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Brahminy Starling *Sturnus pagodarum* – a new breeding species for Tajikistan

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1. Introduction

Brahminy Starling *Sturnus pagodarum* is widespread in the Indian subcontinent. It inhabits open broadleaved forest, gardens, second growth and cultivation (Baker 1926, Kazmierczak 2008). Its breeding range extends into north-eastern Afghanistan (Meinerzhagen 1938).

During an investigation of the bird fauna of Gorny Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) in the Tajikistan Republic from 10 June to 11 July 2011, we recorded a pair of Brahminy Starlings breeding at Zumudg village in Ishkashim region (36°54'N 72°11'E), 2,750 m above sea level. However, other regions of Gorny Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) than Ishkashim region have also been visited by A. Abdunazarov and it is unlikely that *Sturnus pagodarum* can breed in other river valleys than Panj in Tajikistan.

2. Results

A pair of Brahminy Starlings was first recorded at Zumudg village on 16 June 2011. The birds were searching for food in a small patch of pasture near the village, at the edge of an area of sea buck-thorn *Hippophae* and willow *Salix* in the Panj river valley. We subsequently

observed the birds on a number of occasions in this area. They spent much of their time in an old grove of poplar trees *Populus simonii*. Several species of birds were breeding in this grove including Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*, Hoopoe *Upupa epops*, White-winged Woodpecker *Dendrocopos leucopterus*, Yellow-breasted Tit *Parus flavipectus* and Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*. On 4 July, the female starling took a piece of material from the ground (a poplar twig or strip of bark). She flew up to the crown of a poplar with the material and was followed by the male. Three days later (7 July), the female was again watched gathering nest material – a piece of polyethylene or paper – and taking it to the crown of the poplar. The male again followed her. The starlings were quite wary in the presence of observers, and the nest was never found.

A flock of Rosy Starlings *Pastor roseus* was observed feeding at Zumudg village on 8 July. One adult Rosy Starling remained at the village for several days and was seen in company with the Brahminy Starlings on 11 July and also later, according to Sh. Mirzobekov (a local forester).

A. G. Abdunazarov visited Zumudg on 21 July, when he observed one adult Brahminy Starling, and again on 3 September, when he

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Fig. 1. The pair of Brahminy Starlings *Sturnus pagodarum* in the crown of a poplar, 7 July 2011.



Fig. 2. The pair of Brahminy Starlings *Sturnus pagodarum* accompanied by a Rosy Starling *Pastor roseus*, 11 July 2011.

saw a family party of starlings including one adult and three fledged young birds. He recorded another family party of Brahminy Starlings at the village of Namadgut (36°41'N 71°46'E) on 4 September. The young birds at Namadgut seemed to be older than the fledglings at Zumudg.

3. Discussion

In previous years, A. G. Abdunazarov had seen Brahminy Starlings on several occasions in the Panj valley at the beginning of autumn, during post-breeding movements. On 22 September 2008, several individuals were seen feeding with a flock of Red-billed Choughs *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*, Common Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris* and Eurasian Tree Sparrows *Passer montanus* in a harvested field near the village of Sumjin (36°50'N 71°33'E). On 12 September 2009, a flock of seven Brahminy

Starlings was seen feeding in a harvested field near the village of Rym (36°43'N 71°38'E). On the same date, a pair of Brahminy Starlings was observed in the yard of the Pamir Biological Institute in the village of Dasht (36°41'N 71°41'E). The majority of these birds had probably been reared in Afghanistan territory.

Prior to these records, there had been only one observation of Brahminy Starling in the former Soviet Central Asia (Ivanov 1969, Stepanyan 2003). Rustamov *et al.* (1965) shot one male from a pair on 2 June 1963 in the Kugitang foothills of South-eastern Turkmenistan. Timmins (2008) recorded the species as a rare and possible breeding bird in Wakhan-darja valley in the Wakhan Corridor in Afghanistan, near the Tajik border.

Although these recent observations of Brahminy Starling in the Zumudg area are not very far from the previously known distribution of the species, they constitute the first breeding record of the species in Tajikistan.

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