

# First records of 'white-headed' Black Bulbul *Hypsipetes leucocephalus* from India

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The Black Bulbul (Family Pycnonotidae, Order Passeriformes) has recently been split into two species—the Himalayan Black Bulbul *Hypsipetes leucocephalus* and the Square-tailed Black Bulbul *H. ganeesa* (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005; del Hoyo *et al.* 2005). These are distributed in South and Southeast Asia from Afghanistan in the west to Vietnam in the east (del Hoyo *et al.* 2005). Twelve subspecies (or races) of both species have been recognised in different parts of the species' range (Table 1; Ali & Ripley 1983; del Hoyo *et al.* 2005; Rasmussen & Anderton 2005). Three of these subspecies (*stresemanni*, *leucothorax* and *leucocephalus*) differ from the others in having a white head, throat and/or upper breast, contrasting strongly with a smoky blackish-grey or black body. The species is classified by the IUCN as of Least Concern (LC) because it has a wide geographical range and is common in some parts of its range (IUCN Red List). Three subspecies have been recorded from India. These are *psaroides* of

the Himalaya and north-eastern Indian hills, *nigrescens* from parts of north-eastern India, and *ganeesa* from the Western Ghats (Ali & Ripley 1983; del Hoyo *et al.* 2005; Rasmussen & Anderton 2005). None of these races have white heads.

We (US and SD) conducted a bird survey from November 2008 to January 2009 in the community forests in Vijoyanagar circle, which is situated east of Namdapha National Park, eastern Arunachal Pradesh (India). The area lies between the Patkai Hills to the south and the Mishmi Hills and the Himalaya to the north (Fig. 1). Myanmar surrounds the survey area on its east, north and south.

During the course of our survey, we had several sightings of a white-headed race of the Black Bulbul (Figs. 2 and 3) at two locations (Fig. 1). We tentatively identified these birds as belonging to the subspecies *stresemanni* because all birds we observed had entirely blackish-grey bodies without the paler grey tones seen in *leucocephalus* (del Hoyo *et al.* 2005). It is possible that the birds

belonged to the subspecies *leucothorax*, which is supposedly 'inseparable' from *stresemanni* in the field (del Hoyo *et al.* 2005). Further, we tentatively identified these birds as belonging to the subspecies *stresemanni* because the white on the throat does not extend to the lower breast, as it does in the races *leucocephalus* and *leucothorax*. Details of these sightings are provided in Table 2. At both locations, the white-headed birds were part of large fluid flocks (up to 100 birds), of Black Bulbul *Hypsipetes leucocephalus psaroides*, the Himalayan black-headed race. The white-headed birds mixed freely with black-headed ones and foraged along with them. Black Bulbuls of both subspecies were found together in orchards of cultivated persimmon *Diospyros kaki* and were observed feeding on ripe persimmon fruits. The calls of *stresemanni* were very similar to those of *psaroides*. Prior to this, the known non-breeding distribution of *stresemanni* was in Thailand and Laos (del Hoyo *et al.* 2005) and, a single 1995 record from Bangladesh (Thompson & Johnson 2003).

These birds have been visiting the area for the last two winter seasons—

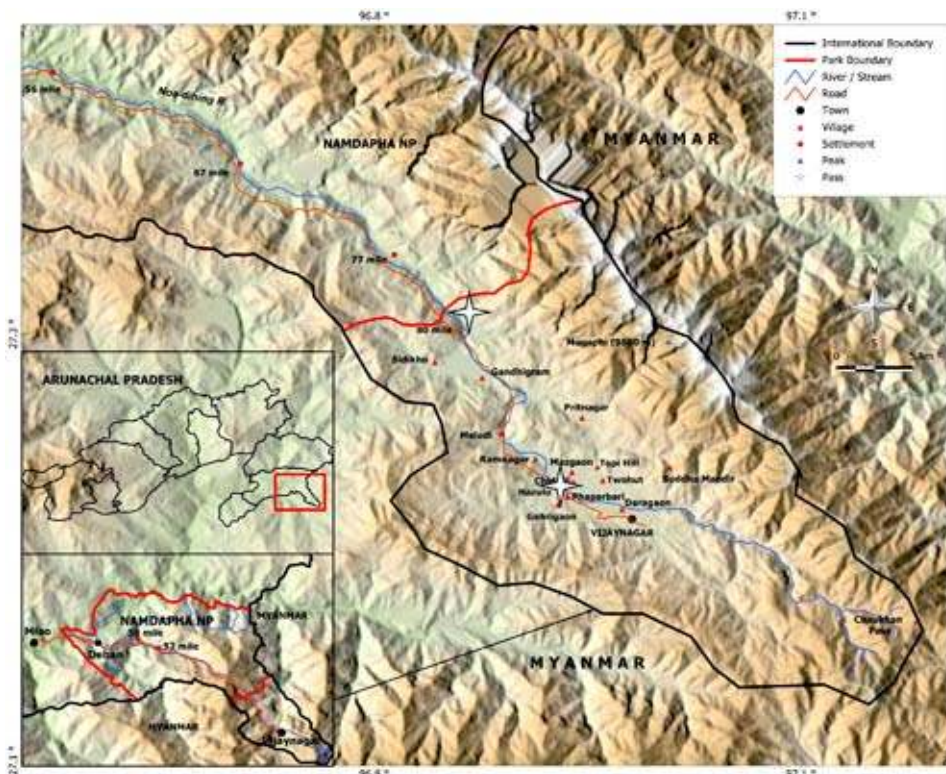


Fig. 1. Locations of 'white-headed' Black Bulbul *Hypsipetes leucocephalus* sightings in eastern Arunachal Pradesh. Source: Nature Conservation Foundation.

**Table 1. Distribution of Black Bulbul *Hypsipetes leucocephalus* subspecies (del Hoyo et al. 2005; Rasmussen & Anderton 2005)**

Subspecies	Distribution	White-headed
<i>humii</i> *	Sri Lanka	No
<i>ganeesa</i> *	Western Ghats of India	No
<i>psaroides</i>	NE Afghanistan, N Pakistan east to NE India, S Tibet, NW Myanmar, old records from C India	No
<i>nigrescens</i>	NE India (E Assam, Manipur), W Myanmar	No
<i>concolor</i>	E Myanmar, S China, Indochina	No
<i>ambiens</i>	NE Myanmar, S China	No
<i>sinensis</i>	Breeds S China, non-breeding W Thailand, Laos, Vietnam	No
<i>stresemanni</i>	Breeds S China, non-breeding Thailand, Laos, single record from Bangladesh (Thompson & Johnson 2003)	Yes
<i>leucothorax</i>	Breeds C China, non-breeding W, N & E Myanmar, N & NE Thailand, N Vietnam	Yes
<i>leucocephalus</i>	Breeds SE China, non-breeding E Myanmar, N Indochina	Yes
<i>nigerrimus</i>	Taiwan	No
<i>perniger</i>	S China, possibly N Vietnam	No

\* Subspecies *ganeesa* of Ali & Ripley (1983) has been elevated to species status, and named Square-tailed Black Bulbul *Hypsipetes ganeesa* (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005; del-Hoyo et al. 2005). The subspecies *humii* of Ali & Ripley (1983) is now treated as a race of the Square-tailed Black Bulbul (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005; del Hoyo et al. 2005). del Hoyo et al. (2005) therefore, list ten races of Himalayan Black Bulbul *H. leucocephalus* and two of Square-tailed Black Bulbul *H. ganeesa*.

**Table 2. Details of sightings of 'white-headed' Black Bulbul *Hypsipetes leucocephalus stresemanni***

Date	Time	Location	Latitude	Longitude	Altitude	Habitat	Number
27th December 2008	0830 hrs	Hazulu	27°12'25.8"N	96°57'26.2"E	992 m	Orchard, garden	4
2nd–3rd January 2009	All day	Musala	27°18'34.8"N	96°54'40.8"E	1,258 m	Orchard	c. 20



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Fig. 2. Black Bulbul *Hypsipetes leucocephalus stresemanni* / *leucothorax* in Changlang district, eastern Arunachal Pradesh.





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Fig. 3: Black Bulbul *Hypsipetes leucocephalus stresemanni* / *leucothorax* in a persimmon orchard, Changlang district, eastern Arunachal Pradesh. Note the presence of Black Bulbuls of the race *psaroides* to the left.

2007–2008 and 2008–2009 (KY). The Black Bulbul *H. l. psaroides* is well-known in the area, especially since it is a frequent raider of persimmon orchards, and has at least two local names (*Chamtakye* and *Nye-m-ne*) in the *Lisu* language. The local people who cultivate persimmon make some effort to drive these birds off fruiting trees. In addition, several biologists have been visiting the area in winter for the past six years and have never noted this subspecies, although the Himalayan *psaroides* is very conspicuous and commonly sighted in large flocks in the area (Aparajita Datta, Rohit Naniwadekar, and M. O. Anand—*pers. comm.*). It is highly unlikely therefore, that this species has been a regular winter visitor to the area and has been overlooked until now. Our sightings are the first records of a white-headed subspecies of the Black Bulbul from India and a significant winter range extension of this subspecies.

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