

## RARE BIRD OF CHINA CLICKED IN INDIA

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Last November, Gurugram-based wildlife photographer Rajeev Dasgupta hit the jackpot when he got the first photographic evidence of the rare subspecies of male Koklass pheasant (*Pucrasia macrolopha meyeri*) near the Helmet top in Walong, Arunachal Pradesh.

Earlier, a few birders had caught a flitting glance in April-May 2015, and later in January 2021. But there had been no definitive evidence as the elusive, reclusive bird is not easy to photograph. The previous birders had recorded their observations about the rare subspecies only verbally on the eBird website.

Avibase, the world bird online taxonomic database, and books such as *Birds of the Indian Subcontinent* by Richard Grimmet, Carol and Tim Inskipp and *Birds of South Asia: The Ripley Guide* mention Koklass pheasant as a resident bird of the Western Himalayas. Of the nine subspecies identified across the world, four are found in the states of Uttarakhand, Jammu and Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh in India. The male subspecies — meyeri — had not been recorded outside China and Tibet. The bird bears a distinctive golden ring around the neck and its emerald green head distinguishes it from the female. While the bird has been declared extinct in Tibet now, the golden ring is not seen in the other subspecies found in India.

On November 22, 2020, Dasgupta got lucky enough to get a clear shot of the bird. “It is not one of my best photographs,” he says, “because the bird was perched on a pine tree 500 metres away. Not only was the distance long, there was no place to fix the tripod either.” He then climbed down a steep valley to reduce the distance between him and the rare catch by 200 metres. Hiding behind the trees, he finally found a narrow gap between him and the bird and clicked with his Canon 1D X Mark2 held in hand.

“Initially, the bird stay put, oblivious of my presence. When I tried to get closer, I stepped on a twig, accidentally. With that soft crackling sound, the bird flew away immediately,” he recalls.

Binanda Hatiboruah, a well known birding guide from the Northeast who has been taking birders to Walong since 2011, is the happiest. “I go into the Walong forests at least six times a year but had never seen this bird. On this trek, when I heard the prolonged ‘keek-kew-kok-kok’ throaty territorial call of the Koklass pheasant, I told Dasgupta to quickly take a photo,” he says over a phone call from Assam. “And he gave us a lifer in the year of pandemic and lockdown!”

“While reviewing the images, we noticed the golden ring near the bird's neck, which was not there in my earlier images of Koklass pheasant taken in Uttarakhand. I checked with ornithologist Neerav Bhatt, and Pravin Jayadevan, the editor of *Indian Birds*, who confirmed this was indeed the rare male subspecies,” says Dasgupta.

Dasgupta is now writing a paper on his experience of sighting the rare subspecies and hopes to get it published in *Indian Birds* or the *Bombay Natural History Society Journal*.

Delhi-based ornithologist Sarwandeep Singh says though people know about the existence of Koklass pheasant, since the subspecies has not been mentioned in popular literature and guides for lack of evidence, Dasgupta's photographic documentation is a rare record.

He says Koklass pheasants are not known for migration and are essentially residential birds of mid-altitude dense forests in the Himalayas. The easternmost town in India, Walong is roughly

20 km south of the China border, so there is a possibility that the birds may have flown as part of general shift in their geographical location. It can be assumed that the subspecies may be residing in Walong's terrain but not spotted as hunting is rampant in that area. "You have to be lucky to photograph the shy bird in dense foliage and from that distance," he says.

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