

Pakistan

June 10 – 19, 2023

Andrew Spencer and Josh Beck

This was a quick trip with the primary goal being to hopefully see **Long-billed Bush-Warbler** which James Eaton just last year found and documented after a long period without certain records. Beyond the Bush-Warbler we hoped to see **Sind Woodpecker**, **White-cheeked Tit**, **Orange Bullfinch**, and a few more western Himalayan and other regional species. The trip was very successful and overall we found Pakistan to be very safe and logistically quite easy, the people to be very kind and very keen to help, the food delicious, the scenery to be absolutely stunning, and the birding to be honestly quite excellent, arguably better than adjacent Indian Jammu and Kashmir.

Some quick notes on logistics: We both qualified for electronic visa/travel authorizations. We filled out the applications online, paid our fee (\$60), and had the visa authorizations almost instantly. For entry you'll need a proof of return ticket and a hotel reservation for the first night at least (and you will need the hotel reservation for your e-visa application anyways). We made bogus reservations which we then cancelled, pretty standard stuff. Upon arrival to Islamabad, they pull you aside to the right and a not terribly clear process mostly involving sitting/waiting for like 20 minutes ensues until eventually you get your actual eVisa issued and then go back to the normal immigration queues to get your passport stamped.

Andrew had arranged a rented 4WD vehicle from a provider in Gilgit – Lost Horizons (<http://www.losthorizontreks.com>, phone/WhatsApp +92 331 8981244). They delivered the vehicle to us in Islamabad at nearly midnight for a modest fee and we returned it in Gilgit. With this we were on our way.

Our first morning we briefly went to **Margalla Hills National Park, Trail 5**. Parking is at 33.7447, 73.0878. There is a small hut there with a chai vendor who else sells some crackers and cookies for an improvised breakfast or if you need water. We birded Trail 5 for about 2kms. The trail is fairly flat for about 1,5km, then you come to a prominent fork. Going right leads you up a steeper bit to another trail junction and a spring. The spring is good for birds coming to drink. It seems that most sightings of **White-cheeked Tit** are from about 1,5km to the spring or in that general area. We had our sighting at 33.7597, 73.07619 which was along the other small branch of trail at the upper trail junction. The trails are all in Open Street Maps (ie, Organic Maps or Maps.me). The birds didn't vocalize much and were moving through pretty quickly but we managed pretty good views. (Andrew later returned solo and found the birds again, hoping to record them, but they were similarly quick moving and not very vocal). With midmorning heat building quickly we watched the spring for a bit then left and drove to Padhri Game Reserve, about a 3 hr drive from Islamabad.

Padhri Game Reserve is a private reserve / community hunting concession (Contact via WhatsApp +92 300 8416115). The lodge itself is just next to the road at 32.8449, 73.2991. The staff were great, the food was awesome, and a Pakistani birder who

previously worked with the conservation organization behind Padhri, Ali Mosvi (WhatsApp +92 331 5360723 / +92 344 5710604) had graciously come to the reserve as well to accompany us and help us find **Sind Woodpecker** and other birds. This was fortuitous as the lodge is primarily a hunting lodge that is part of a successful community-based conservation initiative for the local wild sheep, the Urial, and thus the other staff / community members aren't as knowledgeable regarding birds. In any case, there is a big area to explore within the reserve and Ali's local knowledge was particularly useful. The first evening we made a hurried excursion to a neighboring community where we parked, and explored an area of semi-disturbed fairly open habitat with some small trees. This eventually led to a ridge where at dusk we heard but did not see Sind Woodpecker. The following morning we explored a larger / better area. Turn from the main road at 32.8195, 73.3179 and the dirt track leads into a wadi / wash. We parked at approximately 32.7943, 73.3294 and walked up the main side wash there and generally explored around. No sign of Sind Woodpecker and our secondary target, See-see Partridge, was heard only. By midmorning Ali suggested taking a side trail / old road (no longer driveable) up to the village of Gulyal (32.8093, 73.3530). Behind Gulyal is some taller / lush gallery forest with more intact understory. Here (32.8114, 73.3560) we found **Sind Woodpecker** eventually, having a very cooperative and showy pair. We then hiked back to the car via an alternative trail that Ali and the locals knew, surprisingly finding **Indian Pitta** in the gallery forest just behind Gulyal as well, a new bird for the reserve and potentially only the second "known" site in PK aside from Margalla Hills, though it must certainly occur more widely. We decided to stay an extra night as the food and setting were great and we had a bit of slop time in our schedule. The following morning we returned to the main wash with the hope of seeing See-see Partridge but instead finding a **Sirkeer Malkoha**. With late morning boiling heat building we gave up but then on the drive out we had a female and two very young **See-see Partridges** in the road. Also in the area we explored the tall elephant grass patches around (32.8380, 73.2954) on the hope of finding **Rufous-vented Grass-Babbler** or **Jerdon's Babbler** but found neither. Overall Padhri was a really pleasant place to stay with lovely people and great food, and the birding was quite nice if quite warm (40C by 10AM).

Our next destination was **Shogran**. Shogran is quite touristy, so hotels and food are no problem. The birding is primarily along the steep 4WD track that extends about 6-7km above town to Paye Meadows. Google shows a large water body at Paye Meadows but this is not the case, it's a rounded hilltop/ridgetop with a couple tiny ponds for livestock. The attraction though is the very nice forest with intact understory along the road. The first half of the road is much steeper than the second half, so we birded from approximately km 3,5 to the end of the road and around the edge of the meadows. Most of our birds were from km 3,5 to shortly before the meadow (which is overgrazed and fairly full of local tourists). If you don't have a 4WD you could walk up (steep) or could trivially get a jeep to take you up and/or down as necessary - Shogran does booming trade with domestic tourism and the main thing to do seems to be to go up to Paye Meadow in an old Jeep, so they are literally everywhere. But an early start gives you several hours of nice birding along the road before the semi-ridiculous number of Jeeps start plying the road making noise and dust (gets bad around 10AM). In any case, in our

morning up there we had three sightings of **Orange Bullfinch** in addition to **White-throated Tit**, **Fire-capped Tit**, lots of **Black-and-Yellow Grosbeaks**, and one heard only **Spectacled Finch** (seemingly harder here than in Jammu and Kashmir) and a host of other western Himalayan species. In the scrubbiest vegetation around the edge of the meadow we turned up a pretty skulky pair of **Golden Bush-Robins**.

After this we drove from Shogran to Gilgit via Babusar Pass. This was a long, tiring drive, and Babusar Pass had only barely opened and was quite slow due to one lane restrictions on some of the high altitude bits. Without traffic / delays at the pass it would have been a 10 hour drive. It took us over 12 hours, including a lot of bouncing around, some poor but not terrible road conditions, and some single lane dirt stretches with good drops/cliffs to the side that we very fortunately got through before last light as doing those in the dark would have been a bit ugly. In hindsight, it might have been less stressful/tiring to rent a 2WD in Islamabad and use that for Padhri and Shogran, then return to Islamabad and fly to Gilgit. The flight to/from Gilgit is more scenic than the drive, and by far the more scenic parts of the Karakoram Hwy that we saw were from Gilgit to the China border. If you fly either or both directions, get window seats on the right for Islamabad -> Gilgit, or on the left for Gilgit -> Islamabad for stonking views of Nanga Parbat at eye level!

In any case, from Gilgit it is a quickish 60-75 minute drive to **Naltar Valley**. It's better and faster to take the new paved road on the W side of the river instead of the Karakoram Hwy on the E side to get up to the base of the valley. At the moment the last 5-10kms of the road to Naltar Valley, and particularly the road past the town, are in rough shape and while we saw a couple 2WD vehicles get to town, we didn't see any past town and a 4WD will make your life a lot easier here. There are quite a few guesthouses here, we stayed at Naltar Palace (36.1692, 74.1747) which is recommended - good food, helpful owners, nice place. Across the river from town there is a patch of wetter terraced agriculture with shrubby / weedy margins (roughly 36.153, 74.185) where **Long-billed Bush-Warbler** occurs. When we parked below this area we heard a singing bird as soon as we were out of the vehicle and managed to find two cooperative singing birds in this patch. At the top of this patch we found **Blythe's Rosefinch** and **Tickell's Leaf-Warbler**. **Brooks's Leaf-Warbler** is in the conifers bordering this area, as well as in all conifers in the valley, seemingly. On a subsequent morning, we found another vocal **Long-billed Bush-Warbler** in a scrubby patch of vegetation across the river from the Naltar Palace Hotel, at approximately (36.1673, 74.1728). We birded further up the valley as well, checking various patches of conifer forest and the bit of birch forest near the lakes at the end of the road. At the border of a conifer patch and the scrubby hillside behind it at about (36.2088, 74.1368) we found **Sulphur-bellied Warbler**, **Blue-capped Redstart** (which we subsequently found in more locations as well), and more **Blythe's Rosefinches**. In the next patch at about (36.2171, 74.1157) we found **White-winged Grosbeak**. The patch of birch forest at the top of the valley didn't hold anything particularly noteworthy but we did have **Plain Mountain-Finch** in the boulder / scree fields around some snow patches up there. Overall Naltar Valley was really scenic and holds some excellent birds, we enjoyed it tremendously.

Having seen all of our main targets at this point we did a bit of exploring, driving to and overnighing in the town of **Sost** (last place with hotels/restraurants en route to the China border) and then birding for a morning from there up to **Khunjerab Pass** (4750m) and the border with China. There are a few checkpoints and a National Park entrance to negotiate along the way. One of the checkpoints (immediately after the park entrance) didn't want to let us in prior to 7AM but a bit of kind yet firm negotiating soon got the gate open and we were on our way. The birding along this road was quite good, particularly above about 3600-3800 meters. We saw the local version of Ibex quite well. On the bird side, we found **Plain** and **Black-capped Mountain Finch**, **Desert Wheater** (fairly common except for the highest areas), **White-winged/Güldenstat's Redstart** (common, breeding everywhere), **Himalayan Griffon**, **Lammergeier**, **Tibetan Snowcock**, and more. A really enjoyable last morning of birding.

Our last night in Gilgit was at a nicer / newer hotel near the airport for our early morning flight out (early flights are better for better views of the mountains before it clouds up, also less risk of flights cancelling). The hotel was Hotel Kallista/Callista, 35.9213, 74.3270, and is recommended if you need to stay near the airport.