

Threatened Birds of Asia:

The BirdLife International Red Data Book

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FINN'S WEAVER

Ploceus megarhynchus

Critical —

Endangered —

Vulnerable A1c; A2c; C1; C2a



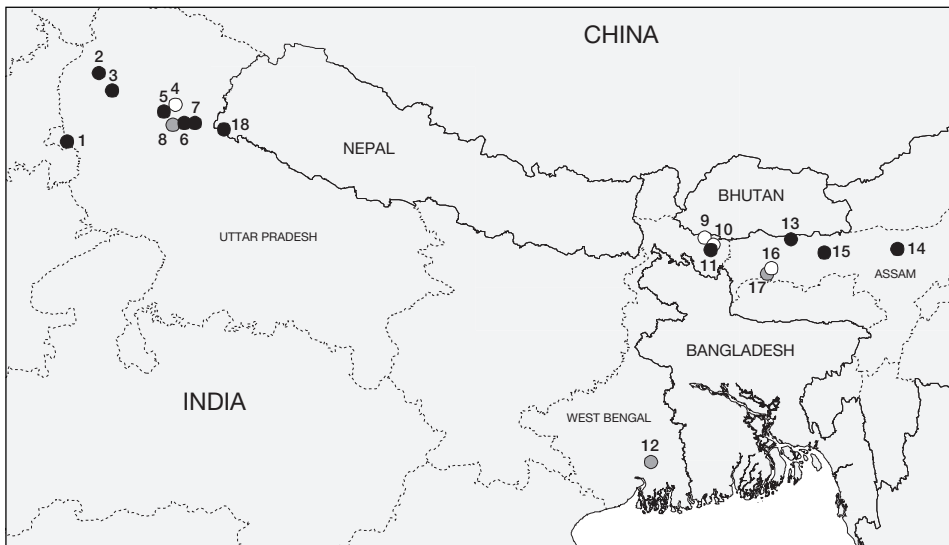
This species has a small, rapidly declining, severely fragmented population as a result of the loss and degradation of terai grasslands, principally through conversion to agriculture and overgrazing. These factors qualify it as Vulnerable.

DISTRIBUTION Finn's Weaver (see Remarks 1) occurs very locally in the terai belt of India and Nepal from the plains to 1,300 m (Baker 1922–1930, Ali and Ripley 1968–1998). Rashid (1967) listed it as a resident almost throughout Bangladesh, but while it is quite possible that it occurred in the country, or indeed still occurs, there is neither evidence nor any direct claim of this (P. M. Thompson *in litt.* 1999; see Remarks 1).

■ **INDIA** The species occupies a disjunct distribution in the terai, with one population in Uttar Pradesh/Delhi and another in West Bengal/Assam (see Remarks 2). Records are from:

■ **Delhi Okhla**, several nests, June–July 1993 (*Oriental Bird Club Bull.* 18 [1993]: 67–70; see Remarks 3), but not recently recorded (Bhargava 2000);

■ **Uttar Pradesh** Mangalore, **Roorkee**, undated but presumably 1990s (S. Javed *in litt.* 1999); **Hastinapur Wildlife Sanctuary**, 28 individuals, June 1979 (Rai 1979), but not located there in July 1998 (Bhargava 2000); **Kaladhungi**, below Naini Tal, two, December 1866 (specimen in BMNH, Hume 1869; see Remarks 4); Rudrapur (untraced), colonies at 1.5 and



The distribution of Finn's Weaver *Ploceus megarhynchus*: (1) Okhla; (2) Roorkee; (3) Hastinapur Wildlife Sanctuary; (4) Kaladhungi; (5) Bazpur; (6) Kichha; (7) Sitarganj; (8) Bilaspur; (9) Hasimara; (10) Rajabhat Khawa; (11) Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary; (12) Salt lakes; (13) Manas National Park; (14) Kaziranga National Park; (15) Rangia; (16) Goalpara; (17) Agia; (18) Royal Sukla Phanta Wildlife Reserve.

○ Historical (pre-1950) ● Fairly recent (1950–1979) ● Recent (1980–present)

7 km along the **Bazpur** road, July–August 1959 (Ali and Crook 1959), July–August 1961 (Ambedkar 1968), these colonies apparently disappearing by 1990 (Rahmani and Qurieshi 1991), also at Sultanpur, about 10 km from Rudrapur, July 1961 (Ambedkar 1968), September 1984 (B. F. King verbally 1998), although not located during 1997 (Bhargava 2000); near **Kichha** (Kitcha), on Lalkua–Bareilly road, several nesting colonies, July–August 1959 (Ali and Crook 1959), and a recently abandoned colony, August 1997 (Bhargava 2000); **Sitarganj** (Sitagananj), Udham Singh Nagar district, undated but presumably 1990s (S. Javed *in litt.* 1999), and three colonies in this region, 1999 (Bhargava 2000); **Bilaspur**, 12–15, June 1953 (Ali and Crook 1959), and Bilaspur–Rudrapur, on Rampur–Naini Tal highway, Rampur district, July–August 1959 (Ali and Crook 1959); Corbett National Park (unconfirmed), undated (Lamba 1987; also Anon. 1993a; see Remarks 5);

■ **West Bengal Hasimara**, breeding colony, June 1912 (H. V. O'Donel in Baker 1922–1930), February 1927 (Inglis 1951–1969), May 1925 (male in BNHS, Ali 1935); **Rajabhat Khawa**, May–June 1925 (two specimens in BNHS, Ali 1935); **Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary**, 65 individuals, January 1987 (*Oriental Bird Club Bull.* 6 [1987]: 36–40, Turin *et al.* 1987); **Salt lakes**, at North Salt lake, around 50, April–August 1966 (Saha 1967; see Remarks 3); Buxa Wildlife Sanctuary (not mapped), listed, possibly on the basis of historical records nearby (Anon. 1993a);

■ **Assam Manas National Park**, 1987 (Rahmani *et al.* 1988); **Kaziranga National Park**, c.10, February 1994 (P. Alström, U. Olsson and D. Zetterström *in litt.* 2000), 10, April 1994 (*Oriental Bird Club Bull.* 20 [1994]: 55–61), two individuals, April 1998 (*Oriental Bird Club Bull.* 29 [1999]: 51–56), at Bahu beel, 30–40 nests, undated (Barua and Sharma 1999); Dharamjuliarh (Rajagarh), Darrang district, north of **Rangia** railway station (see Remarks 6), a colony with 24 nests, June 1975 (Saha 1976); Ronikata camp, **Goalpara**, March 1910 (male in BNHS); **Agia**, May 1950 (11 specimens in AMNH, FMNH, LACM and UMMZ), March 1952 (five specimens in LACM and UMMZ), and June 1953 (two males in UMMZ); Hariwar tea estate (untraced), May 1926 (male in BNHS).

There are unconfirmed records from: Naini Tal, where a bird purchased in Calcutta market was reputedly caught, February 1904 (male in AMNH); Borivili, Maharashtra, April 1958 (male in BNHS), although either the identity or the provenance of this specimen must be erroneous.

■ **NEPAL** The species may be an erratic summer migrant or a regular but overlooked breeder (Baral 1998a, 2000b), but it seems to be restricted to very few sites in the lower terai. Records are from: **Royal Sukla Phanta Wildlife Reserve**, Mahakali zone, Kanchanpur district, up to 11, May 1996 (Baral 1998a), and nearby, including at Jhilmila grasslands, 53, March 1998 (*Danphe* 7, 1–2 [1998]: 11–12, *Oriental Bird Club Bull.* 28 [1998]: 44–48); Kosi Tappu Wildlife Reserve (unconfirmed), February 1993 (Fourage 1993).

POPULATION The population of Finn's Weaver must always have been relatively small but recent evidence suggests that it has declined substantially as many colonies in its stronghold of northern Uttar Pradesh have apparently disappeared (Bhargava 2000). There is no evidence to suggest that the total population exceeds 10,000 individuals, and it may well fall well short of this.

Until the 1950s Finn's Weaver was known from a small number of specimens and occasional birds found on sale in markets (Ali and Crook 1959). Expeditions organised specifically to search for it visited Kaladhungi in September 1934 (Ali 1935), and the Kumaon terai around Bilaspur in September 1953, but failed to locate it and it was assumed to be very rare (Ali and Crook 1959). Also in the 1950s, however, a series of specimens was collected at Agia, Assam (see Distribution), shortly followed by the discovery of breeding colonies around Bilaspur in 1959 (Ali and Crook 1959). Several breeding colonies were found at this latter

locality, each containing about 15–20 nests, and in a few cases up to 200 nests, leading to the conclusion that the species was “not at all rare or uncommon” and had possibly been overlooked (Ali and Crook 1959; see Remarks 7). This view was reinforced in July–August 1961 when eight hundred nests were counted in 21 colonies nearby (Ambedkar 1968). These records reveal that Finn’s Weaver was at that time locally common in parts of the Uttar Pradesh terai.

In September 1984 70 birds were again counted near Rudrapur (B. F. King verbally 1998), suggesting that little had changed. However, a survey of many (including all historical) sites in the Kumaon terai in 1997–1999 revealed only “a small population at low density” (very few small colonies were found), suggesting a slump in numbers since the 1961 survey (Bhargava 2000). Indeed, local bird trappers reported “a severe decline” since the 1970s and 1980s (Bhargava 2000). Additionally, although the species was recorded in the Meerut region (at Hastinapur, Uttar Pradesh) in 1979 (Rai 1979), recent extensive trapping of weavers produced no record of the species, leaving “little hope of its presence” in the area (Bhargava 2000).

Elsewhere in India, a few colonies have been found near Delhi and Calcutta and at a few other localities in north-east India. These colonies appear to form and disappear equally suddenly and it is therefore very difficult to estimate population size. In Nepal, the population is not thought to exceed 50 birds (H. S. Baral *in litt.* 1998) and the species may well occur only erratically.

ECOLOGY Habitat Finn’s Weaver occurs in tall grassland (sometimes scrubby), often with scattered trees for nesting, although it will also nest in reeds *Phragmites* and reed-mace *Typha* in wetlands (Ali and Crook 1959, Abdulai 1961, Saha 1967, *Oriental Bird Club Bull.* 20 [1994]: 55–61, Baral 1998). Colonies in Uttar Pradesh were found in typical terai habitat (Ali and Crook 1959), characterised by marshes and extensive stands of sarpat *Imperata* (given by Ali and Crook 1959 as *I. arundinacea*, but possibly referring to *I. cylindrica* or *Saccharum arundinaceum*) and munj grass *Saccharum spontaneum* (“munj” is usually used to refer to *S. bengalense* [*S. munja*]), sparsely dotted with trees such as *Dalbergia sissoo* and *Bombax ceiba*, and with occasional patches under rice and sugarcane cultivation (Ali and Crook 1959). It occurs in similar habitat in Nepal, where birds have been found in grassland dominated by *Saccharum* and *Phragmites karka* with scattered trees and termitaria (Baral 1998a). Colonies in north-east India have been found in “a vast area of grass more or less intermixed with scrub” (Baker 1922–1930), “thatch land [=grassland] with small trees” (Inglis 1951–1969), nesting in scattered *Erythrina* trees growing in a grassy area (Abdulali 1961b), and nesting in reed marshes (Saha 1967, Ambedkar 1968).

Food The species feeds primarily on seeds, often foraging in ploughed fields and along roadsides (Ali and Crook 1959). It also takes invertebrates from grasslands and sugarcane fields (Ali and Crook 1959, H. S. Baral *in litt.* 1999). Husked rice grains, smaller seeds and brown chitinous insect remains, possibly of ants, have been found in the crops of specimens (Ali and Crook 1959). A female feeding young had an insect in the bill and insect remains in the crop (Ali and Crook 1959). The species is generally gregarious while feeding (Ali and Crook 1959); flocks in Uttar Pradesh have been recorded feeding in mixed-sex groups in large stands of hemp *Cannabis sativa* and millet *Panicum*, apparently often on insects found on these plants rather than the seeds themselves (Bhargava 2000).

Breeding Season It generally breeds from May to September (Ali and Crook 1959, Ambedkar 1968). In Uttar Pradesh, adults in the Kumaon terai were feeding young by 12 July and had probably started breeding after heavy rains in May (Ali and Crook 1959), and at a colony at Rudrapur most eggs hatched between 18 and 24 August (Ambedkar 1968). Complete nests and nests under construction were recorded at a colony in West Bengal on 17 July and at a second colony three weeks later (Saha 1967).

Nest site Finn’s Weaver breeds in the tops of trees and in reed *Phragmites* and reed-mace *Typha* (Ali and Crook 1959, Saha 1967, Ambedkar 1968). There is some indication, from

Uttar Pradesh, that birds breeding early in the season nest in trees whilst those breeding later after the rains use reeds (Ambedkar 1968, Bhargava 2000). Nesting has been recorded in a variety of tree species including mango *Mangifera indica*, *Butea monosperma* (Ambedkar 1968), *Erythrina* (Abdulali 1961b), *Dalbergia sissoo* (Ali and Crook 1959, Bhargava 2000), *Ficus bengalensis* and particularly *Bombax ceiba* (Ali and Crook 1959, Barua and Sharma 1999, Bhargava 2000), usually where the trees are associated with grassland (Baker 1922–1930, Inglis 1951–1969, Ali and Crook 1959), although a colony was found in the centre of a village in 1961 (Ambedkar 1968). Colonies may occur in loose groups with wide areas of open country between them (Ali and Crook 1959). Nests in trees are 8–20 m off the ground (Ali and Crook 1959, Bhargava 2000), sometimes above areas flooded during the monsoon (Ali and Crook 1959). Protection from predation may be conferred where nests are located in small *Bombax ceiba* trees, the trunks and branches of which are spiny, and where colonies are in trees containing a breeding pair of Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocerus*, which aggressively drive away potential predators such as raptors and crows (Ali and Crook 1959, Ambedkar 1968): five out of seven nesting colonies in the Kumaon terai were sited in trees containing a breeding pair of Black Drongos and the two species also bred in the same tree in Sultanpur village (Ambedkar 1968). Nests in reeds in two fishponds at the north Salt lake (near Calcutta) were 40–90 cm above the water-level, with the reeds standing in one metre of water (Saha 1967). A colony in a patch of *Typha* (Rudrapur, Uttar Pradesh) had nests affixed to dead, dry stems, within the stems standing in knee-deep water (Ambedkar 1968).

Nest structure The nest is distinctly different from other weaver species in the Indian subcontinent (Ali and Crook 1959), although it shares certain similarities with the nest of the Asian Golden Weaver *Ploceus hypoxanthus* (Baker 1932–1935). It is entirely lined inside, rather than just on the floor of the nest, which is more usual in Asian weavers (Ali and Crook 1959, Saha 1967, Ambedkar 1968). In Uttar Pradesh, males generally strip leaves off all twigs near their nests, denuding the upper canopies of colony trees and leaving the large, untidy, globular nests easily visible; although first-year birds appeared to be nesting in reedbeds, there were no definite signs of breeding and these nests were not completed (Ali and Crook 1959). Nests in reedbeds are of a similar construction, loosely “knitted round a bunch of reed stems” and “cylindrical in shape, the exterior presenting various loops and sharp angles of strips of leaves” (Saha 1967). Just as the trees in the Kumaon terai were stripped of leaves, the reedbed surrounding a colony at Salt lake was “practically devoid of leaves due to their consumption in nest-construction” (Saha 1967). Saha (1967) remarked that the nests were so loosely constructed that gaps in the matrix sometimes allowed eggs to drop from the nests, but this was probably an unusual circumstance related to the “almost continuous heavy rains in the area for more than three days”. In stands of *Typha*, the nests were lined with material from *Typha* inflorescences, and males often constructed second or third nests attached to the first (Ambedkar 1968). In the Bhutan duars, nests were reported as untidy balls of grass strips, loosely and carelessly put together with no lining and fixed to the stems of grass (Baker 1922–1930) and were never found in trees. However, other colonies in the region were located in trees (Abdulali 1961b).

Clutch, incubation and success Breeding biology resembles that of Baya Weaver. Males are successively polygamous, mating with 1–4 females and having an average of 2.8 nests (Ali and Crook 1959). Clutch size generally varies from 2–4 eggs (Ali and Crook 1959, Saha 1967), with five-egg clutches occasionally recorded in Uttar Pradesh (Ambedkar 1968). Of 74 clutches investigated in 1959, and from 1961–1963, 33 (44.6%) had three eggs and 19 (25.6%) had two eggs, and the average clutch size was 2.4 eggs (Ali and Crook 1959, Ambedkar 1968). This was lower than the average clutch size (3.2 eggs) of Baya Weavers in the Pune area (Ambedkar 1964). As with other Indian weavers, incubation is by the female alone (Ambedkar 1968). It usually begins with the first egg and typically lasts 14–15 days, although

periods of 13 and 16 days have also been recorded (Ambedkar 1968). Females brood the chicks for the first 3–4 nights after hatching but rarely thereafter (Ambedkar 1968). The young are fed mostly on insects collected by the female while the male guards the nest from predators and rivals, although in one case a male was noted collecting food from the returning female and passing it to the nestlings (Ambedkar 1968). Young remain in the nest for 12–17 days (Ambedkar 1968). Of 79 eggs laid in one colony, 55 (69.6%) hatched and 42 young fledged (53.1%) (Ambedkar 1968); this high success was attributed to a safe colony, good food supply and short breeding cycle.

Migration No migration, local movement or post-breeding dispersal has been described, but colonies in southern areas appear and disappear unpredictably, and in Nepal the species has been described as erratic and it may be a summer migrant there (Baral 1998a, 2000b).

THREATS Finn's Weaver is threatened primarily by extensive habitat loss and degradation in the terai and in north-east India, and additionally by capture for the live-bird trade (Ahmed 1997, Bhargava 2000).

Habitat loss During the twentieth century grasslands of the terai and north-east India underwent massive ecological disturbance and their continuing loss and degradation is the key threat to this species and presumably the cause of its recent decline (Rahmani 1988b, Rahmani and Qurieshi 1991, Bhargava 2000). Huge areas of grassland have been destroyed as a result of conversion to agriculture and forestry plantations, edaphic grasslands have dwindled as flooding regimes have been disrupted by dam and irrigation schemes, and many remaining grasslands are subject to high grazing pressure from domestic stock and intensive harvesting by local communities, often associated with grassland burning (Javed and Rahmani 1991, Bell and Oliver 1992, Peet 1997, Bhargava 2000). A general account of these problems in India and Nepal appears under Bengal Florican *Houbaropsis bengalensis*.

The centre of Finn's Weaver's distribution in the Kumaon terai (Udham Singh Nagar district) is one of the most prosperous districts in Uttar Pradesh with a human population that has increased dramatically through the twentieth century, leading to a "drastic change" in land-use patterns to the detriment of the species (Bhargava 2000). It tends to vacate an area once grassland habitat has been cultivated (Rahmani and Qurieshi 1991, Bhargava 2000); the area around Rudrapur, for example, where large colonies were discovered in the 1950s, "has been converted to cropland", and the species can no longer be found. A colony in Sultanpur, discovered in 1961, had disappeared by 1968, probably because nearby elephant grass ("elephant grass" is a generic term for tall grasslands typical of the terai and the Brahmaputra valley) had been cleared (Ambedkar 1968). At one of the colonies in Uttar Pradesh, visited in June 1999, villagers were harvesting grass to sell as cattle fodder, thereby reducing the feeding habitat available for the species (Bhargava 2000). In Gujarat, *Ploceus* weaver colonies are threatened by lopping of nest tree branches for domestic use (Sharma 1997) and this threat is likely to apply to Finn's Weaver colonies, particularly in Uttar Pradesh. Potentially important areas of grassland surrounding and adjoining Royal Sukla Phanta Wildlife Reserve, Nepal, have been rendered useless to wildlife conservation by illegal encroachment and grazing of livestock (Baral 2000b). Wetland colonies are threatened by drainage and conversion of suitable habitat to agricultural, urban or industrial land (Bhargava 2000); the north Salt lake, for example, has now been filled in and developed (T. P. Inskipp *in litt.* 2000). Overgrazing, buffalo grazing amongst wetland colonies and pollution of swampy areas with industrial effluent are also potential problems (Sharma 1997, Bhargava 2000). Rising flood levels sometimes destroy colonies when the birds nest in reeds (*Oriental Bird Club Bull.* 18 [1993]: 67–70, C. Inskipp verbally 1998).

Trade Although Finn (1901c) remarked that the true *P. megarhynchus* was "unknown to the dealers", the species is thought to have been freely sold in the Calcutta and Bombay markets early in the twentieth century (Abdulali 1954, 1961b). It is judged that between 200

and 300 birds are illegally traded annually for the pet bird trade (Ahmed 1997, *Oriental Bird Club Bull.* 27 [1998]: 16–20).

Miscellaneous A large colony in Uttar Pradesh was “attacked” by crows (House Crows *Corvus splendens* and Large-billed Crows *C. macrorhynchos*) which stole several chicks and eggs, apparently precipitating the total desertion of the colony (Bhargava 2000). If crow populations have increased with the spread of human settlement, as suggested by Bhargava (2000), this threat possibly impinges on breeding success, especially as the design of Finn’s Weaver nests (lacking the tube-like neck of its congeners’ nests) appears to present a poor defence against such predators.

MEASURES TAKEN The species is legally protected in India (weavers in general are listed on Schedule IV of the Wildlife Act 1972). Trapping and trade of the species has been banned since 1991 (R. Barghava and A. R. Rahmani *in litt.* 1998). In India, it has occurred in Manas National Park and Kaziranga National Park. In Nepal, there are records from Royal Sukla Phanta Wildlife Reserve.

MEASURES PROPOSED The species should be listed on Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act and should also be listed under CITES (Bhargava 2000)—although for the latter measure it is normally required to demonstrate that trade in a species has a confirmed international dimension.

Protection of remaining suitable habitat is the highest conservation priority for this species if further declines are to be prevented. The conservation requirements of Finn’s Weaver should be viewed in combination with the needs of a variety of other threatened grassland birds within its range, so that a programme of habitat management and research can be implemented with benefits to each of these species (see Measures Proposed under Bengal Florican). As suitable grasslands are so restricted in area and distribution, further research must be coupled with direct action to strengthen the measures that ensure their protection (Peet *et al.* 1999a,b, Bhargava 2000). In this regard, key breeding colonies and surrounding habitat should be protected (Bhargava 2000) although the siting of such areas might pose a problem as colonies are apparently mobile (see Breeding). In the extension area of Royal Sukla Phanta Wildlife Reserve, Nepal, there is a need to reverse the process of illegal settlement and livestock grazing (Baral 2000b).

Control of trapping should be one of the primary objectives of any conservation programme for the species. A conservation awareness programme targeting trappers and local people in key sites for the species should be initiated (Bhargava 2000). Stricter enforcement and training of authorities would also help, but the provision of alternative livelihoods to traditional subsistence bird-trappers would be needed (*Oriental Bird Club Bull.* 27 [1998]: 16–20).

Despite several field studies, little is known about the species’s current status and distribution. Further surveys are urgently required, ideally targeting the help of trappers with prior knowledge of its habits and range (R. Barghava and A. R. Rahmani *in litt.* 1998). An investigation of the effect of trade on sample populations would be useful (Bhargava 2000). The possibility of translocating small numbers of individuals to protected habitat islands such as Dudwa and Corbett National Parks has been raised (Bhargava 2000), but this must remain a last resort and habitat protection is the clear priority; care should be taken not to mix populations of the two subspecies if translocations or re-introductions are attempted.

REMARKS (1) The species was first noted by Hume (1869) on the basis of birds in trade. The eastern form of Baya Weaver *Ploceus philippinus* was later united with this form, and given the name *P. megarhynchus* (Oates 1889–1890), causing considerable confusion in early

literature. Despite clarification of the issue by Finn (1901c), who finally described the breeding plumage of males, published records of *P. megarhynchus* from, for example, Meghalaya, southern and eastern Assam and Arunachal Pradesh (Baker 1894–1901, 1907b, Inglis 1896–1902, Stevens 1914–1915), refer to the eastern race of Baya Weaver *P. p. burmanicus*. This has subsequently generated false assumptions about the range of Finn's Weaver: for example, Rashid (1967) listed its occurrence almost throughout Bangladesh, a country in which it has never been identified. Two races of Finn's Weaver are now recognised (Abdulali 1960): *P. m. megarhynchus* in the west (Uttar Pradesh, Delhi) and *P. m. salimalii* in West Bengal and western Assam (Ambedkar 1968, Ali and Ripley 1968–1998). (2) After a breeding colony of Finn's Weaver was apparently discovered in the Bhutan duars (Baker 1922–1930), suspicions remained that these birds were also nothing more than *burmanicus* (Whistler and Kinnear 1931–1937). Ali (1935) stated quite categorically that “it is now certain that O'Donel's breeding colony of the Duars was not of this species but of *P. philippinus burmanicus*”. However, this certainty faded and the records were later re-accepted (Abdulali 1952, Ali and Crook 1959). (3) The birds at Okhla constitute a “remarkable southerly range extension” and the proximity to Delhi suggests that escaped cagebirds might have been involved (*Oriental Bird Club Bull.* 18 [1993]: 67–70, Ahmed in prep.). Similarly, the birds found breeding at the Salt lakes were thought likely to derive from escapes from the nearby Calcutta bird market (Saha 1976, Ahmed in prep.). However, given earlier and more recent records from northern West Bengal, they may well have been naturally occurring birds. (4) One hindrance to the rediscovery of the species was created by the false impression of its habitat based on the fact that the type locality, Kaladhungi, lies in the forested portion of Kumaon; the species actually frequents the “vast swampy grasslands of the terai at lower elevations” (Ali and Crook 1959) and thus the type presumably derived from a little way south of Kaladhungi. (5) The species was listed as “very common” throughout Corbett National Park (Lamba 1987; also Anon. 1993a), but this is presumably an assumption made on the basis of nearby historical records; therefore the record is not treated as confirmed. Another possible record is listed by van Groen (1989). (6) According to Saha (1976) the site was “100 km north” of Rangia railway station (itself in Kamrup district, Assam), but this cannot be correct as it places it in the mountains of Bhutan. (7) Ali and Crook (1959) suggested that the species might have been overlooked owing to its habit of nesting on top of trees and to the unorthodox structure of the nests themselves, although later they asserted that “the upper part of the canopy is normally completely denuded and the colonies thus stand out prominently against the skyline”.