

Birds
of
Mussoorie

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Foreword

The crisp air of Mussoorie encourages the outdoors enthusiast no end. The early morning tweets of the little wonders enliven the minds of all. If you have been initiated into the art of bird watching, Mussoorie is the place to be, as the birds of this place are sure to draw you into the lap of nature. The joy of bird watching is well brought out in this book, Birds of Mussoorie.

Bird watching inculcates not only observation skills and an increased ability to focus but is also an effective stress buster. While appreciating nature, birding also awakens us to the fact that a lot of the natural habitat of birds is diminishing. Books such as these, brought out by young enthusiastic amateurs would go some way in developing the hobby of birding as well as sensitizing the reader to the beauty of nature and the need for conserving it.

[Padamvir Singh]

Director

Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration

Mussoorie

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Introduction

Birds...metaphors for freedom, majesty, peace, beauty and life itself! They enliven one's day with their relentless sweet chirping and tweeting. To remain immune to them is a difficult task indeed, and it was this that aroused a curiosity in me, that later turned into an affection and passion that will, hopefully, continue throughout my life.

Mussoorie, the Queen of the Hills, may be a popular haunt for tourists trying to escape the searing heat of the North Indian plains. But in the green and not-so-green vistas surrounding this hill-town lie a treasure trove of biodiversity – birds, butterflies, mammals, reptiles, flowering shrubs and what not! Even our own modest campus, the prestigious Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration, plays host to wide variety of birds. Being in the Himalayas had the added advantage in that I was able to observe the other side of the life of many migrant species that land up in my home state, Kerala, in winters. Sheer curiosity and my love for birds prompted me to explore these hills and valleys in whatever time I could afford to spend for my hobby. And the result of my wanderings – Over a 100 species of birds, both migrant and resident, recorded from the surroundings of LBSNAA. This booklet is a compilation of the birds I have seen, heard and photographed in Mussoorie from the days of our Foundation Course, starting from September 2011 till May 2012, during our Phase-I training. A total of around 25 treks and walks to Cloud's End, Hathi Paon, Company Bagh, Kempt village and Camel's Back road spread over a duration of 4-5 months were made for this purpose. This booklet by an amateur bird-watcher, though not created professionally with vast experience or knowledge, will hopefully serve the purpose of introducing the interested reader to the common and not-so-common birds seen in these parts. The birds have been described along with photographs and only those behaviour have been mentioned which I could observe in my trips. I have also tried to make the task of spotting these birds easier, by mentioning the locations where good sightings can be had. Lastly, I confess that I might have failed to record several species and I also could not cover the environs of Landour, Lal Tibba or Kempt falls. All I wish for and desire is that the reader obtains at least some pleasure, knowledge and a life-long affection for our feathered friends from these pages.

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Mussoorie – Birdwatchers' Paradise

This page is meant to answer the main question – *Where to watch birds?* Some good locations that can deliver handsomely are Company Bagh, Hathi Paon, Cloud's End, Dalai Hill, Kempty Road, the footpath to Kempty village and Camel's Back Road. Each place differs in the vegetation and the birds.



COMPANY BAGH and its environs are well wooded. Mixed forests are seen here, with broadleaved and coniferous trees. A small grassy patch exists, adjacent to Company Bagh. The road splits at the garden and rejoins about a kilometre away. The lower road, passing behind Vermont and near the valley ridge is an excellent place for laughing thrushes, warblers, flycatchers, woodpeckers,

blackbirds and doves. **Hotel Vermont** and its surroundings, lying on the upper road, offer good views of redstarts, barbets, bulbuls, and tits.



LYNNDALE ESTATE, on the way to Hathi Paon, is a dense oak forest, with little undergrowth. Woodpeckers, hill partridge, khalij pheasant, minla and thrushes can be seen here.

Mussoorie – Birdwatchers' Paradise



HATHI PAON area, located a few kilometres preceding Cloud's End is has a nice mix of conifers, meadows and rocky outcrops. A fine spot for raptors, buntings, magpies, drongo and tits. **Cloud's End** comprises of dense forest with good undergrowth. Woodpeckers, warblers, sibia, shrike babbler, jays and flycatchers are the birds seen here.



Near the top, on the slopes of **DALAI HILL** and along the footpath to **Kempton Village** one finds scrubs and rocky outcrops, followed by broadleaved forests at lower elevations on both sides of the road culminating in Chir forest near the village. Pipits, chats, thrushes and warblers are abundant in the scrub. The lower elevation forests hold good numbers of minivets, tits, woodpeckers and parakeets.

Glossary

A collection of terms used to describe a bird, which may be unfamiliar to a general reader:

Altitudinal migrant: A species seen at different altitudes at different times of the year, for example, a bird that spends the winter at lower elevations and summer at higher elevations.

Arboreal: Tree dweller.

Buffish: Pale yellowish-brown colour.

Cere: Bare and feather-less fleshy skin at the base of the bill.

Collar: A coloured band around the neck.

Crown: Top of the head.

Ear coverts: The short feathers covering the ear.

Gregarious: Sociable and living in groups.

Juvenile: A young, fully fledged (i.e. able to fly) bird that has not yet reached sexual maturity.

Lore: Area between eye and nostrils.

Nape: Back of the neck.

Plumage: Feathering of a bird.

Raptor: A bird of prey, like eagle, vulture or kite, that is diurnal in nature.

Rufous: Reddish-brown, like rust.

Rump: Region immediately above the tail.

Streamers: Elongated feathers of the tail.

Supercilium: Eye-brow.

Undertail Coverts: Area under the tail, behind the legs. It is different from the vent.

Wing bar: A visible band across the wing.

Vent: Area under the anal opening (around the cloaca)

Hill Partridge *Arborophila torqueola* 28 cm

Photo : ♀ ♂



Small quail-sized ground-dwelling bird. Sexes coloured differently. Male has a black supercilium, rufous crown and ear coverts. Black throat separated from breast by a white band. Underparts dotted with white spots that are outlined with blue rings. Female comparatively plainly coloured with black barring on upperparts. The crown is brown and it lacks the prominent black throat of the male.

Found usually in pairs. Very shy and wary of humans. They often sense human presence before one gets to spot the bird. While in the field, the sound of scratching of leaves on forest floor could lead to the bird, if one is careful enough to move slowly and noiselessly.

Best place to spot : Between Company Garden and Hathi Paon, particularly in the woods near Lynndale estate.

Kalij Pheasant *Lophura hamiltonii* 64 cm

Photo : ♀



Approximately the size of a male domestic chicken ('cock'). Males have a silver crest on their crown, silver abdomen, and blue-black upperparts and tail. The females are brown, with white speckles and a brown crest. Both sexes sport a red skin patch around the eye and have long down-curved tail.

These birds usually move around in small groups of one or two males and 3-4 females. Almost a full-time ground dweller it can be seen foraging for food amidst forest floor leaf litter. Prefers to stay away from humans, and flee at the first sight of a human figure. They can also fly short distances to escape any perceived threat.

Best place to spot : The garbage dump just outside Company Bagh is the best place to see this bird properly, as the elevated road gives a vantage point to the bird-watcher. Woods around Lynndale estate and Cloud's End are other places where this has been spotted.

Brown-Fronted Woodpecker Lesser Yellownape

Brown-Fronted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos auriceps* 20 cm

Photo : 



A medium sized woodpecker, found very commonly in Mussoorie. Male distinguished by the yellow-orange crown, whereas the female has a brownish crown. Both sexes have brown forehead, black upperparts barred with white and reddish undertail coverts.

Almost always seen in pairs. Very active and move from tree to tree frequently. Rapid kik-kik-kik calls can be used to pinpoint the location of the bird in the field.

Best place to spot : Very common and can be found in any lightly wooded area. The choicest places to see this bird are near the Tibetan settlement on the way to Company Bagh and behind hotel Vermont.

Lesser Yellownape *Picus chlorolophus* 27 cm



A medium-sized woodpecker with green upperparts and wings. Has a tufted yellow nape with red and white markings on head. The breast and abdomen is dull white with fine brown bars across. The male is distinguished from the female by the presence of a red moustachial stripe, which the female lacks.

General behaviour is that of a typical woodpecker. Mostly seen in pairs. Nesting is in holes drilled into trees with their powerful beaks. The stiff tail is used as a support while climbing up trees. As in other woodpeckers, the feet have toes pointing forward and backward. Prey is taken in with the help of a long tongue. This bird is also a resident in the hills of South India.

Best place to spot : Spotted a couple of times in the trees behind Hotel Vermont and along the footpath to Kempt village.

Greater Yellownape *Picus flavinucha* 33 cm

Photo : 



Large green woodpecker with a conspicuous yellow crest and nape. Males have yellow chin and throat, whereas females have a reddish brown throat. Streaking is seen on the breast. This bird is easily distinguished from the Lesser Yellownape by its larger size and absence of red markings on head.

Seen mostly in pairs. Loud metallic, single syllable call can be heard sometimes. Like other woodpeckers, the flight is undulating in nature, and the

Best place to spot :The dense and dark forest near Lynndale estate and along the road passing behind Hotel Vermont from Company Bagh.

Grey-Headed Woodpecker *Picus canus* 32 cm

Photo : 



Another woodpecker that is seen quite commonly in Mussoorie. It is almost as large as the scaly-bellied woodpecker. As the name suggests, the head is grey for both sexes. The crown of the male bird is red, whereas it is black for females. Both have a black nape and moustachial stripe. The underparts are plain green, with no streaking. The wings are faintly barred.

Typical woodpecker and they mostly forage for food in pairs. Sometimes seen in the same area along with the scaly bellied woodpecker. Call is a loud series of 'pew-pew-pew-pew-pew-pew'.

Best place to spot : In the wooded area behind Hotel Vermont and along the path to Kempty village.

Scaly-bellied Woodpecker *Picus squamatus* 35 cm

Photo: 

A large woodpecker with very prominent scale-like feather pattern on the underparts. White supercilium, thick black moustachial stripe and an unstreaked throat are key identifying features. Males have a red crown, whereas the female bird has black crown with white spots. It can be distinguished from the smaller streak-throated woodpecker which prefers lower altitudes and has streaks on its throat unlike the scaly bellied woodpecker.

Much of the behaviour, like feeding and moving is similar to other woodpeckers. Loud and high-pitched 'kik' call is a giveaway to its location. Spotted in pairs most of the time.

Best place to spot : In the wooded area behind Hotel Vermont and along the path to Kempty village

Great Barbet *Megalaima virens* 33 cm



India's largest barbet is a pigeon-sized bird with a distinctly large yellow beak, bluish-grey head, olive green upperparts and reddish undertail coverts. Lowerparts are yellow with olive green streaks. Parts of the belly and wings are bright turquoise blue when seen in sunlight.

Found singly or in small flocks of 2-3 individuals. Has a habit of staying close to treetops or within the thick cover of leaves. It is more often heard than seen, as it easily blends into the

green foliage of trees. The hills and valleys around Mussoorie resound with its loud 'kaouuuu... kaouuuu' call and the shrieking 'kreeeeeee...kreee' call.

Best place to spot : Ubiquitous bird, seen almost everywhere. Fruiting trees, though, act as magnets for these birds. The road to Company Bagh and Indra Colony will offer good views of this rainbow-coloured bird.

Blue-Throated Barbet *Megalaima asiatica* 23 cm



One of the most brightly coloured barbets in India. Bright blue face and throat and parrot green underparts mark out this bird. The wings are a darker shade of green whereas the forehead and crown are bright red. A black bar passes across the crown, dividing the red patch laterally.

A fruit-eater, it is found all across the Himalayas and in the north-east. It is not found to be common in Mussoorie in the pre-winter months. But from April onwards, the frequency of sightings increases.

Best place to spot : Spotted in the meadow near Hathi Paon. It was observed eating berries. April-end onwards, it could be seen regularly near Company Bagh, but chose to remain amongst the treetops. The call is a

Common Hoopoe *Upupa epops* 31 cm



A handsome buffish-brown bird. Wings are alternately barred with black and white stripes. Sports a crest on head, which spreads out like a fan at times. Long beak is downward curved.

Feeds and moves about mostly on the ground. Long, curved beak is used to probe the soil for insects and larvae. Nests are in the form of a hole built along the face of mud banks. The name of the bird imitates its call, a three syllable hollow-sounding 'oop-

oop-ooop' which differs from the Oriental Cuckoo's 'up-ooop-ooop-ooop...' which has more syllables and is relatively melodious.

Best place to spot : Seen once in LBSNAA football ground. Calls frequently heard along the motorable road to Kempty, especially from April onwards.

Slaty-Headed Parakeet Plum-Headed Parakeet

Slaty-Headed Parakeet *Psittacula himalayana* 41 cm

Photo : ♀



Size is similar to the rose-ringed parakeet (aka 'the parrot' in common parlance), which is very popular as a caged bird. But this parakeet has a slaty-grey head, red beak, green upperparts and abdomen. The male bird has a maroon shoulder patch, which the female lacks. The long tail is bluish with two large and conspicuous yellow markings on the tail tips.

Found in small flocks (usually of not more than 7-8 birds). Difficult to spot when inside foliage, but loud 'kreek-kreek' shrieking calls lead one to the bird, especially while they are in flight. It nests in holes in trees, sometimes drilled by woodpeckers. The fall in the numbers of birds spotted during winter could be due to movement to lower elevations.

Best place to spot : Though common, they are not restricted to any one area. But the largest numbers can be seen in the open forest on the way to Kempty

village, less than a kilometre from the Tibetan Buddhist temple. Photo shows an adult female with three juveniles that were seen near Kempty village.

Plum-Headed Parakeet *Psittacula cyanocephala* 36 cm

Photo : ♂ ♀



Slightly smaller than a rose-ringed parakeet in size, these birds exhibit a marked difference in plumage between sexes. Male has plum-red head, with black collar and yellow beak. Females have grey head with pale yellow beak. Tail is bluish and the tips are white. Though they resemble each other, female plum-headed parakeets are differentiated from slaty-

headed parakeets by their pale grey head and absence of yellow tail tips. Altitudinal migration suspected in Mussoorie, as this bird was practically absent in the months of October and November, but were to be seen frequently from March onwards.

Best place to spot : Along the road to Polo Ground and in Indira Colony.

House Swift *Apus affinis* 15 cm



A small sparrow-sized bird that spends most of its life in the air. Predominantly black or dark grey in colour, but has a distinctive white rump and throat. Tail is slightly forked. Swifts have very small and ineffective feet which can be used only to cling on to their nests. Nests are constructed in large colonies, which are used year after year. They are built under eaves of roofs using feathers and fibres. Nesting was active during September and the first half of October in

Mussoorie. They are highly gregarious and are often seen in flocks that may be dozens strong.

Best place to spot : Large flocks can be seen hunting over Happy Valley, behind LBSNAA, particularly during mornings and evenings.

Asian Barred Owl *Glaucidium cuculoides* 23 cm



A small rotund owl with thickly barred brown body. Head, upperparts and breast chocolate brown with dark brown bars. Lower abdomen white with fewer barrings. Eyes and beak bright yellow. Supercilium is white.

Not very commonly seen in Mussoorie. Solitary by nature. Looks very similar to the Jungle owl of the Indian plains, but the latter's belly is also streaked unlike the Asian barred owl which sports more white in its abdomen. The jungle owl is very

common and found throughout India, unlike this owl which is essentially a bird of the Himalayas. Feeds on small rodents and lizards.

Best place to spot : Spotted a couple of times at Hathi Paon.

Rock Pigeon *Columba livia* 33 cm

A bird that is unknown to none. Overall blue grey coloration with two black bars on the wings. Prominent metallic green and purple sheen on neck and breast. The sheen seen on the necks of adults is generally not very pronounced on fledglings.

Originally an inhabitant of rocky cliffs and gorges, today it is found abundantly amongst human habitation throughout India. Breeds freely with feral (semi-domestic) pigeons, giving rise to a variety of

plumages. Nests are built without any fear in human-inhabited buildings. Nests are crude and apparently haphazard structures made of twigs.

Best place to spot : Ubiquitous. Very common in Mussoorie town.

Oriental Turtle Dove *Streptopelia orientalis* 33 cm

A light-brown pigeon. Both sides of the neck adorned by black and bluish grey barrings. The wing is brown with black spots which vary in size.

Found singly or in pairs. Small sized flocks have been recorded, but not very frequently. Though predominantly arboreal, they often descend to the ground to feed, especially in garbage dumps. Call is a long, crooning 'kooor...kru-kur kooor...' A bird of the open forest, it is not as confident as the spotted dove

in human presence and takes flight if the intruder gets too close.

Best place to spot : Garbage dump adjoining Company Bagh is a good place for these doves, where sightings are almost guaranteed.

Spotted Dove *Streptopelia chinensis* 30 cm



An elegant looking dove, slightly smaller in size than the oriental turtle dove. Black and white checkerboard pattern behind the neck is a distinguishing feature. The wings and mantle are heavily spotted with cream coloured dots. Upperparts are greyish brown and belly is pinkish brown.

Widespread resident throughout India and inhabits both light forests and cultivated regions alike. Seen in small flocks of 4-5 birds and often feeds on the ground. Call is a long crooning 'vukk-vooor-vooor-vooor...'

Best place to spot : Indira Colony and along the main road to Kempty Falls.

Wedge-Tailed Green Pigeon *Treron sphenura* 33 cm

Photo :  



A large and plump green pigeon. Males have a greenish-yellow head and part of their wings is maroon and flight feathers are green.

Females are wholly green. Lower belly and underparts of tail are light green with dark green speckles for both sexes. The tail, as the name suggests, is wedge-shaped.

An arboreal fruit-eater it was more commonly seen and heard during October-November compared to March-April. Sometimes, only the mild long whistle could be heard, especially during summers when the pigeons descend to lower elevation forests. During pre-winter months they were mainly seen near Hathi Paon, but from April onwards, lower altitude areas on the way to Kempty village offered more glimpses of these pigeons.

Best place to spot : Trees near the meadow at Hathi Paon and around Hotel Vermont from mid-September to early November.

Black Kite *Milvus migrans* 61 cm

This is probably the most abundant bird of prey in India. Overall dark brown plumage, with light brown streaks on head, wings and belly and has distinct black eye-stripe. V-shaped fork in the tail distinguishes this raptor easily.

Predominantly a scavenger. Found in the dozens in garbage dumps of Indian cities and towns. It is also a keen and cunning hunter, often carrying away chicks of wild and domestic birds alike. One of the most adaptable birds, many a times it builds its crude stick-and-twig nests on high mast lamps in the midst of our busiest cities (even metal pieces and wires are used in nests occasionally). Their loud 'kweeeee-hi-hi-hi' shrieks have become an inalienable part of urban India today. Nesting activity observed in April at Company Bagh.

Best place to spot : Largest numbers are seen near the garbage dump next to Library Point in Mussoorie town.

Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis* 50-61 cm

A medium sized raptor of the family of raptors called sparrowhawks (Accipiters). Overall grey upperparts with prominent white supercilium (eye-brow) and a broad dark grey eye stripe. Pale white underparts are finely barred. 3-4 black bars can be seen under the tail while in flight.

The largest of India's sparrowhawk species is a resident of the Himalayas and feeds upon birds and small mammals. Prefers areas with good forest cover as these raptors have

well-maneuvrable rounded wings and can hunt within wooded areas too. Females are much larger than males, as is the norm in accipiter species.

Best place to spot : Spotted only once above the road leading to Hathi Paon from Company Bagh.

Himalayan Griffon *Gyps himalayensis* 115-125 cm



One of the largest vultures in India. Adults identified by a pale sandy-coloured feather-less head and body. The tail and flight feathers are

dark brown. Juvenile has a pale head and is dark brown throughout with pale streaking under the wings. Pale white/sandy markings are seen underneath the wings while in flight.

This is a scavenger and feeds on dead domestic livestock and wild animals. Usually seen singly, in pairs or small flocks of at the most 10-12 individuals. They inhabit rocky cliffs and hills where they also nest. These majestic raptors can be seen gliding on rising hot air, with minimal flapping of their wings.

Best place to spot : Very common in and around Hathi Paon and Everest Bungalow. Can be seen occasionally

Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus* 61 cm



A black kite-sized raptor. Generally has a pale cream-coloured unstreaked head, but plumage might vary. Brown belly with few streakings. Two black patches under the wings (carpal patches) are prominent in flight, and so is the unbarred pale-brown tail. The wing tips and edges are black.

Best place to spot : A pair was observed for almost two weeks beginning from early March onwards in the vicinity of LBSNAA main gate.

Was often seen circling over the academy's riding ground. Was observed feeding on a fresh kill on a tree outside in the same place.

Black Eagle *Ictinaetus malayensis* 69-81 cm



A large and dark coloured bird of prey. The whole bird is black, except for the beak, cere and feet which are yellow. Faint barring can be

seen on the underparts of the tail during flight. Wings are held in slight 'V' position while in flight, and the wing tips are held upright, which distinguishes the flight of the black eagle from other eagles.

This raptor, which is also seen in the Western Ghats, is a tree-top hunter. It feeds on birds, nestlings and small mammals which it hunts while cruising over the canopy. Seen singly in Mussoorie, especially during the few months before winter sets in.

Best place to spot : Seen a couple of times in September 2011, in the area between Hathi Paon and Cloud's End.

Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis* 76-80 cm



A large brownish eagle. Fairly common in Mussoorie during the pre-winter months. Adult birds are dark brown with lighter wings. Juveniles have

a white cross-bar on underparts and two on upperparts. A white crescent-shaped bar can be seen above tail.

Normally prefers lightly forested or grassy hills. Even though a hunter which can kill birds and small mammals for food, it also partakes of carrion.

Best place to spot : Dalai hill and occasionally in the vicinity of the garbage dump near Library Point.

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* 35 cm

Photo : 



A small raptor that is slightly smaller than a house crow. The male has a grey head with prominent dull black moustachial stripe. Upperparts are rufous brown with heavy black streaking. The wings tips are black. Light sandy-brown underparts are also streaked. The tail is grey with a black band just above the grey tip. Female kestrel lacks the grey head and moustachial stripe, and is brown overall. Females are usually larger than adult male birds.

This is one of the few birds that can hover in mid-air while hunting. It feeds mainly on rodents but takes insects also. Prefers grassy hills or open cultivation.

Best place to spot : Can be seen in the area between Company Bagh and Hathi Paon. One bird was observed hunting along Camel's Back road.

Black-Headed Jay *Garrulus lanceolatus* 33 cm



A handsome, pigeon-sized bird. It has a black head and small crest. The throat is black with thick white streaks. Body is pale pinkish brown. Wings and tail is prominently barred with blue. There is a white patch on the wings near the shoulder. Tail tips are white.

Seen mostly singly or in pairs. Even though it is an arboreal feeder, it sometimes descends to the ground to feed, but takes flight on slightest hint of danger. Call is a harsh croak like 'kraaa....'

Best place to spot : Commonly seen in any wooded area. Can be spotted along the road to Company Bagh, Camel's Back road or near the Tibetan Buddhist temple.

Red-Billed Blue Magpie Grey Treepie

Red-Billed Blue Magpie *Urocissa erythrorhyncha* 65 - 68 cm



One of the most beautiful birds of the crow family. Black head, bright blue upperparts and white underparts. Head is black with a white stripe running down from the crown to the base of the neck. The bill is bright orange-red. Long, ribbon like tail feathers have white tips and are as long as the bird's body itself. Can be differentiated from the very similar looking yellow-billed magpie which has a yellow beak and a white crescent at the back of its neck.

A shy and wary bird, at least in Mussoorie's forests, it sticks to trees and remains hidden amongst leafy branches in human presence. But in areas with low human activity, they often descend to the ground to feed. Calls are a loud and raucous 'quirr..quirr..kig..kig'. Nesting observed from late March onwards, when the birds are very cautious but still collect nesting material from the ground.

Best place to spot : There is a resident pair in the vicinity of Company Bagh. Largest concentration at a single place seen in the meadow located in the low-lying area between Cloud's End and Everest bungalow.

Grey Treepie *Dendrocitta formosae* 36 - 40 cm



A pigeon-sized bird of the crow family with a long tail. Face is black and underparts are light grey. The neck and tail are grey. The back is greyish-brown and wings are black with a small white patch on them. The tails tips are also black. The rufous treepie of seen throughout India looks similar but has a rufous body with slaty-black head, rufous to buffish underparts and a white band near the tip of the tail.

A strictly arboreal bird seen in pairs or small group. The call is a sonorous croak-like 'kraun...kraun...' An omnivore, it feeds on insects, berries, lizards and other nestlings alike. Its close relative, the much commoner rufous treepie of the plains is also a nest-raider, feeding and decimating entire broods of other birds.

Best place to spot : No particular spot as such. But seen frequently near Company Bagh and the Tibetan settlement on the way to the same garden.

Large-Billed Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos* 46 - 59 cm



A bird to which the reader needs no introduction. A large, dark glossy black bird with a heavy-looking bill. Differs from the much commoner house crow (which is not seen in Mussoorie) in that this bird lacks the ash-grey collar of the former and is much larger in size.

Lives off by scavenging or hunting. Seen singly or in flocks of 8-10 individuals. Gregarious behaviour is not very commonplace in Mussoorie. Call is much deeper and harsher than that of the plains' dwelling large-billed crow. Nesting season begins by the end of March. Nest building activity was recorded near Company Bagh, where a pair was seen collecting twigs. Nests are usually built on tall treetops.

Best place to spot :Ubiquitous. But population density is not very high.

Black-Winged Cuckooshrike *Coracina melaschistos* 24 cm

Photo : 



Both sexes have black wings. Male bird is slate-grey with white-tipped tail. Female bird has a whitish supercilium ('eye-brow'), faintly barred on the breast and belly, and is of a lighter shade.

An altitudinal migrant, it spends the winter in the foothills. Habitat-wise, the bird prefers open forest. Feeds on invertebrates and is mainly arboreal in nature.

Best place to spot : One resident male was observed regularly since March on the slopes of Dalai Hill facing Benog Tibba.

Long-Tailed Minivet Ashy Drongo

Long-Tailed Minivet *Pericrocotus ethologus* 21 cm

 Photo :  


One of Mussoorie's brightest coloured birds. Males have black upperparts. The single large wing patch and from breast downwards it is flaming orange. Females are a dull greyish-brown, with bright yellow rump, underparts and wing patch. Scarlet minivets look very similar but has two small wing patches in the place of the one patch of this minivet. Seen in

pairs or in small groups consisting of 1-2 males and 3-5 females. An tree-living bird, it avoids coming down to the ground, but will move to the lower branches to feed.

Best place to spot: Near LBSNAA main gate and along the footpath to Kempty village.

Ashy Drongo *Dicrurus leucophaeus* 29 cm



An ash-grey bulbul-sized bird with a deeply forked tail and reddish eyes. Looks similar to more common black drongo of the plains, but lacks the white spot at the base of the bill that the black drongo has.

Seen in pairs or small flocks. A migrant, it nests from March-end onwards in the Himalayas and spends the winter in the rest of India. Fiercely protective of their nest, the parents attack and chase away intruding birds, especially large birds like crows, pecking at them in mid-air. A shallow cup-shaped nest is built of plant fibres and lichen-like material in a fork in a branch. One such nest was recorded on the open forest along the footpath to Kempty village.

Best place to spot: Company Bagh and the trek path to Kempty village.

Blue-Capped Rock Thrush *Monticola cinclorhynchus* 17 cm

Photo : 



A bulbul-sized bird. Males have blue head, throat and tail. Breast, underparts and lower back is orange. A white wing patch is very prominent. Females are uniform olive-brown with faint barrings and speckles on underparts.

A migrant species, this bird spends the summer and breeds in the Himalayas and winters in the Western Ghats. Seen in open forest and shrubbery in Mussoorie, but keeps to forest in south India. Males often sing,

perched on vantage points like electric poles and tree tops during breeding season.

Best place to spot: Along the main road to Kempty falls.

Chestnut-Bellied Rock Thrush *Monticola rufiventris* 23 cm

Photo :  



Slightly larger than the blue-capped rock thrush. Males are dark-blue with reddish brown underparts. The lower back is blue and they lack the white wing patch distinguishing it from the latter. Females have dark brown upperparts with densely barred underparts. A dull orange 'ear' patch helps differentiate the female from females of other thrushes. A resident bird, it breeds from March-end onwards.

Can often be seen feeding on the forest floor or along road sides. Females build their nests on the ground using small twigs, mosses and straw-like material. The male remains in the same area while the female builds the nest, but is relatively more fidgety and shier.

Best place to spot: Resident pair on the road between Company Bagh and Hathi Paon.

Blue Whistling Thrush *Myophonus caeruleus* 33 cm

A blue coloured bird slightly smaller than a house crow. Glistening blue when seen in sunlight. Bill is bright yellow in colour. Head, breast and back spotted with white.

Very common bird in Mussoorie. Has the habit of hopping and running on the ground while searching for food. Turns over leaves with its beak in search of prey. When alarmed, runs for a short distance, spreads out the tail like a fan and cautiously watches the intruder. The birds seen near semi-

urban areas are not very perturbed by human presence, but the forest dwellers clearly hesitate to let people get close to them. Call is a long shrill 'kreee' or a rambling whistle-song. Nesting starts by April, and nesting activity was observed in the vicinity of Company Bagh.

Best place to spot: Ubiquitous. Very common along the road to Company Bagh from Library Chowk.

White-Collared Blackbird *Turdus albocinctus* 27 cmPhoto : 

A thrush that is slightly smaller than the whistling thrush. Male is black with a wide white collar around the neck. The bill and ring around the eye is yellow. Females are browner in plumage and the collar is relatively less prominent.

A Himalayan resident, this bird, like most others of the thrush family feeds on the ground amongst leaf litter. But, if approached, it will take to the cover of trees. Moves about in pairs or small flocks numbering 4-5 individuals.

Best place to spot: In and around Company Bagh. More commonly observed during pre-winter months of September and October.

Grey-Winged Blackbird *Turdus bouboul* 28 cm

Photo : ♂ ♀



wings. Bill is orange for both sexes.

A bird similar to the previous species in terms of size and shape. Males are dull black with grey wings. Females are a dull brown in colour, and have light brown

Predominantly terrestrial in behaviour and more confiding in nature than other thrushes. Even though a resident species, it is more commonly seen in greater numbers during September and October. Seen in small flocks that may be around 10-12 birds strong at times. It often descends in small flocks to the ground to feed on worms and insects, particularly in and around overflowing sewage drains and garbage dumps.

Best place to spot: Garbage dump adjoining Company Bagh.

Chestnut Thrush *Turdus rubrocanus* 27 cm



Another thrush seen in Mussoorie. It has a grey head, white collar and chestnut brown body. The wings are dark brown. The female is less colourful with a brownish head and body and has light streaking on throat and breast.

Undoubtedly the most shy of all the thrushes found here. Hides in foliage at the any hint of intrusion by anyone. While feeding, throws up leaves in the forest floor in search of insects, and this noise can attract one to the bird even if it's not immediately visible. Mostly seen either alone or in groups of around four or five birds.

Best place to spot: Stretch between Company Bagh and Hathi Paon, especially in areas rich in leaf-litter with plenty of shade.

Dark-Sided Flycatcher Small Niltava

Dark-Sided Flycatcher *Muscicapa sibirica* 14 cm



A small bird, about the size of a sparrow, with dull brown upperparts. The breast and flanks are streaked with brown, but from the centre of the throat to the vent, it is white. A white ring is present around the eye. Juveniles are more heavily mottled and streaked. The wing tips project out of the body while perching.

Like all flycatchers, this bird perches on a twig and lunges at airborne prey, only to return to the same perch to ready itself for another mid-air hurl. Mostly seen singly.

Best place to spot: Cloud's End and in the locality of the Tibetan settlement en route Company Bagh.

Small Niltava *Niltava macgrigoriae* 13 cm

Photo : 



A tiny blue flycatcher. Males have blue upperparts, a bluish white breast and dull white belly. Brilliant iridescent blue forehead and neck patches are distinctive. Females are dull brown throughout with a dull white underbelly, faint blue neck patches and reddish brown wings.

Mostly seen in pairs, this resident prefers to stick to the shade. Hence it becomes a difficult subject to photograph as it hardly leaves the cool and dark of foliage.

Best place to spot: Seen a couple of times in proximity of the Company Garden, along the road passing behind Hotel Vermont.

Ultramarine Flycatcher *Ficedula superciliaris* 12 cm

Photo : ♂ ♀



A tiny flycatcher, slightly smaller than a sparrow. Male has dark blue upperparts, head and neck patches. The supercilium and underparts are white. The female is dull brown above, and has dirty white underparts. The forehead of the female has a reddish tinge to it.

A tiny but very restless bird, it keeps flitting from twig to twig, hunting for insects. The call is a metallic 'chwit' followed by 'trrr-trrr-trrr...' Nest is built on depressions in tree bark or even on beams under roofs using plant fibre, lichen and cobweb. Two nests were recorded – one under the roof of a shed inside Company Garden, and the other near the stable at the entrance of Camel's Back road. These birds spent the winter in the foothills, and move to higher altitudes in summer.

Best place to spot: Frequently spotted bird, and a summer breeding species. Very common in the months of March & April, especially near Company Bagh & Camel's Back road.

Verditer Flycatcher *Eumyias thalassina* 16 cm

Photo : ♂



A greenish blue flycatcher that is larger than a sparrow. Males are green-blue overall with black lore (patch in front of eye). Females are duller, with a greyish tint and duller lores.

Mostly seen in pairs. This migrant species moves south to the Western Ghats during winters, but returns to the Himalayas to breed in summers. Mid-march onwards is a good time to see these beautiful birds. Males often perch on top of trees and sing during the breeding season. Prefers lightly wooded areas.

Best place to spot: In and around Company Bagh and near Hawa Ghar on Camel's Back road.

Grey-Headed Canary Flycatcher *Culicicapa ceylonensis* 13 cm



A cute-looking flycatcher with a grey crested head, whitish throat, olive-green upperparts and a yellow belly. Both sexes look alike.

A very active bird, it can generally be seen perching on small twigs or on electric power lines, waiting for some insect to fly past. The prey is hunted mid-air and the bird returns to the perch. It migrates to the foothills to spend the winter, but returns to Mussoorie to breed in summer. Call is a chirping 'chwit-chwit-chwit...' which is often produced while hunting.

Best place to spot: Can be spotted in Indira Colony and near the LBSNAA riding ground. Increased sightings from mid-March onwards as the birds come uphill after winter.

Orange-Flanked Bush Robin *Tarsiger cyanurus* 14 cm



A flycatcher sized bird. Males are blue above and white below. Females have olive brown upperparts. Both sexes have white throat, orange flanks and a blue tail.

A terrestrial-feeder, this bird remains close to the ground, either in small bushes or on the forest floor. Prefers to reside in thick undergrowth in forests. Commonly seen in October and November. In Mussoorie, the male bird was more elusive and hard to spot, whereas the female

happened to be commoner and more visible along roadsides.

Best place to spot: The stretch of road between Company Bagh and Hathi Paon.

Blue-Capped Redstart *Phoenicurus coeruleocephalus* 15 cm



Adult male bird identified by a greyish-blue cap, black upperparts, wings, throat and breast. Underparts and the wing bar are white. Females are dull brown with a greyish belly and

reddish brown rump. Two white wing bars are present. Juvenile birds are dull grey overall with a bluish tinge to the cap. White wing bars will not be very prominent.

Even though a resident species, it is mostly seen during the months of October and November. Prefers open areas with grassy patches nearby. Seen singly, sometimes in pairs.

Best place to spot: Trees in and around Happy Valley; open grassy estate neighbouring Company Bagh.

Blue-Fronted Redstart *Phoenicurus frontalis* 15 cm

Photo : 



Males of this species have bright blue head, throat, back and centre of the tail. Underparts, sides of the tail and lower back (rump) are yellowish orange. Females, as in other redstarts, are brown with a pale orange belly and tail.

An altitudinal migrant, it can be seen in Mussoorie only from mid-September. As winter draws to a close, it migrates to higher elevations. Prefers open forest with shrubberies.

Best place to spot: Grassy compound adjoining Company Bagh and near Hawa Ghar in Camel's Back road.

Common Stonechat *Saxicola torquata* 17 cmPhoto: 

Slightly larger than a sparrow in size. Males have a black head, wings and tail. Neck patch, flanks and wing bar are white. The male has a deep orange breast. Females are pale brown, with heavy speckles on upperparts.

A migrant species, it spends the winter in the plains and foothills. Can be spotted in Mussoorie only after March, when it returns to the hills. Prefers open spaces with shrubberies. Males often perch atop trees or bushes and sing loudly. Otherwise the call is a

mildly harsh 'check-check...'

Best place to spot: Recorded only in the grassy slopes of Dalai Hill and in the scrub along the footpath to Kempty village.

Grey Bushchat *Saxicola ferrea* 15 cmPhoto: 

Slightly larger than a sparrow, this bird also shows sexual difference in plumage. Males are dark grey and black above, with a black mask around the eyes. Supercilium and throats downwards is white. Females are brown with dull white supercilium and underparts.

This bird is very common during summers compared to winter months. Mostly seen as pairs. Prefers open spaces with shrubs, scrubby hillsides and secondary forest with

low tree density. Nesting activity was observed on the Camel's Back road. Both the parents stayed close to the nest, and were seen bringing insects and grubs for the chicks.

Best place to spot: Along the main road to Kempty, where pairs can be observed very closely. They can be seen in the grassy meadows and open forest around Hathi Paon, before entering the dense vegetation of Cloud's End.

Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis* 25 cm



A chocolate brown bird with a black head and yellow beak. The skin around the eye and the legs are yellow. White wing patch is visible only when in flight. Sexes look alike.

A bird seen throughout the length and breadth of India, both in villages and cities. A very adaptable bird, it often nests in man-made structures like electric poles, hollows in dry pipes etc. which simulate its natural nesting sites i.e., holes in trees. Such holes are made by other birds like

woodpeckers or barbets, but taken over by these enterprising mynas. Generally they are very gregarious and noisy, but in Mussoorie the flock sizes are smaller.

Best place to spot: Commonly seen in & around the town, but their numbers are not very high.

Jungle Myna *Acridotheres fuscus* 23 cm



A bird that looks very similar to the common myna, but is greyish in colour. It also lacks the yellow beak and skin around the eye that the former has. The head is black. A prominent crest can be seen at the base of the bill. Also has a white wing patch which is visible only in flight.

Behaviour and nesting habit quite similar to the common myna, but this bird prefers more wooded areas and is generally absent from urban locales. Nests are built in holes. In

fact, more numbers of this species is found in Mussoorie than the common myna. Nest building activity has been recorded in several places along the Camel's Back road and Mall Road.

Best place to spot: Noisy flocks of these birds are very commonly seen around habitation from March, but they were practically absent in the months of October and November.

White-Tailed Nuthatch *Sitta himalayensis* 12 cm

A small sparrow-sized bird with dull blue upperparts, white cheeks, throat and breast and a reddish brown belly. A black streak passes

from the base of the beak to the base of the neck. Distinguishing feature is the white spot in the centre of its tail, which may not always be visible easily, leading to misidentification.

Like all nuthatches, this bird has the ability to move up and down the bark of trees, and even walk upside down on branches. It is indeed very interesting to watch these birds descend with their beaks pointing downward. Many a times, they can be found in mixed hunting parties including other birds like tits and warblers.

Best place to spot: In the vicinity of Company Garden.

Bar-Tailed Treecreeper *Certhia himalayana* 12 cm

A brownish sparrow-sized bird with a long and down curved bill. Heavily speckled and spotted in shades of brown, black and white. Prominent white throat and supercilium. Very difficult to spot from afar as it blends in perfectly with its habitat.

Like the nuthatch, it also can climb up vertical surfaces and move about upside down, but generally doesn't descend with beak pointing downwards. Most often it can be seen climbing up tree trunks in an upward

spiral. Call is rapid, trilling 'sui-sui-sui-sui...' Sometimes feeds amongst grassy patches on vertical rock faces.

Best place to spot: In the stretch from LBSNAA main gate to the Tibetan settlement on the way to Company Garden.

Spot-Winged Tit *Parus melanolophus* 11 cm



A bird, smaller than a sparrow in size. It has predominantly bluish-grey upperparts and dark grey lowerparts. Head is black with a tiny, yet prominent crest. The cheeks and sides of the neck are white. Derives its name from the two rows of white spots on its wings.

Moves around in small groups consisting of around 7-8 birds. Not very common in Mussoorie, but still can be spotted fairly frequently. Feeds in bushes and low-lying branches of trees. Often seen in mixed hunting parties with birds of other species. Prefers well wooded areas with some shrubbery.

Best place to spot: Along the road from Company Bagh to Hathi Paon, starting from the garbage dump and running behind Hotel Vermont.

Green-Backed Tit *Parus monticolus* 13 cm



Head, throat, breast and central part of abdomen is black. Cheeks are white. The back is green and belly is greenish yellow. The wings are black with a blue shoulder patch and two white wing bars. The tail is blue with a black tip. Fledglings lack the bright blue wing patches and tail.

A very active and acrobatic bird, it is mainly spotted either in pairs or small flocks of 5-8 birds. Tits are mainly insectivorous. Hairy caterpillars are dealt with patiently, wherein the bird

rubs them on twigs and plucks the hairs away with its beak. Only then is it consumed. Nesting was observed from April onwards. The birds could be seen collecting moss and lichen for the nests. During this period of nest building, they move about in pairs and not in groups. Call can be either a rapid 'ch-ch-ch-ch...' or a two-syllable 'tchewii-tchew'

Best place to spot: Ubiquitous in the hills of Mussoorie. Can be easily seen in any lightly wooded area outside the town.

Black-Throated Tit *Aegithalos concinnus* 10 cm

A tiny bird. As the name goes, it has a black mask and throat. Rest of the face is white. The crown is chestnut brown. Upperparts are pale bluish-grey and underparts are a pale pinkish brown.

An extraordinarily active bird, that is also gregarious in nature. Flocks can be up to 15 strong at times. Constant 'trrr...trrr...trrr' call is characteristic of this tit. Its call, along with the bird's frantic movements and incredible acrobatics, attracts the birdwatcher's eyes to it. Nesting activity began in March. Nests are small globular bag-like structures (see photo) well camouflaged with moss, lichen and cobwebs. Nest were recorded at three different spots –within a creeper growing on the mesh fence surrounding Hotel Vermont; on the road to Polo ground, where the nest hung very low over the road; within a thicket growing at the base of a rocky outcrop near Cloud's End.

Best place to spot: Can be seen in any moderately wooded area away from human habitation.

Black-Lored Tit *Parus xanthogenys* 14 cm

A beautiful tit with a large spiky black crest and black lores. Upperparts black with yellow spots. Underparts and supercilium yellow with a thick black stripe extending from chin to underbelly.

Behaviour-wise it is very similar to the other tits, but is not very gregarious. About 3-4 birds make up a flock. Prefers more wooded areas. Nesting goes on in April and May.

Best place to spot: In the oak & chir forests along the non-motorable path to Kempty village.

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* 18 cm



Identified by a dark blue head, breast band and upperparts, a red forehead and throat and white underparts. The tail is sharply forked. The juveniles have a pinkish throat and black, instead of blue, upperparts.

Migrant species that winters in the south, but breeds in the Himalayas. Generally seen in large flocks, feeding in mid-air. Nest building is using mud, which is used in pellet form to build cup shaped structures on vertical surfaces (see photo). A single brood may have up to 5 chicks.

Best place to spot: At Library Point, where these birds can be seen perched on electric power lines. One nest was recorded under the roof of a shop on the ground floor of Mussoorie library.

Himalayan Bulbul *Pycnonotus leucogenys* 20 cm



A handsome bird with a prominent crest. Has white cheeks, brown back and whitish belly. Vent is bright yellow.

Seen mostly in pairs or sometimes singly. An energetic and vocal bird, the pleasant rolling call of which can be heard often in the secondary growth and gardens of Mussoorie. Usually glimpsed perched on power lines. Fruit bearing bushes and trees attract small flocks of these birds, making them good spots for both observation and photography. Though not aggressive, one bird was observed chasing a jay that went too close to its nest, with alarm-like squeaky calls.

Best place to spot: Ubiquitous bird of the open forest and gardens. Camel's Back road offers good photo opportunities of this bulbul.

Red-Rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica* 17 cm

Looks quite similar to the barn swallow, but absence of red throat and blue breast band helps avoid misidentification. Adults have a

deep blue crown and upperparts. Back of the neck and rump are orange. The breast is heavily streaked in brown.

They can be seen in flocks numbering in the dozens scouring the skies for insects. Nesting starts in April, and like the barn swallow, this also builds nests using mud. But the nest's shape differs in that it is a bowl-shaped structure with a small tunnel-like entrance built on ceilings. During nesting season, pairs separate off from the flock.

Best place to spot: Can be seen all along the stretch from Library Chowk to LBSNAA. Good views of the bird can be had in Indira Colony and near Hotel Vermont. One nest (see photo) was recorded in Sampoonanand Auditorium of LBSNAA.

Black Bulbul *Hypsipetes leucocephalus* 25 cm

A grey coloured bulbul with a spiky black crest and blood red beak and feet. Rest of the body is in varying shades of grey and black. The tail is slightly forked.

A noisy and sociable resident species, it always moves in flocks numbering over a dozen at times. Loud squeaky calls can lead one to these birds. Prefers the treetops, but comes down to lower branches while feeding. They were more frequently seen in the pre-winter months.

Best place to spot: Widespread presence in Mussoorie, particularly in the wooded tracts. Good chances of sighting along the road to Hathi Paon from Company Bagh.

Oriental White-Eye *Zosterops palpebrosus* 10 cm



Small, sparrow-sized, yellowish green bird with a striking white ring around the eye. Head is yellow and the rest of the body has a greenish cast to it. Underparts are greyish in colour.

Spotted in pairs or small flocks of 4-5 birds. Behaves like tits, in terms of their acrobatics and frantic activity. Call is a short 'cheeerr' and a tinkling song at times. Nesting season, as with most other hill birds is in summer. During this particular phase, pairs can

be seen moving separately and not with their flocks.

Best place to spot: In and around the garden adjoining the Central School for Tibetans, en route to Dalai hill and along the motorable road to Kempton falls.

Grey-Hooded Warbler *Seicercus xanthoschistos* 10 cm



A tiny songbird, with bright yellow underparts and a grey hood which covers its crown, cheeks and nape. Has a faint white supercilium and crown stripe.

Mostly seen singly or in pairs, but small flocks numbering 4-5 birds have been spotted at times. This is one bird, apart from the black-throated tit that can be termed 'hyperactive'. Their sweet and loud song ought to be one of the commonest melodies of Mussoorie's hills. Nesting starts off

from mid-March. Nests are built in well concealed locations at the base of thickets. Three nests were discovered – All built on rubble boundary walls. Unlike many other species, this warbler shows no hesitation in going to and from the nest even in the presence of a human, least mindful of whether the nest's safety would be compromised.

Best place to spot: Commonly seen anywhere outside the town where the habitat is bushes interspersed with trees or in gardens.

Striated Prinia White-Throated Laughingthrush

Striated Prinia *Prinia criniger* 16 cm



Prinias are sparrow-sized birds with drab plumage and a relatively long tail. This prinia has streaked grey-brown upperparts, and a whitish unstreaked belly. The tail is long and faintly barred. In non-breeding season, the plumage is duller and browner in colour.

A resident of scrubby hillsides and grasslands of the Himalayas, this bird starts breeding in April. Nests are built using fine grasses, during the building of which the birds are extra cautious so as not to disclose the nesting location. Call is a buzzy 'cheezwit-cheezwit'.

Best place to spot: In Mussoorie, spotted only in one place that has decent scrub and long grassy vegetation – in the hillsides of Dalai Hill facing Benog Tibba. The location lies along the trek path to Kemptly falls.

White-Throated Laughingthrush *Garrulax albogularis* 28 cm



A pigeon-sized bird with brown upperparts and a large bright white throat and upper breast. The lower belly is orange-brown in colour. Sexes are coloured alike.

Invariably seen in flocks, the size and strength of which may vary. The largest flocks seen in Mussoorie had over 50 birds. They feed like thrushes, throwing up leaves from the forest floor, but take to the trees at even an inkling of danger. They are a noisy lot, and their musical laugh-like calls and

tinkling chatter can be heard before even a glimpse of the bird is had. Being social birds they have to communicate with others in the flock and this is done with a series of giggle like cries. Habitat preferred is woodland with good undergrowth, as this bird avoids coming out into the open.

Best place to spot: Behind Hotel Vermont and near the arch a few dozen metres away from the Company Bagh entrance.

Striated Laughingthrush *Garrulax striatus* 28 cm



A plump looking, large laughing thrush. Sports a dark brown bushy crest and wings. The face and underparts are light chocolate brown. The bird is heavily streaked with white lines of varying lengths. The tail is dark brown.

An extremely shy bird, it ought to be the most secretive, wary and unobtrusive of all the five species of laughing thrushes found in Mussoorie. An inhabitant of dense forests, this bird sticks to the shade scrupulously,

and hardly comes into the sunlight. They have a particular fondness for shady and overgrown ravines. Call is a loud and long assorted set of syllables, like a maniacal chatter. Seen singly or in pairs.

Best place to spot : In the densest parts of forest – a small patch behind Hotel Vermont, and in a similar small patch close to Lynndale estate.

Streaked Laughingthrush *Garrulax lineatus* 20 cm



Much smaller than the other laughing thrushes. Brownish grey head, reddish brown ear coverts and orange-brown wings and tail are distinctive features. The underparts are brownish grey. The head, breast and mantle are heavily streaked with light brown.

Most unusual of all laughing thrushes, as this bird doesn't restrict itself to the undergrowth, but confidently moves about hopping on the ground in full visibility. Mostly seen in pairs. Call is a

whirring 'treet-teeuu' among a multitude of other calls. Nests are built on the ground, well hidden under bushes or in rocky outcrops. The behaviour of the bird changes completely during nest building and it becomes very reclusive, trying to human eye-contact wherever possible.

Best place to spot : A very common laughing thrush, it can be seen near Company Bagh and along Camel's Back road.

Rusty-Cheeked Scimitar Babbler White-Browed Shrike Babbler

Rusty-Cheeked Scimitar Babbler *Pomatorhinus erythrogenys* 25 cm



Size is larger than a bulbul. Face, cheeks and breast downwards are rusty brown. There is a white throat patch. Upperparts are a brownish grey. Long, slim and downward curved bill gives the bird and its family the name 'scimitar babblers'.

Another member of Mussoorie's introvert club. Prefers to remain in the dense understory of forests, where it remains silent most of the time. Seen singly or in small flocks numbering 4-5 individuals at the most.

Best place to spot : Despite its reclusive nature, the bird does come out into the open for one thing – free food at the garbage dump next to Company Bagh. This makes the spot the best for both spotting and photography of this shy beauty.

White-Browed Shrike Babbler *Pteruthius flaviscapis* 16 cm



Slightly larger than a sparrow in size. Males are eye-catching, clad in black hood, wings and sport rufous patches on wings. The mantle is grey. Supercilium and underparts, from throat downwards is white. Females have dull olive-brown upperparts with grey hood and green wings. Their rufous wing patches are paler than the males'.

Seen mostly singly. Prefers oak and rhododendron evergreen forests. Feeds on insects and other larvae.

Not a very common bird.

Best place to spot: Seen in the dense patch of forest seen before reaching Company Bagh and also in the oak forests of Cloud's End.

Chestnut-Tailed Minla *Minla strigula* 14 cm



The chestnut tailed minla is about the size of a sparrow but with a longer tail. Sports an orange crown and wing panel, yellow throat and underparts and a broken moustachial stripe. The tails sides are yellow.

A sociable bird, it is found in small flocks. Behaviour is similar to a tit, in the manner of feeding and moving about. Not a very common bird and somewhat shy in these parts. Seen in moderate to dense evergreen forest.

Best place to spot: In the stretch from Company Bagh to Hathi Paon. There is one specific perennial spring just on the roadside, where these birds come to bathe by mid-morning.

Rufous Sibia *Heterophasia capistrata* 21 cm



A bulbul sized bird with a black hooded head. The neck and throats downwards is covered with pale orange-brown plumage. The wings have rufous and blue stripes. The tail is has two black and grey bars near the tip.

Found mostly in pairs. Though a widespread resident, sightings are not very frequent during September to November. An arboreal bird of the mixed evergreen broadleaved forests, it sometimes descends to

small bushes to feed. Call is a high pitched 'deetoo-deeetyoowoo'. Being very active birds, they can be seen diving into bushes and shrubs in search of insects. Sometimes they also join hunting parties of tits, warblers and laughing thrushes. Often seen sunning themselves on treetops in the months of October and November, when the cold weather starts to set in.

Best place to spot: One has the highest probability of seeing this bird in and around Company Bagh.

Whiskered Yuhina Stripe-throated Yuhina

Whiskered Yuhina *Yuhina flavicollis* 14 cm



Small, sparrow-sized bird. Has a prominent dark brown crest and wings. The black moustachial stripe that continues to the nape in the form of a golden brown collar is a distinctive feature. There is white ring around the eye and the underparts are a dirty white.

Found in pairs or small groups foraging in small bushes for berries. Spring and summer seasons, when the berries are ripe, bring in more of these birds. In contrast, yuhinas are uncommon during October and November. The call is a harsh 'chew-chii' apart from excited twittering at times.

Best place to spot: Frequently seen, during late March and April in the stretch between Company Bagh and Vermont hotel (main entrance). They are particularly fond of foraging in the creepers that cover the boundary fence of Company Bagh.

Stripe-throated Yuhina *Yuhina gularis* 13 cm



An olive green bird with a streaked throat and a short crest. The wings have an orange panel and black edges. The feet are pale orange.

Seen in small flocks having- birds. Spotted during late September and October. Prefers wooded areas. Call is a nasal 'chweee..chweee'. Not very common.

Best place to spot: All records came from the vicinity of Company Bagh.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* 15 cm

Photo : ♂



A species that is well-known to all. Males have an ash-grey crown and brown eye stripe extending to the neck. Throat and upper breast is black. Rest of the underparts is dull white. Upperparts are brown with black, brown and grey speckling. Females are sandy-brown in colour with a thin pale cream supercilium and have unspeckled greyish underparts.

They are seen in human settlements and cultivation, where the scene of sparrows flitting across roads and

inside human dwellings is a fairly common sight. Sadly, their numbers are on the fall today owing to multiple reasons, of which lack of nesting places (in traditional houses), increased pesticide use and effect of microwave radiation are the most important.

Best place to spot: Can be spotted along the Mall Road, but the numbers are not very high.

Russet Sparrow *Passer rutilans* 15 cm

Photo : ♂ ♀



Looks like a house sparrow, but is an entirely different species. Males have reddish brown crown and mantle. Only the throat is black while the

cheeks and underparts are white to greyish-white. Females of both species might look like mirror images, but the brown is richer in russet sparrow females and the eye stripe is dark and prominent. The supercilium is wider and cream in colour. A yellowish tinge can be seen around the throat for both sexes.

Even though found near human settlement, prefers light forest and cultivation in the hills. Nests are built in the months of April and May, in cavities in trees, sometimes even under roofs. Nesting was observed in a cavity in an electric pole near Hathi Paon.

Best place to spot: On the sides of the hill adjacent to main gate and in Indra Colony.

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* 19 cm

A bird that's not larger than a bulbul. Upperparts are grey with black wings. The supercilium, throat and belly are pale yellowish-white. The breast, rump and vent are bright yellow. Breeding males have a black throat. The tail is relatively long.

A migrant bird, it winters in the rest of India, but returns to the Himalayas to breed. Likes to feed and breed in and around streams, be it in the Himalayas or elsewhere. It can be seen either singly or in small flocks of

4-5 birds in moist patches of forest. Like all wagtails, this one also has the habit of wagging the tail up and down (except the Forest Wagtail (*Dendronanthus indicus*) which wags it sideways) frequently. Mostly terrestrial in habit, it runs around on ground in search of small insects, on which it feeds.

Best place to spot: Small flocks of 2-3 birds can be seen feeding in the riding ground during mornings and evenings.

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba* 19 cm

A pied wagtail which comes in a variety of plumages. Generally they have a white head pattern, with either grey or black mantle. Underparts are always white. Distinguished from the White-browed Wagtail (not recorded in Mussoorie) by its smaller size and difference in head pattern.

The bird depicted in the photo is the non-breeding form of the subspecies Masked Wagtail (*Motacilla alba personata*).

Winter quarters are spread over the entire Indian subcontinent, right up to Sri Lanka. Breeds in the Himalayas in the vicinity of streams. Like most wagtails, this also prefers habitats that are well-watered.

Best place to spot: Seen only once in the month of September in Happy Valley.

Upland Pipit *Anthus sylvanus* 17 cm



Upperparts are light brown with heavy dark brown streaks. The underparts are whitish with fine streaking. It has a prominent white supercilium. Distinguished from the very similar looking tree pipit as the latter has a yellowish green cast to its heavily streaked breast.

Pipits are birds belonging to the same family as wagtails. A very similar looking pipit, the tree pipit has also been recorded from the same area as this one. This is a year-round resident of rocky and grassy slopes, unlike the tree pipit which migrates to the south of Himalayas during winter. A shy bird, it hides in the grass in the presence of humans. If surprised, will rise to the air with a sudden 'chirp' or 'tsip-tsip' call and plunges into the grass. Seen singly or in pairs.

Best place to spot: Rocky and grassy hill slopes of Dalai Hill.

Black-Faced Warbler *Abroscopus schisticeps*



A tiny warbler. Has a black face mask, yellow supercilium and throat. The crown is grey. Breast, wings and upperparts are greenish yellow. Lower belly is off-white in colour.

This is very uncommon in the forests of Mussoorie. A flock of three individuals was seen near Lynndale estate in the month of April. No more records were found after that. They were tweeting excitedly, and offered just a glimpse for a few seconds before vanishing into the trees.

Best place to spot: Presence recorded near Lynndale estate once.

Spectacled Finch *Callacanthis burtoni* 18 cmPhoto : 

A wagtail-sized bird. Both sexes are brown overall and have black wings with white-tipped feathers. Males and females sport pink and yellow coloured 'spectacle'-like patches around the eye. The beak is conical like that of a typical finch.

A Himalayan resident, this bird is seen in small flocks of 5-6 individuals at the most. They generally prefer to remain away from the presence of humans, and take to flight or hide in foliage in case someone approaches them.

Seen most of the times in coniferous and mixed evergreen forests.

Best place to spot: In the vicinity of the well just outside Hathi Paon village (in the small valley-like area that separates Cloud's End from Everest Bungalow hill). Once, three females were observed behind Hotel Vermont.

Brown Bullfinch *Pyrrhula nipalensis* 17 cm

Adult birds have greyish-brown head and mantle and grey underparts. Wings and the long tail are black. Wing patch is light grey. When seen in sunlight, the wing tips and tail tip appear glistening blue. The forehead and chin are densely spotted. A thin white rump can be seen in flight.

A resident species. Seen in small flocks. Most of the time they stick to tree tops, but can be seen descending onto bushes to feed on seeds. Inhabits mixed broadleaved

evergreen forests.

Best place to spot: Spotted on the open forest on the hillside, across Company Bagh, that slopes downhill.

Spot-Winged Grosbeak *Mycerobas melanozanthos* 22 cm

Photo :  



Males have black head, upperparts and wings. The breast and underparts are bright yellow. Females are brown above. The underparts and supercilium are pale brown. The throat, breast and flanks are

heavily streaked. Ear covers and eye stripe are dark brown. Both sexes have yellow spots on their wings which gives them their name.

A seed eater, as suggested by the strong, conical beak, these birds travel in flocks, sometimes numbering in the dozens. They feed gregariously, often settling down on fruiting trees. An altitudinal migrant, they move downhill to lower elevations during the harsh winters. So, November-end and December is the apt time to catch a glimpse of these birds. Once spring settles in, they again climb the hills in search of cooler, temperate climes.

Best place to spot: In the vicinity of Hotel Vermont (main entrance) and along the road from there to Waverly Chowk.

Pink-Browed Rosefinch *Carpodacus rodochrous* 15 cm

Photo : 



A beautiful pink and brown bird. The male has bright pink supercilium and underparts. Upperparts and lores are coffee-brown. The crown is deep reddish brown. Females are nondescript with a heavily streaked plain brown body.

A local migrant, seen in Mussoorie's open forests and scrubland during early spring. Feeds on seeds and moves about in small flocks. Summers are spent in high altitude grasslands and forests.

Best place to spot: On the scrub-covered hillside of Company Bagh.

Common Rosefinch Rock Bunting

Common Rosefinch *Carpodacus erythrinus* 15 cm

Photo : 

It is larger than a sparrow. Males in breeding plumage have bright red head, breast and rump. A small red crest adorns the head. Females are brown with streaked under and upperparts. They have two thin white bars on their wings. Bill is stout and conical.

Being a migrant, this bird can be seen in Mussoorie only during summer, starting from the month of March onwards. In winter, it is very widespread throughout peninsular India and has been recorded as far south as Kerala. It prefers to inhabit open forests interspersed with bushes and scrub and cultivation. Seen singly or in small flocks.

Best place to spot: The grassy hillsides of Dalai Hill.

Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia* 16 cm

Photo : 

Slightly larger than a sparrow. Males and females have different plumage. Males have an ash grey head, black moustachial stripe and black stripes across the crown, and bordering the ear

coverts. Underparts are reddish brown. Females are paler, and the stripes on the head are less visible.

Migrates to lower hills and plains during winter, and shifts uphill after the advent of summer. Habitats preferred are rocky grassy slopes, with bushes and light forest.

Best place to spot: Seen in the grassy rock outcrops near Hathi Paon in early March.

Checklist of Birds of Mussoorie

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|---|---|---------------------------------|
| 1. Black Francolin | - | <i>Francolinus francolinus</i> |
| 2. Hill Partridge | - | <i>Arborophila torqueola</i> |
| 3. Kalij Pheasant | - | <i>Lophura hamiltonii</i> |
| 4. Brown-Fronted Woodpecker | - | <i>Dendrocopos auriceps</i> |
| 5. Himalayan Woodpecker | - | <i>Dendrocopos himalayensis</i> |
| 6. Lesser Yellownape | - | <i>Picus chlorolophus</i> |
| 7. Greater Yellow-nape | - | <i>Picus flavinucha</i> |
| 8. Scaly-bellied Woodpecker | - | <i>Picus squamatus</i> |
| 9. Grey-Headed Woodpecker | - | <i>Picus canus</i> |
| 10. Great Barbet | - | <i>Megalaima virens</i> |
| 11. Blue-Throated Barbet | - | <i>Megalaima asiatica</i> |
| 12. Common Hoopoe | - | <i>Upupa epops</i> |
| 13. Indian Cuckoo | - | <i>Cuculus micropterus</i> |
| 14. Oriental Cuckoo (Himalayan Cuckoo) | - | <i>Cuculus saturatus</i> |
| 15. Eurasian Cuckoo | - | <i>Cuculus canorus</i> |
| 16. Grey-Bellied Cuckoo | - | <i>Cacomantis passerines</i> |
| 17. Asian Koel | - | <i>Eudynamis scolopacea</i> |
| 18. Slaty-Headed Parakeet | - | <i>Psittacula himalayana</i> |
| 19. Plum-Headed Parakeet | - | <i>Psittacula cyanocephala</i> |
| 20. White-throated Needletail | - | <i>Hirundapus caudacutus</i> |
| 21. Himalayan Swiftlet (Edible-nest Swiftlet) | - | <i>Aerodramus brevirostris</i> |
| 22. House Swift | - | <i>Apus affinis</i> |
| 23. Asian Barred Owlet | - | <i>Glaucidium cuculoides</i> |
| 24. Rock Pigeon | - | <i>Columba livia</i> |
| 25. Oriental Turtle Dove | - | <i>Streptopelia orientalis</i> |
| 26. Spotted Dove | - | <i>Streptopelia chinensis</i> |
| 27. Wedge-Tailed Green Pigeon | - | <i>Treron sphenura</i> |
| 28. Oriental Honey-buzzard | - | <i>Pernis ptilorhynchus</i> |
| 29. Black Kite | - | <i>Milvus migrans</i> |
| 30. Himalayan Griffon | - | <i>Gyps himalayensis</i> |
| 31. Shikra | - | <i>Accipiter badius</i> |
| 32. Crested Goshawk | - | <i>Accipiter trivirgatus</i> |
| 33. Northern Goshawk | - | <i>Accipiter gentilis</i> |
| 34. Long-Legged Buzzard | - | <i>Buteo rufinus</i> |

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|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 35. Short-Toed Snake Eagle | - <i>Circaetus gallicus</i> |
| 36. Black Eagle | - <i>Ictinaetus malayensis</i> |
| 37. Steppe Eagle | - <i>Aquila nipalensis</i> |
| 38. Common Kestrel | - <i>Falco tinnunculus</i> |
| 39. Eurasian Jay | - <i>Garrulus glandarius</i> |
| 40. Black-Headed Jay | - <i>Garrulus lanceolatus</i> |
| 41. Red-Billed Blue Magpie | - <i>Urocissa erythrorhyncha</i> |
| 42. Grey Treepie | - <i>Dendrocitta formosae</i> |
| 43. Large-Billed Crow | - <i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i> |
| 44. Eurasian Golden Oriole | - <i>Oriolus oriolus</i> |
| 45. Black-Winged Cuckooshrike | - <i>Coracina melaschistos</i> |
| 46. Long-Tailed Minivet | - <i>Pericrocotus ethologus</i> |
| 47. White-Throated Fantail | - <i>Rhipidura albicollis</i> |
| 48. Ashy Drongo | - <i>Dicrurus leucophaeus</i> |
| 49. Blue-Capped Rock Thrush | - <i>Monticola cinclorhynchus</i> |
| 50. Blue Rock Thrush | - <i>Monticola solitarius</i> |
| 51. Chestnut-Bellied Rock Thrush | - <i>Monticola rufiventris</i> |
| 52. Blue Whistling Thrush | - <i>Myophonus caeruleus</i> |
| 53. Orange-headed Thrush | - <i>Zoothera citrina</i> |
| 54. White-Collared Blackbird | - <i>Turdus albocinctus</i> |
| 55. Grey-Winged Blackbird | - <i>Turdus boulboul</i> |
| 56. Chestnut Thrush | - <i>Turdus rubrocanus</i> |
| 57. Dark-Sided Flycatcher | - <i>Muscicapa sibirica</i> |
| 58. Ultramarine Flycatcher | - <i>Ficedula superciliiaris</i> |
| 59. Verditer Flycatcher | - <i>Eumyias thalassina</i> |
| 60. Small Niltava | - <i>Niltava macgrigoriae</i> |
| 61. Grey-Headed Canary Flycatcher | - <i>Culicicapa ceylonensis</i> |
| 62. Orange-Flanked Bush Robin | - <i>Tarsiger cyanurus</i> |
| 63. Blue-Capped Redstart | - <i>Phoenicurus coeruleocephalus</i> |
| 64. Blue-Fronted Redstart | - <i>Phoenicurus frontalis</i> |
| 65. Common Stonechat | - <i>Saxicola torquata</i> |
| 66. Grey Bushchat | - <i>Saxicola ferrea</i> |
| 67. Common Myna | - <i>Acridotheres tristis</i> |
| 68. Jungle Myna | - <i>Acridotheres fuscus</i> |
| 69. White-Tailed Nuthatch | - <i>Sitta himalayensis</i> |
| 70. Bar-Tailed Treecreeper | - <i>Certhia himalayana</i> |
| 71. Spot-Winged Tit | - <i>Parus melanolophus</i> |
| 72. Green-Backed Tit | - <i>Parus monticolus</i> |
| 73. Black-Lored Tit | - <i>Parus xanthogenys</i> |
| 74. Black-Throated Tit | - <i>Aegithalos concinnus</i> |

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| 75. Asian House Martin | - | <i>Delichon dasypus</i> |
| 76. Northern House Martin | - | <i>Delichon urbica</i> |
| 77. Barn Swallow | - | <i>Hirundo rustica</i> |
| 78. Red-Rumped Swallow | - | <i>Hirundo daurica</i> |
| 79. Himalayan Bulbul | - | <i>Pycnonotus leucogenys</i> |
| 80. Mountain Bulbul | - | <i>Hypsipetes mccllellandii</i> |
| 81. Black Bulbul | - | <i>Hypsipetes leucocephalus</i> |
| 82. Striated Prinia | - | <i>Prinia criniger</i> |
| 83. Oriental White-Eye | - | <i>Zosterops palpebrosus</i> |
| 84. Grey-Hooded Warbler | - | <i>Seicercus xanthoschistos</i> |
| 85. Greenish Warbler | - | <i>Phylloscopus trochiloides</i> |
| 86. Buff-barred Warbler | - | <i>Phylloscopus pulcher</i> |
| 87. Black-Faced Warbler | - | <i>Abroscopus schisticeps</i> |
| 88. Yellow-browed Warbler | - | <i>Phylloscopus inornatus</i> |
| 89. White-Throated Laughingthrush | - | <i>Garrulax albogularis</i> |
| 90. Rufous-chinned Laughingthrush | - | <i>Garrulax rufogularis</i> |
| 91. Striated Laughingthrush | - | <i>Garrulax striatus</i> |
| 92. Streaked Laughingthrush | - | <i>Garrulax lineatus</i> |
| 93. Variegated Laughingthrush | - | <i>Garrulax variegates</i> |
| 94. Rusty-Cheeked Scimitar Babbler | - | <i>Pomatorhinus erythrogyens</i> |
| 95. Jungle Babbler | - | <i>Turdoides striatus</i> |
| 96. White-Browed Shrike Babbler | - | <i>Pteruthius flaviscapis</i> |
| 97. Chestnut-Tailed Minla | - | <i>Minla strigula</i> |
| 98. Rufous Sibia | - | <i>Heterophasia capistrata</i> |
| 99. Whiskered Yuhina | - | <i>Yuhina flavicollis</i> |
| 100. Stripe-throated Yuhina | - | <i>Yuhina gularis</i> |
| 101. House Sparrow | - | <i>Passer domesticus</i> |
| 102. Russet Sparrow | - | <i>Passer rutilans</i> |
| 103. White Wagtail | - | <i>Motacilla alba</i> |
| 104. Grey Wagtail | - | <i>Motacilla cinerea</i> |
| 105. Upland Pipit | - | <i>Anthus sylvanus</i> |
| 106. Tree Pipit (Eurasian Tree Pipit) | - | <i>Anthus trivialis</i> |
| 107. Robin Accentor | - | <i>Prunella rubeculoides</i> |
| 108. Spectacled Finch | - | <i>Callacanthus burtoni</i> |
| 109. Common Rosefinch | - | <i>Carpodacus erythrinus</i> |
| 110. Pink-Browed Rosefinch | - | <i>Carpodacus rodochrous</i> |
| 111. Brown Bullfinch | - | <i>Pyrrhula nipalensis</i> |
| 112. Spot-Winged Grosbeak | - | <i>Mycerobas melanozanthos</i> |
| 113. Rock Bunting | - | <i>Emberiza cia</i> |

References

The following are some books and websites that will be of use to anyone interested in learning more about birds:

1. The Book of Indian Birds by Salim Ali
2. Pocket Guide to the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent by Grimmett and Inskipp
3. A Field guide to the Birds of India by Krys Kazmierczak
4. www.kolkatabirds.com
5. Indian Birds e-group in Facebook
6. <http://www.xeno-canto.org> – for recordings of bird calls
7. <http://orientalbirdimages.org/>