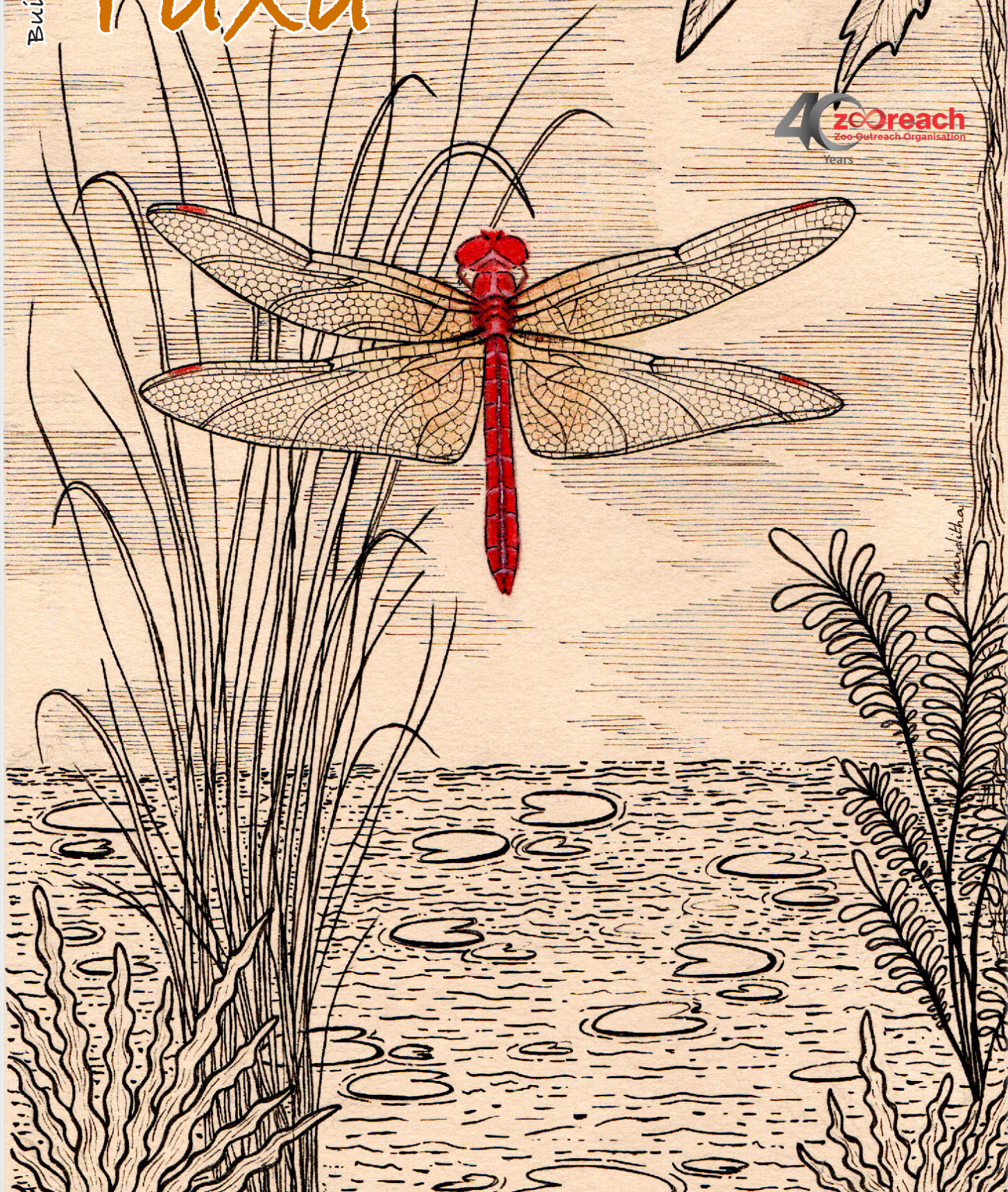
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continued on the back inside cover

Cover: A male Scarlet Skimmer perching on vegetation by the banks of a waterbody. Ink and watercolour illustration by Ananditha Pascal.



First record of Greater Scaup *Aythya marila* in Farakka IBA near West Bengal & Jharkhand border, India

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West Bengal has a very rich avifaunal diversity with 929 species, including 11 'Critically Endangered' species (Manna et al. 2024). Large numbers of migrants are attracted, especially during winter, by the extensive areas of water bodies of West Bengal. River Ganga enters into West Bengal through Malda District. Due to presence of Farakka Barrage on the river Ganga in Malda District, the river appears to be huge but near stagnant in nature. The river's water level begins to drop as winter approaches, and several 'chaurs' or riverine islets are formed and birds utilize these 'chaurs' for foraging and roosting. Farakka barrage and the surrounding area is recognized as an IBA (Important Bird and Biodiversity Area) that extends from Farakka Barrage to Manikchak Ghat of Malda District, West Bengal (Rahmani et al. 2016). Due to its diversity, this area attracts a significant number of both terrestrial and aquatic birds. Some are Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga*, Baer's Pochard *Aythya baeri*, Indian Skimmer *Rynchops albicollis*, and Ferruginous Pochard *Aythya nyroca* (Jha 2006). The 'Endangered' Gangetic Dolphin *Platanista gangetica* also has a strong population in this

area.

On 01 December 2024 morning, a Greater Scaup *Aythya marila* was observed near the West Bengal and Jharkhand state borders. The authors recorded this during a four-month-long avifaunal survey (December 2024 to March 2025) in the river Ganga conducted once a month. Figure 1 shows the location of the bird sighting area (24.970° N, 87.938° E). This is the first record of Greater Scaup in Farakka IBA. At first the authors misunderstood it as a Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*, as it was floating along with them. The authors took some pictures and later identified it as a female Greater Scaup using a field guide (Grimmett et al. 2016). Image 2 shows a clear picture of a female Greater Scaup floating with a female Tufted Duck. Greater Scaup females often have a rounder head, a wider bill with a whiter base (Kessel et al. 2020). In contrast, female Tufted Ducks may have a smaller white patch at the base of their bill, a flatter-topped head, and a small tuft (Carboneras & Kirwan 2020). The authors recorded a total of nine riverine bird species on that location, including Greater Scaup and

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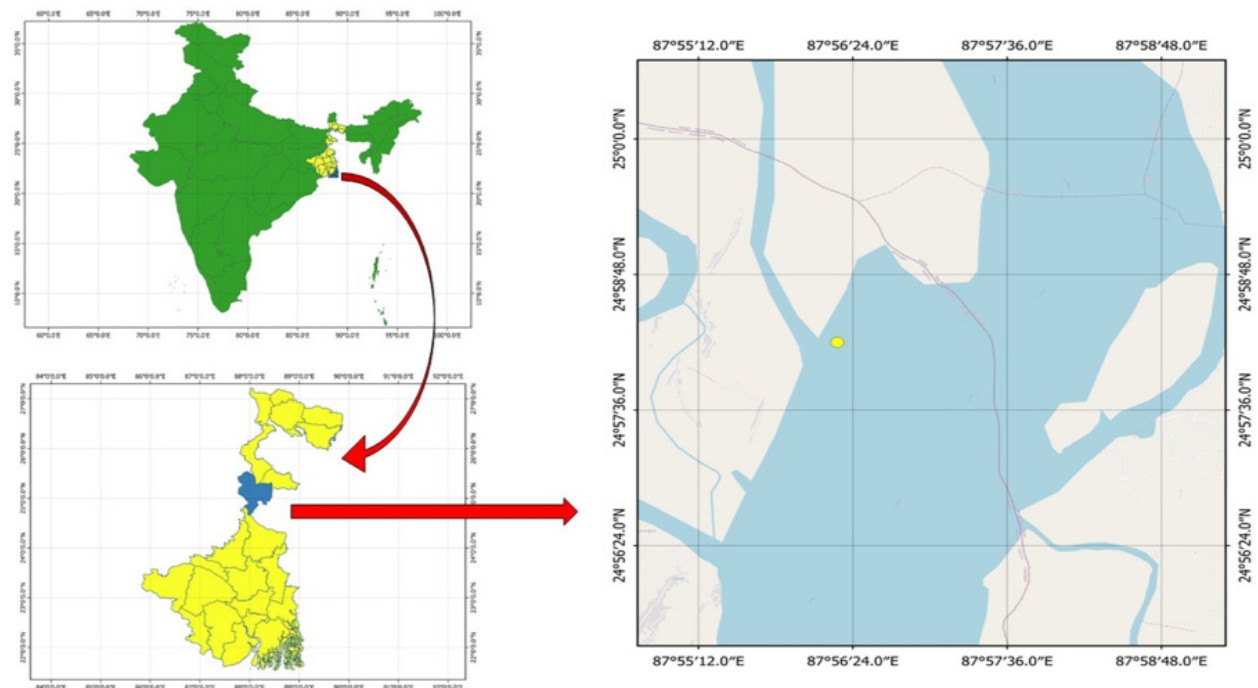


Figure 1. Location of the sighting area.



Image 1. Female Greater Scaup *Aythya marila* (in the right) floating with a Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula* (on the left). © Sudip Ghosh.

Tufted Duck. Other sighted bird species were Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*, Kentish Plover *Anarhynchus alexandrinus*, Brown-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus brunnicephalus*, Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*, Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*, Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*, Black-headed Ibis

Threskiornis melanocephalus, and Eastern Cattle Egret *Ardea coromandra*.

The Greater Scaup is a rare migratory bird to India (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Grimm et al. 2016). This round-headed diving duck migrates through the Central Asian Flyway (CAF) (Narwade et al. 2021). Though

Greater Scaup has some unique distinguishing features, it is easy to get confused with other *Aythya* ducks. Male Greater Scaup have black breast, medium gray back, white sides, yellow eyes, and a glossy blackish-tinted green head, although head color can vary and is not a reliable distinguishing feature. Females have a white patch on their face and are dull in colour. Their belly is white, and they have a dark brown head and neck with lighter molting (Deviche 2019). Typically, flocks of this species are seen with other *Aythya* ducks. Although Greater Scaup can be found in freshwater, these birds often choose bays and coves with saltwater. As they can dive to hunt for aquatic invertebrates including mollusks, crustaceans, and insects, these ducks favour shallow freshwater lakes, ponds, and rivers. They also consume aquatic plant stems, leaves, and seeds. They are mostly seen in Siberia, Alaska, and northern Canada during the breeding season and winters in south to avoid the severe Arctic weather. Their wintering sites are found around the coasts of North America, Europe, and Asia, as well as other temperate locations (Bellrose 1980; Cannings et al. 1987; American Ornithologists' Union 1998; Trost & Drut 2001). Some individuals occasionally stray further south and are seen in southern Asia, including India (American Ornithologists' Union 1998; Ali et al. 2015).

In recent years, Greater Scaup has been recorded in northeastern India, mostly in Assam, West Bengal, and Sikkim. It is noticed that most of the observations were made in the Brahmaputra and Ganga Rivers. By analyzing secondary literature, it is found in Gajolboba Barrage, West Bengal at the same month of the authors' observation in Farakka IBA; Piyali River, South 24 Parganas, and Gajoldoba in Jalpaiguri (eBird 2025). Few other winter sightings of this species in India recorded are from Bombay Deccan (Aspinall 1950); Corbett National Park, Uttarakhand (Kumar & Lamba 1985); Dihaila Jheel, Karera Bustard Sanctuary, Madhya Pradesh (Natarajan & Sugathan 1987); Nelapattu Bird Sanctuary, Andhra Pradesh (Prashant et al. 1994); Pohara-Malkhed Reserve Forest, Maharashtra (Wadatkar & Kasambe 2002); Pong Dam, Himachal Pradesh (den Besten 2004); Bhindawar Bird Sanctuary, Haryana (Harvey et al. 2006). This present sighting is a reminder for birdwatchers that they should always look for the presence of uncommon birds that may get overlooked due to similarities with their more common congeners.

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