

Threatened Birds of Asia:

The BirdLife International Red Data Book

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GREY-CROWNED PRINIA

Prinia cinereocapilla



Critical —
Endangered —
Vulnerable A1c; A2c

This species is inferred to be rapidly declining, probably as a result of destruction and conversion of grasslands throughout its range. It therefore qualifies as Vulnerable.

DISTRIBUTION The Grey-crowned Prinia (see Remarks 1) has been recorded in India, Nepal and Bhutan, where it occurs in the terai belt and the Himalayan foothills. It has also been reported from a single locality in Pakistan, the Margalla hills (at 450–1,000 m), where a small, apparently resident breeding population was discovered in May 1985 (Roberts 1991–1992). However, the species has not been relocated in the area despite considerable searching (M. Pyhälä *in litt.* 2000) and, given the ease with which it may be confused with its congeners, confirmation of its presence in Pakistan is desirable.

■ **INDIA** The species occupies a restricted range in the Himalayan foothills in northern India, from Garhwal and Kumaon (Uttar Pradesh) to northern West Bengal and Assam (Grimmett *et al.* 1998). There is an early mention of its occurrence in Sikkim (Blanford 1872c; also Ripley 1982) although the description has been questioned (Oates 1889–1890) and this record is treated here as unconfirmed (moreover, the sighting was probably in present-day West Bengal). There are also unconfirmed (and unlikely) records from the North Cachar hills, Assam (see Remarks 2). Records are from:

■ **Uttar Pradesh** “Alpine District” (untraced), north-western Kumaon, undated (Anderson 1878, *Stray Feathers* 9: 287); **Dunda** or Barahath (“high up in the valley of the Baghirathi” [Bhagirathi river]; *Stray Feathers* 9 [1880]: 286–288), Garhwal, May 1874 (Brooks 1875a, male and female in BMNH), November 1876 (specimen in ROM); **Corbett National Park**, 5–15 daily, March 1993 (Kovacs 1993), listed (Grewal and Sahgal 1995); **Ramnagar**, one by the dam, December 1998 (Ballard *et al.* 1999); **Dudwa National Park**, listed (Chandola 1978, Singh and Singh 1995);

■ **West Bengal Darjeeling**, undated (specimen in AMNH), and “Darjeeling terai”, undated (Baker 1922–1930); **Gopaldhara**, December 1911 (Anon. 1946–1947); **Silguri**, 500 m, May 1949 (male in YPM);

■ **Assam Bhutan duars** (a region centred in Assam but including the adjacent portion of West Bengal), January, 1873–1877 (three specimens in BMNH, *Stray Feathers* 9 [1880]: 286–288).

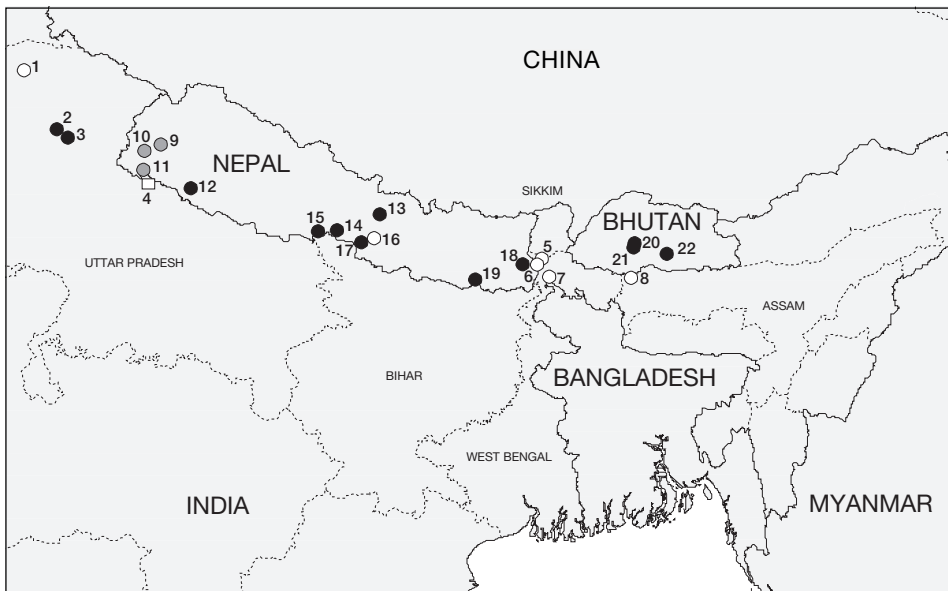
■ **NEPAL** The species has a fragmented distributed from Kanchanpur district in the west to Ilam district in the east. Records are as follows: Baila, **Doti**, one female, December 1952 (Rand and Fleming 1957); **Belbahadi**, Doti, one female, December 1952 (Rand and Fleming 1957); **Badamachli**, 450 m, one male, December 1952 (Rand and Fleming 1957); **Royal Bardia National Park**, undated (Cox 1985, Lama 1991), up to eight, February 1995 (Wheeldon 1995); **Trisuli** (Trishuli), 1980–1981 (del-Nevo and Ewins 1981); **Royal Chitwan National Park**, undated (Gurung 1983), with small numbers recorded at various sites (e.g. Churia hills, Dumaria–Kasara, Gaida wildlife camp, Kachuwani grasslands, Machan, Sauraha, and Tiger Tops lodge) by many observers down to the present (e.g. Wheeldon 1995, H. S. Baral *in litt.* 1996, 1997, J.-C. Kovacs *in litt.* 1998, P. Holt *in litt.* 1999, M. Rooney *in litt.* 1999, P. Alström, U. Olsson and D. Zetterström *in litt.* 2000, Baral 2000a); **Tamaspur**, 1979 (Robson 1979), 1979–1980 (Fairbank 1980); **Hetauda** (Hetaura), 16, May 1947 (Biswas 1960–1963); **Parsa**

Wildlife Reserve, Laukahi Daha, three, September 1992 (H. S. Baral *in litt.* 1997); **Ilam district**, 1979 (Robson 1979), 1982 (Walinder and Sandgren 1983); **Kosi Tappu Wildlife Reserve**, recent reports (Inskipp 1989); Tikoli (Thikoli) (not mapped), at least 10, November 1996 (J.-C. Kovacs *in litt.* 1998); hills in eastern Nepal (not mapped), 1,600 m, in 1976 (Gregory-Smith and Batson 1976).

■ **BHUTAN** There is apparently an early breeding record (Baker 1932–1935) from an unknown locality. Confirmed records are from three sites, all from Inskipp and Inskipp (1993b): **Ada**, 1,300 m, one, May 1993; **Nashina**, 1,220 m, two, May 1993; **Tingtibi**, 700 m, three, May 1993.

POPULATION Despite its rarity in early collections (see Remarks 1), which suggests that it has always been local and uncommon, Ali and Ripley (1968–1998) stated that this warbler is “a little known, yet fairly common resident species” in the Indian subcontinent. This is almost certainly mistaken; the contrary view that it remains localised across its range and is probably declining (H. S. Baral *in litt.* 1998, Grimmett *et al.* 1998) is seemingly borne out by the evidence above and below.

India Historical information is scant but the species appears to have been generally uncommon. A. O. Hume (*Stray Feathers* 9 [1880]: 286–288), for example, described it as a “very rare bird” (see Remarks 1), although it was subsequently reported to be “not uncommon” in the terai of West Bengal (Baker 1922–1930). Very little is known about its current population but it is inferred to be declining as a result of habitat loss throughout its Indian range. There have been no recent records in West Bengal and Assam, and current unquantified populations are known in only a few protected areas in Uttar Pradesh.



The distribution of Grey-crowned Prinia *Prinia cinereocapilla*: (1) Dunda; (2) Corbett National Park; (3) Ramnagar; (4) Dudwa National Park; (5) Darjeeling; (6) Gopaldhara; (7) Silguri; (8) Bhutan duars; (9) Doti; (10) Belbahadi; (11) Badamachli; (12) Royal Bardia National Park; (13) Trisuli; (14) Royal Chitwan National Park; (15) Tamaspur; (16) Hetauda; (17) Parsa Wildlife Reserve; (18) Ilam district; (19) Kosi Tappu Wildlife Reserve; (20) Ada; (21) Nashina; (22) Tingtibi.

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

Nepal In 1947 it was common in the “Central Doon” area (see Remarks 3), particularly around Hetauda (Biswas 1960–1963). It remains locally fairly common and conspicuous in this area at Royal Chitwan National Park (H. S. Baral *in litt.* 1997, P. Holt *in litt.* 1999), which holds the largest population in Nepal and perhaps in the Indian subcontinent (Baral 2000a), although population data are lacking. It has not recently been seen outside protected areas (Inskipp 1989). The population of this species in Nepal is thought possibly to be declining (H. S. Baral *in litt.* 1998), in line with an apparent contraction in the extent of suitable habitat (N. B. Peet *in litt.* 2001), although there is no direct evidence to support these opinions.

Bhutan It appears to be scarce in Bhutan, with only three records of small numbers of birds, although it may have been overlooked (C. Inskipp and T. P. Inskipp *in litt.* 1999).

ECOLOGY Habitat This species frequents quite dense forest (“tolerably thick jungle”: Brooks 1875a) and secondary growth, particularly around forest clearings and edges from the fringe of the plains up to 1,350 m (Ali and Ripley 1968–1998, Fleming and Fleming 1976, Ripley 1982, Inskipp and Inskipp 1991, Inskipp *et al.* 1999b). It also occurs in shrubby grasslands, especially those close to sal *Shorea robusta* forest (H. S. Baral *in litt.* 1997), and there is a recent record from scrub at Ramnagar (Ballard *et al.* 1999). A few records are from more open tall grassland (e.g. H. S. Baral *in litt.* 1997) or cultivation in the subtropical zone (e.g. Inskipp *et al.* 1999b), but in general it is “more arboreal” than its congeners (Ali and Ripley 1968–1998, Inskipp and Inskipp 1991).

Food Its diet includes insects and probably nectar (Ali and Ripley 1968–1998); Brooks (1875a) noted that birds he collected had “a good deal” of red pollen on their foreheads, although it seems possible that this was dusted onto the birds as they sought insects in flowers (see Roberts 1991–1992). Although the species is regularly found quite high up in vegetation, it sometimes feeds near the ground as it creeps about in tall grass and low thorny bushes (Fleming and Fleming 1976). It is apparently often seen in the company of Grey-breasted Prinia *Prinia hodgsonii* when foraging (Ali and Ripley 1968–1998).

Breeding Virtually nothing is known about the breeding biology of the species (Walters 1998b; see Remarks 2). It is thought to breed during the monsoon, mainly in June (Ali and Ripley 1968–1998), although this is presumably on the basis of Baker’s (1894–1901) disputed nest, and specimens collected in Uttar Pradesh in May were in full moult and clearly not breeding (Brooks 1875a). Birds in Chitwan and Bordia sing from January onwards and birds caught in Chitwan in early April had well-developed brood patches, suggesting that the breeding season was well underway (Baral 2000a)

THREATS The terai regions of Nepal and India have undergone massive ecological disturbance over the last century and the loss and degradation of natural and semi-natural terai grasslands and forest is the key threat to this species (Rahmani 1988b, Rahmani and Qurieshi 1991, H. S. Baral *in litt.* 1998, Peet *et al.* 1999a, Bhargava 2000). This species is perhaps especially vulnerable to grassland degradation as it will not colonise grassland regrowth until well developed (Baral 2000a). In Nepal *Shorea robusta* forests and associated shrubland in the terai and Himalayan foothills have been cleared for timber, agriculture and settlement, particularly since the eradication of malaria in the 1950s, and have been degraded by the collection of fuelwood and fodder for domestic livestock (N. B. Peet *in litt.* 2001). Detailed accounts of threats to grasslands in the Indian subcontinent appear under Swamp Francolin *Francolinus garularis* and Bengal Florican *Houbaropsis bengalensis*.

MEASURES TAKEN In India, the species has been recorded in Corbett National Park (521 km²) and Dudwa National Park (488 km²), although no information on populations or persistence in these areas is available. In Nepal, populations occur in Royal Chitwan National

Park (932 km²), Royal Bardia National Park (968 km²) and Parsa Wildlife Reserve (499 km²) and there are recent reports from Kosi Tappu Wildlife Reserve (175 km²).

MEASURES PROPOSED The conservation requirements of the Grey-crowned Prinia should be viewed in combination with the needs of a variety of other threatened grassland and grassland-associated 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). With grasslands 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). In Nepal, conservation of grassland adjacent to forests (especially *Shorea robusta*) is needed and further degradation of open forest must be halted (H. S. Baral *in litt.* 1998). This will require efforts to control grazing by domestic livestock and to minimise harvesting of fuelwood and fodder from remaining forests. Similar efforts to maintain existing forest and associated grasslands in the Indian terai and foothills are also required. Accounts of conservation measures required to protect natural habitat in the terai belt appear in the equivalent sections under Swamp Francolin and Bengal Florican.

As the species is poorly known, surveys are required to establish its true population status and distribution and research is needed to investigate its ecology (particularly breeding ecology) and conservation requirements. In particular, efforts should be made to clarify its status in Pakistan, and to elucidate the ecological relationship and level of competition with sympatric (and more abundant) congeners such as the Grey-breasted Prinia.

REMARKS (1) A. O. Hume (*Stray Feathers* 9 [1880]: 286–288) harboured reservations about the validity of *P. cinereocapilla*; he remarked that “it seems incredible that amongst the tens of thousands of specimens that have passed through the hands of, or been examined by, Mandelli, Brooks and myself, we should only have come across four specimens. Of course it may be a good species, but at present the probabilities are against this”. Further research proved the taxon to be valid (see, e.g., Inskipp *et al.* 1996). In addition, the obsolete species *Prinia poliocephala* (Anderson 1878) was pronounced synonymous with *cinereocapilla* (*Stray Feathers* 9 [1880]: 287), but is now known to be Ashy Prinia *Prinia socialis stewarti* (Peters 1931–1987). (2) According to BMNH egg data compiled by E. C. S. Baker, a clutch of eggs collected in 1890 at Dunjunmakh, Gurjong, North Cachar, Assam, were “I think, correctly identified as this species”. Baker (1894–1901) initially mentioned this, and four other North Cachar nests, admitting that he did not see the species in the area after 1890 and concluding that it was “very rare indeed” there (also Ali and Ripley 1968–1998, Grimmett *et al.* 1998). In later synopses, however, he made no reference to the nest or to the occurrence of the species in North Cachar (Baker 1922–1930, 1932–1935). After listing the contradictory and inconclusive data available, Walters (1998b) concluded that “there is no authentic description of the nest and eggs of this species”. Indeed it is important to note that there is widespread unease about the accuracy of Baker’s egg collection and his reliability in general (e.g. Harrison 1966, Harrison and Parker 1967, Parker 1970, Becking 1981, P. C. Rasmussen verbally 2000, M. P. Walters *in litt.* 2000; see also Remarks 2 under White-winged Duck *Cairina scutulata*, Remarks 2 under Spotted Greenshank *Tringa guttifer*, Remarks 4 under Blue-banded Kingfisher *Alcedo euryzona*, Remarks 3 under Wood Snipe *Gallinago nemoricola*, Remarks 3 under Grey-sided Thrush *Turdus faae* and Distribution under Kashmir Flycatcher *Ficedula subrubra*), a consideration that applies wherever his data, distributional or otherwise, have been included in these texts. (3) A “doon”, or dun valley lies between the first two ranges of Himalayan foothills; in Nepal the central dun refers to the valley of the Narayani river and its tributaries and includes Royal Chitwan National Park (N. B. Peet *in litt.* 2001).