

The First Record of Horned Lark from Jigme Khesar Strict Nature Reserve – A New Record for Bhutan

Gyeltshen Dorji^{1,2}, Sangay Wangchuk², Wangchuk², Sonam Tobgay² and
Jigme Tshelthrim Wangyal^{2,3}

Abstract

The Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris*) even though a widespread songbird species had not been recorded from Bhutan. The bird was observed in Jigme Khesar Strict Nature Reserve in a recent trip to Gakiling, Haa. With this new record, the number of bird species found in Bhutan has increased to 739 species.

Keywords: Horned Lark, new record, songbird

The Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris*) is a widespread species of songbird that occupies grasslands, tundras, deserts, and other sparsely vegetated habitats on five continents (Beason, 1995). Belonging to family Alaudidae, *E. alpestris* by habit is terrestrial, ground nesting and has the capacity to camouflage to defend itself from predators (Donald *et al.*, 2017).

An extensively studied bird in terms of geographic difference and systematics (Behle, 1942; Johnson, 1972), physiological adaptations (Trost, 1972), relation to wind energy (Erickson *et al.*, 2014), population genetics (Drovetski *et al.*, 2006, 2014; Mason *et al.*, 2014; Ghorbani *et*

al., 2019), and breeding biology (de Zwaan *et al.*, 2019), a lone bird appeared (Figure 1) in front of the regular birding team at about 1500 hours on 16 December, 2018 on the edge of a fallow agriculture land at Gakiling village (is 27.117914°N and 89.144196°E at an elevation of 818 m above mean sea level) under Gakiling Range of Jigme Khesar Strict Nature Reserve.

Earlier that day, the team tried to photograph Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo (*Dicrurus remifer*) and Red-headed Trogon (*Harpectes erythrocephalus*) but failed to do so because of poor, shaky and unstable camera. However, later in the afternoon the team improvised the camera by using wood stick supplement as stand (Figure 1) and ventured out on the same trail with the hope to get photos of the two species found in the morning. At about 1500 hours, the team spotted a different type of bird (never found earlier) but for the second time the camera gave way and the bird escaped into the bushes. Frustrated over the failure to trap the unique bird, the team returned to the camp and

¹College of Natural Resources, Royal University of Bhutan, Lobesa, Punakha, Bhutan

²Jigme Khesar Strict Nature Reserve, Haa, Bhutan

³University of New England, Armidale, NSW, Australia

^{2,3}Corresponding author: jigmewangyal@gmail.com

Received: December 3, 2020

Accepted: December 10, 2020

Published online: December 31, 2020

Editor: DB Gurung, College of Natural Resources, Bhutan



Figure 1: Improved camera stand (A, left) and the Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris*) (B, right), new record for Bhutan. (Photo: Gyeltshen Dorji, Forest Ranger)

checked with whatever guidebooks we had on birds of Bhutan. The team was surprised not to see the bird in the bush in the guide books which prompted them to keep the search going over the next day. Thus, they returned to the same spot on 20 December, 2018 to find the same species of bird foraging on the same spot (seen earlier). The modified camera also supported the team to take photos of the bird which was widely shared for confirmation. It was Biju, an Indian birder who first told the name of the bird as Horned Lark with a comment “amazing shot”, and by afternoon several bird lovers identified it as Horned Lark. The species was later reconfirmed by Dr. Sherub, an Ornithologist from the Ugyen Wangchuck Institute for Conservation and Educational Research,

who noted its as a novel record for Bhutan.

According to Bird-Life International (2018) the 18 cm long Horned Lark is a least concerned species with the declining population trend (no assessment done in Bhutan so far) and has extremely large range. Resident of the high Himalayas, the males have a black and white head pattern with black mask, horns and band across crown and is known to breed on stony ground and alpine pastures even occupying on fallow lands in winters (Birds of India).

Until the observation of this bird, Bhutan had recorded 738 species of birds (Dr. Sherub pers. comm.). With this new record, the number of bird species known to occur in Bhutan has reached to 739 species.

References

- Beason, R.C. (1995). *Horned Lark (Eremophila alpestris)*, version 2.0, *The Birds of North America*. Vol. A, edited by Poole, F., and F.B. Gill, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca.
- Behle, W. (1942). Distribution and variation of the horned larks (*Eremophila alpestris*) of western North America. *Univ. Calif. Publ. Zool.*, 46: 203–316.

- de Zwaan, D.R., Barnes, S. and Martin, K. (2019). Plumage melanism is linked to male quality, female parental investment and assortative mating in an alpine songbird. *Anim. Behav.*, 156: 41–49. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.anbehav.2019.06.034>
- Donald, P.F., Alström, P. and Engelbrecht, D. (2017). Possible mechanisms of substrate colour-matching in larks (Alaudidae) and their taxonomic implications. *Ibis*, 159: 699–702. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ibi.12487>
- Drovetski, S.V., Raković, M., Semenov, G., Fadeev, I.V. and Red'kin, Y.A. (2014). Limited phylogeographic signal in sex-linked and autosomal loci despite geographically, ecologically, and phenotypically concordant structure of mtDNA variation in the Holarctic avian genus *Eremophila*. *PLoS One*, 9: e87570. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0087570>
- Drovetski, S.V., Pearson, S.F. and Rohwer, S. (2006). Streaked horned lark *Eremophila alpestris strigata* has distinct mitochondrial DNA. *Conserv. Genet.*, 6: 875–883. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10592-005-9074-9>
- Erickson, W.P., Wolfe, M.M., Bay, K.J., Johnson, D.H. and Gehring, J.L. (2014). A comprehensive analysis of small-passerine fatalities from collision with turbines at wind energy facilities. *PLoS One*, 9: e107491. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0107491>
- Ghorbani, F., Aliabadian, M., Olsson, U., Donald, P.F., Khan, A.A. et al. (2019). Mitochondrial phylogeography of the genus *Eremophila* confirms underestimated species diversity in the Palearctic. *J Ornithol.* DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10336-019-01714-2>
- Johnson, N.K. (1972). Origin and differentiation of the Avifauna of the Channel Islands, California. *Condor*, 74: 295–315. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1366591>
- Mason, N.A., Title, P.O., Cicero, C., Burns, K.J. and Bowie, R.C.K. (2014). Genetic variation among western populations of the Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris*) indicates recent colonization of the Channel Islands off southern California, mainland-bound dispersal, and postglacial range shifts. *Auk*, 131: 162–174. <https://doi.org/10.1642/AUK-13-181.1>
- Trost, C.H. (1972). Adaptations of Horned Larks (*Eremophila alpestris*) to Hot Environments. *Auk*, 89: 506–527.