

NOTEBOOK

Nesting Green Cochoa *Cochoa viridis* in the Buxa Tiger Reserve, West Bengal, India

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The Green Cochoa *Cochoa viridis* is an enigmatic species—although first described from specimens collected in the lower hills of Nepal, it was apparently unfamiliar to most Nepalese, but foresters called it ‘Cocho’ which was latinised to ‘Cochoa’ (Hodgson 1836). The Green Cochoa has a known geographical range from the Kumaun division, Uttarakhand, India (Oates 1890) eastwards through Nepal, where the only records are the four specimens obtained by B. H. Hodgson (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), Bhutan, Myanmar, Lao PDR, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia and south China (BirdLife International 2014). The Green Cochoa is described as rare or rarely seen (Collar 2005) or possibly overlooked (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), but although the population size is unquantified, the species is classified as of Least Concern (BirdLife International 2014).

In India it is a summer visitor from March to August or strongly nomadic with whereabouts unknown in winter; no specimens taken between December and February have been traced (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), but it has recently

been observed in winter in Namdapha National Park, Arunachal Pradesh (Viswanathan & Naniwadekar 2014). It inhabits moist broadleaved evergreen forests between 700–1,800 m and has also been recorded from a mosaic of partially degraded subtropical forests and farmland in south-east Bhutan (Bishop 1999). In India, the Green Cochoa is nowhere common today, although it was said to be once fairly common in Manipur. In recent years, the species has been reported intermittently from Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary, Pakhui Wildlife Sanctuary, Sessa Orchid Sanctuary, the Mishmi hills and Namdapha National Park, all in Arunachal Pradesh.

Although a few specimens have been collected from Sikkim over the years, only one specimen could be traced with certainty from northern West Bengal. A male bird was collected by H. J. Elwes on 24 July 1870 from Goke near Darjeeling and is now in the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH 573995). Jerdon (1863) wrote ‘I did not procure a specimen whilst at Darjeeling. It has only been obtained in Nepal and Sikkim. Major Tickell informs me that he procured one specimen in winter, near

Plate 1. Male Green Cochoa *Cochoa viridis*, Buxa Tiger Reserve, West Bengal, India, 11 May 2013.



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Plate 2. Female Green Cochoa, Buxa Tiger Reserve, West Bengal, India, 23 May 2014.



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Kursiong; but in summer it apparently keeps to great elevations, not found in general below 8,000 ft.' [Editors' note: Kursiong (today Kurseong) lies 32 km south of Darjeeling, West Bengal.] Mackintosh (1915) mentioned sighting the Green Cochoa in the far end of the Singalila, where he saw it on a couple of occasions, without giving details of dates, altitude, habitat etc.

The first recent records of Green Cochoa from northern West Bengal were between 16–19 April 1982 when Ben King both saw the species and recorded its song at 800 m, 1,000 m and 1,500 m in Lolegaon forest, Kalimpong (King 1982). Lolegaon forest is more or less contiguous with the Neora Valley National Park. On 25 May 2014, Sujit Kumar Das (pers. comm.) photographed the species at Kolakham village which lies on the north-facing slope just outside Neora Valley NP. Shantanu Bhattacharya (pers. comm.) photographed one of a group of about eight Green Cochoas feeding on a fruiting tree in late September 2009 near the Rabong La in South Sikkim.

Buxa Tiger Reserve lies in the north-east corner of West Bengal and is contiguous with the forests of Greater Manas, the buffer zone of Manas Tiger Reserve, Assam, and other Reserve Forest areas along the Indo-Bhutanese border. Most of the reserve lies in the plains; only the northern tracts are hilly and the northern boundary follows the Bhutan border. There is continuous forest from the plains to nearly 2,000 m at the border, and forest cover probably continues to the 4,066 m Tale La in Bhutan (Allen *et al.* 1997). Green Cochoa has not been previously recorded from Buxa Tiger Reserve (see Allen *et al.* 1997, Sivakumar *et al.* 2006). On 11 May 2013, at about 1,400 m in the hills of the reserve, I came across a male Green Cochoa. I had played the song of the Blackish-breasted Babbler *Sphenocichla humei* in what appeared to be good habitat and was hoping for a positive response when a thrush-like bird flew out of bushes in a fairly steep gorge and perched on a horizontal branch in the mid-storey of a big tree. Although the light was failing, the bird perched long enough for me to identify it as a male Green Cochoa and obtain several images (Plate 1), before it flew away down the gorge; the following morning I saw a pair in flight.

Over a year later, on 22 May 2014, I was again rewarded with the sight of a female Green Cochoa in the same area. This time two colleagues and I had the opportunity to observe the bird for quite some time, and discovered that it was nesting about 2.5 m up in a fork of a medium-sized tree. The next morning on the same trail we found another pair of Green Cochoa nesting on a 9 m high horizontal branch overgrown with orchids. Although the male flew away at our intrusion, the female remained

there during our brief stay. On our return, the female at the previous day's nest provided a photographic opportunity and did not venture far from the nest site. I was back in the area on 11 June with the idea of observing the young birds if possible, but this time no birds were observed at either nest site. However during the day I did see Green Cochoa briefly, once perched and once in flight. The species is extremely alert or inquisitive in response to the call of other birds, particularly the Himalayan Cutia *Cutia nipalensis* and the Blackish-breasted Babbler.

These observations of Green Cochoa in the same area of the Buxa Tiger Reserve, during the same period in consecutive years, suggest this is a regular breeding site and probably presents us with the opportunity to study their breeding behaviour.

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