

# First Record of Red-headed Bunting (*Emberiza bruniceps*) from Deukhuri Valley, Lumbini Province

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The Red-headed Bunting is considered a vagrant species in Nepal, with very few records from the country. We reported the first observation of this species from the Dang Deukhuri Foothill Forests and west Rapti Wetlands, an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA) located in Deukhuri, Dang District, southwestern Nepal. A total of seven individuals were observed, with one photographed on 16 April 2024, during a point-count survey of farmland birds. This is the westernmost known record of the species from Nepal. This finding underscores the importance of the IBA as a stopover for migrants using the Central Asian Flyway. The IBA remains largely unexplored, and a thorough survey of the birds and other biodiversity of the IBA is needed. Furthermore, based on data from recent observations of this species in Nepal and the IUCN criteria, we recommend that this species be reclassified from "Vagrant" to "Extant" and "Passage migrant" for Nepal.

**Keywords:** Central Asian Flyway; Extant; Important Bird and Biodiversity Area; Migration stopover; Passage; Vagrant.

The Red-headed Bunting (*Emberiza bruniceps*) is a small (16-17 cm), sparrow-sized bunting with a yellowish body and a long-forked tail belonging to the family Emberizidae and order Passeriformes (Ali, 2002; Grimmett et al., 2016). The males can be distinguished by their rufous/rusty head, yellowish body, and yellowish-green mantle (Ali, 2002; Grimmett et al., 2016; eBird, 2024). The females and immatures are hard to distinguish from the Black-headed Bunting (*E. melanocephala*), and the two species often travel in mixed flocks (Ali, 2002; Grimmett et al., 2016).

Its conservation status is Least Concern (LC) globally (IUCN, 2016; BirdLife International, 2024) and nationally (Inskip et al., 2020). This species winters in India, and its breeding range extends from northern Iran and Afghanistan in the south to Kazakhstan and southern Russia in the north, the Caspian Sea in the west, and western China in the east (IUCN, 2016; Copete, 2020; BirdLife International, 2024). In Nepal, this species is considered by the IUCN Red List assessment as extant (IUCN, 2016). However,

Nepal's National Red List considers it a vagrant (Inskip et al., 2020). There are very few documented observations of the species from Nepal, and they are from the Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve, the Chitwan National Park, the Rupandehi-Kapilvastu area, and Phewa Lake-Wetlands (Table 1). The species had not been reported from Dang Deukhuri Foothill Forests and West Rapti Wetlands of Dang District before.

The Dang Deukhuri Foothill Forests and west Rapti Wetlands are an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA) in south-western Nepal that is adjacent and east of Banke National Park. It is a fertile and wide valley created by the Rapti River between two low-lying mountain ranges. To the west of the IBA lie the Arghakhanchi and Kapilvastu districts, to its north is Dang Valley and Pyuthan District, and to the south is the Suhelwa Wildlife Reserve of India. The bird species richness and diversity of the IBA are poorly documented, with one study by Thakuri (2009) and one by Khanal et al. (2024). Thakuri (2009) reported 246 species, and Khanal et al. (2024) reported 319 species. These numbers are well below what can be

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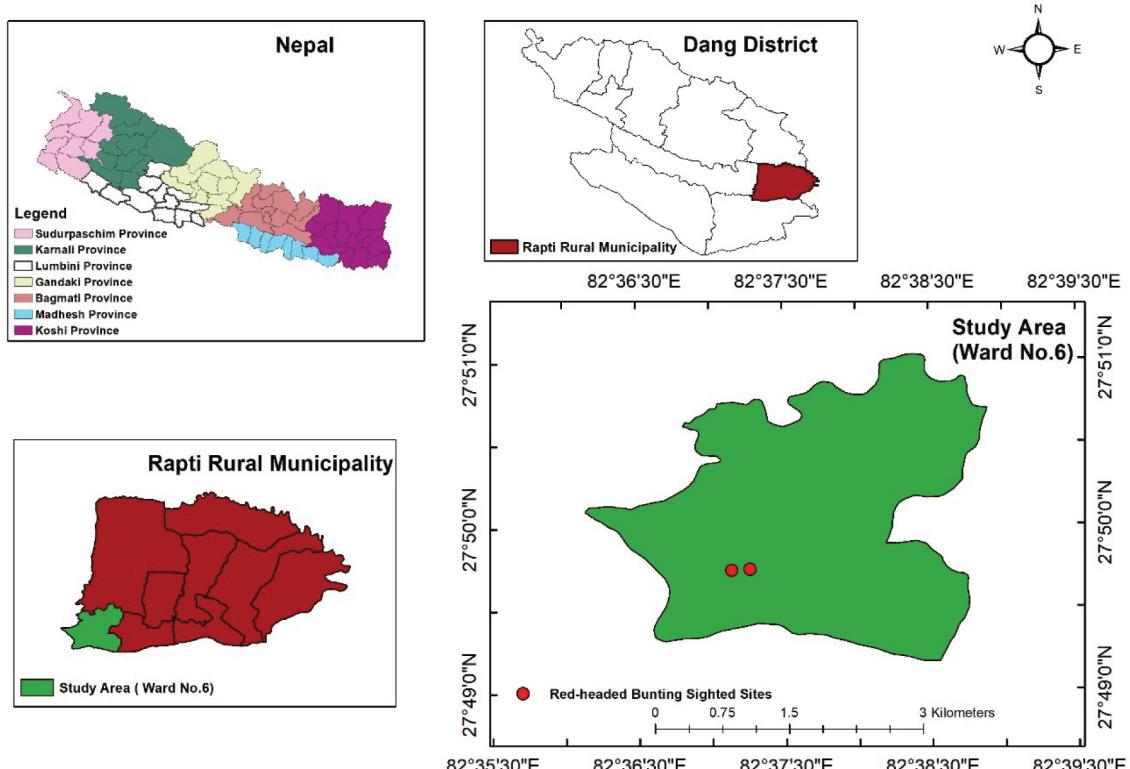
expected in the IBA based on the number of species reported from adjacent areas. We report the first record of *E. bruniceps* from the IBA.

## Materials and Methods

### Study area

The study was conducted in Ward No. 6 of Rapti Rural Municipality, located in the Deukhuri Valley of Dang District, Lumbini Province, Nepal (Figure 1). The area lies between  $82^{\circ}36'30''$  and  $82^{\circ}38'30''$  E

longitude and  $27^{\circ}49'0''$  and  $27^{\circ}51'0''$  N latitude, covering a total area of 8.93 km<sup>2</sup>. It comprises 5 villages (Patthargadhawa, Bagrapur, Sagrapur, Bhagwanpur, and Majheriya). Agriculture is the primary occupation of the local people, and the area experiences two crop cultivation seasons. The main crops cultivated in the farmland are Paddy, Maize, Mustard, Sunflower, Lentil, and Wheat. Major vegetation in farmlands of Rapti Rural Municipality is *Dalbergia sissoo*, *Neolamrckia cadamba*, *Bombax ceiba*, *Malia azedarach*, and *Tectona grandis*.



**Figure 1:** Map showing the study area (Ward 6, Rapti Rural Municipality, Dang District, Nepal) and sighted sites of the Red-headed Bunting

**Table 1. Reports of Red-headed Bunting (*Emberiza bruniceps*) observations from Nepal**

Date	Location	Observers	Number	Source
15 April 1975	Chitwan NP	R.L. Fleming and H. Gilston	1	Inskipp et al. (2020)
18 February 2002	Koshi Tappu WR	S. Basnet, A. Ofner, and G. Tebb	1	Tebb et al. (2004)
February 2002	Koshi Tappu WR Surrounding	S. GC, B. Chaudhary, and T.R. Giri	2	Inskipp et al. (2020)
January 2006	Lumbini, Rupandehi District	H.S. Baral and M. Mallalieu	1	Inskipp et al. (2020)
28 February 2014	Chitwan NP	L. Zhu	1	Inskipp et al. (2020)
07 March 2022	Chitwan NP surrounding	O. Samwald	1	eBird
25 April 2022	Chitwan District	Y. Shrestha	1	eBird
27 January 2024	Kapilvastu District	R. Gurung	2	eBird
16 April 2024	Deukhuri Valley	K. Chaudhary	7	Present study
02 January 2025	Phewa Lake-Wetlands	H. Malla	1	eBird
25 February 2025	Phewa Lake-Wetlands	T. Karwinkel	2	eBird

Note: NP = National Park; WR = Wildlife Reserve

## Methods

This study reports a specific and significant observation made during a broader farmland bird monitoring program carried out within Dang Deukhuri Foothill Forests and west Rapti Wetlands, an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area. The monitoring aimed to document the diversity of farmland birds in the study area. Although the survey was not specifically targeted at Red-headed Bunting, the observation was made during these standardized bird monitoring activities.

Farmland birds in the IBA were monitored using the double-observer point-count method along a predetermined transect. A transect consisted of a set path with 10-point count locations approximately 200m apart along the set path. At each point count location, the primary observer counted the number of birds observed for each species for a duration of ten minutes, and the secondary observer recorded the data as well as any birds missed by the primary observer within a 100m radius of the point. Surveys were carried out in the mornings.

Birds were observed using binoculars (Bushnell 8×42, Olympus-8 16×40) and identified using book Birds of Nepal. Birds that were not easily identifiable in the field were photographed using a Nikon D5300 camera with a 70-300mm lens. An app, “*Picture Bird-Bird Identifier*,” was used to identify this species. Pictures were shared with experts to confirm the identification of confusing species. Study maps were created in ArcGIS 10.8 (ESRI, 2020).

## Results

On 16 April 2024, the field team carried out the fourth survey of farmland birds along the established transect passing through Bagrapur Village, and the Red-headed Bunting was recorded. The survey, which was part of a broader study on farmland bird diversity and not specially designed to target this species, began from point #10 and gradually worked down to point #1. The Red-headed Bunting (one individual adult male) was first observed during a survey of point #8 that started at 06:51 AM. The species stayed in the location throughout the 10-minute count and was not bothered by four farmers working in the nearby fields. It hopped from one maize plant to another as it fed on the flowers. In the subsequent point (#7), six individuals of the species were observed at 07:14 AM. The species' behavior was the same as in point #8; it was not disturbed by the point-count team and fed maize plants. There were

no farmers close to this point during the survey. The species was not identified in the field. Pictures were taken, and the app “*Picture Bird-Bird Identifier*” was used for preliminary identification. After learning that the species was rare for the area, the field team shared the pictures with experts to confirm identification.

This species is often observed in a mixed flock with similar species (Inskipp et al., 2020). At Point #8, an individual of Red-headed Bunting was observed with a flock of about 20 Baya Weavers, but at Point #7, 6 red-headed bunting were recorded, with no other species observed. .

## Discussion

Red-headed Bunting is known to migrate to its breeding grounds in Central Asia during March/April (Ali, 2002). Its typical winter habitats consist of irrigated agricultural fields interspersed with trees and bushes (Ali, 2002; IUCN, 2016; Copete, 2020). The present study, conducted in 2024 in the Deukhuri Valley of Dang District, documents the first record of the Red-headed bunting from this valley, adding regional significance. Previous sightings from other parts of Nepal have been reported in published research, and additional eBird records up to 2025 bring the cumulative total to 11 sightings across six districts (Table 1), including our observation. Although previously considered a vagrant in Nepal, these sightings indicate that its occurrence is not incidental but recurring, suggesting an emerging pattern of passage or wintering presence within the country.

The individuals observed in the present study were recorded in agricultural landscapes near the Rapti River. The site had scattered trees (*Dalbergia sissoo*, *Wendlandia heynei*, *Tectona grandis*, *Bombax ceiba*, and *Neolamarckia cadamba*), small Bamboo groves, and crops including maize, wheat, and vegetables, which is a similar habitat type described in Birdlife International, 2024.

A vagrant species is defined as “The species is/was recorded once or sporadically, but it is known not to be native to the area” and an extant species is defined as “The species is known or thought very likely to occur currently in the area, which encompasses localities with current or recent (last 20-30 years) records where suitable habitat at appropriate altitudes remains” (IUCN, 2018). Considering our observation, prior published records, recent eBird data, and suitable habitat along with IUCN criteria, we propose reclassifying *E. Bruniceps* in Nepal’s



**Figure 2: Red-headed Bunting in Farmland (Photo by Kriti Chaudhary, 16th April 2024)**

Red List from “Vagrant” to “Extant”. Based on the seasonal timing of records (January, February, March, and April) in Table 1, we further recommend it as a passage migrant for Nepal.

## Conclusion

The first sighting of the Red-headed bunting in the farmland of Deukhuri Valley within Dang Deukhuri Foothill Forests and west Rapti Wetlands IBA expands the documented range of this species in Nepal and marks its westernmost occurrence in the country. The finding provides important details about the bird’s migratory path along the Central Asian Flyway and underlines the significance of this IBA as a major stopover for migratory species. With more sightings, suitable habitats, and seasonal patterns, we suggest changing the status of this species to “Extant” on Nepal’s Red List and recognizing it as a passage migrant. This finding will serve as a basis for future research on range distributions, behaviors, and ecological needs of this species in Nepal.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Author contribution

**KC, LS, and AC** designed the study. **KC** conducted the field survey, photographed, and identified the bird species. **AC** led the writing with contributions from **KC** and **LS**.

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