

LITTLE-KNOWN ASIAN BIRD

Range extension of Rusty-bellied Shortwing *Brachypteryx hyperythra* in Sikkim, India

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Among the five species of shortwing that exist in India, four are found in the Himalayas. Rusty-bellied Shortwing *Brachypteryx hyperythra*, a globally threatened species with IUCN status Vulnerable, is endemic to Eastern Himalayas with restricted distribution in Darjeeling, Assam, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh, but with records from China, Myanmar and Bhutan (BirdLife International 2001, Choudhury 2003, Spierenburg 2005). Sikkim is a rugged mountain state of India with varied topography and climate. It lies in the Eastern Himalayas, a global hotspot of biodiversity and an Endemic Bird Area (Stattersfield *et al.* 1998, Islam & Rahmani 2004, Mittermeier *et al.* 2005).

We have been studying the birds of Teesta Valley, Sikkim, since 2002. On 20 May 2004, while conducting fieldwork in conifer forests near Yumthang (27°47'N 88°43'E) at 3,600 m elevation, two male Rusty-bellied Shortwings were seen sitting 1 m apart on the ground and calling. The observation was from close distance (< 10 m). After a minute both birds flew into rhododendron undergrowth and could not be relocated. Then, while surveying birds in the early morning of 14 January 2006 at Menshithang (27°38'N 88°37'E), at 1,970 m within the Khanchendzonga Biosphere Reserve, a single male was seen feeding

on small insects, catching prey in the air and coming to perch on bamboo at about 1 m above ground before disappearing into dense bamboo undergrowth.

The highest elevation documented for the species appears to be 2,900 m and its habitat has been reported as broadleaved evergreen forest, bamboo and grass (BirdLife International 2001), so our observation of birds in coniferous forest at 3,600 m is a new elevational record and an extension of habitat for the bird as well as being a first for Sikkim. Moreover, this record in May adds evidence of breeding of this species and that its breeding habitat in this region lies between 2,000 and 3,600 m. Nonetheless, while this new information is encouraging, the principal threat to the avifauna of the Himalayas remains loss of habitat due to forest clearance and degradation through logging, firewood collection, livestock grazing and various developmental projects. Most low- and mid-elevation forests in the Eastern Himalayas are already lost or fragmented. Temperate broadleaved forest, the probable main breeding habitat of the shortwing, is also experiencing high level of disturbance and is being lost at a rapid rate owing to unplanned resource extraction and ongoing developmental activities such as road construction and hydropower generation. Much more work is needed to understand the habitat requirements of this species and to conserve tracts of appropriate habitat throughout its range.

Plate 1. Rusty-Bellied Shortwing *Brachypteryx hyperythra*, Lava, West Bengal, India, May 2000.



EDWARD VERCRUYSE

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