

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Sighting report of critically endangered Baer's Pochard *Aythya baeri* (Radde, 1863) from Champhai, Mizoram, India

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In this paper we report the first confirmed sighting of Baer's Pochard *Aythya baeri* (Radde, 1863) from Mizoram. Baer's Pochard belongs to the family Anatidae and is reported from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Japan, China, Mongolia, Hongkong, South Korea, North Korea, Laos, Myanmar, Russia, Pakistan, Phillipines, Thailand and Vietnam. In Mizoram, this is the only sighting report and photographic record for this species; details of sightings and habitat are discussed.

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Introduction

Baer's Pochard, *Aythya baeri* (Radde, 1863), a rare and critically endangered diving duck belongs to the family Anatidae under Order Anseriformes.¹ It is reported from Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Hong Kong, India, Japan, Laos, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, North Korea, Pakistan, Philippines, Russia, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam.^{1,2} Baer's Pochard is listed as Critically Endangered due to decreasing population, only 150-700 mature individuals is estimated to be in the range.¹ Wang et al.³ estimated the population to be between 299-999 individuals. It is one of the most threatened species in Asia and may become extinct in the near future.⁴ It is known to inhabit freshwater lakes, ponds and flooded paddy-field or stagnant freshwater with tall grass.¹ In China, they are found in coastal wetlands near forest.¹ The main threat is thought to be habitat loss and degradation; recently the hunting of birds and their eggs for food may have become a more significant factor.⁵ They are reported from Myanmar, India, and Bangladesh where they migrate during winter months.²

Baer's Pochard has a glossy-green head during breeding season while most of the time they appear to be black headed. White wing bar is prominent during flight and wing stretching, chestnut-brown neck, breast and back. White and chestnut stripe on flanks and whitish under-parts. They are often found singly or in small groups, sometimes may join flock of other ducks like Tufted duck and Ferruginous Duck (with which they are believed to cross breed), this is in line with the observation in Tripura.⁶

Observation and Discussion

While conducting a regular winter bird survey and documentation at the plains (mostly paddy-field and small pond) of Champhai, on the 6th November 2023 the authors sighted a small group of large ducks- an uncommon sight for the place. On further detailed observation in the field and thorough analysis of the photograph taken, along with subsequent field visit it was confirmed that it was a mixed flock of 6 Tufted Duck and 1 Baer's Pochard. The Tufted Ducks can be easily identified from their long and slim crest, while the Baer's



Figure 1. Baer's Pochard, *Aythya baeri*

Pochard's identifying character like chestnut and white stripe on flanks is prominent in a single individual who lack crest. The groups are loosely bound, swimming in the pond and behavioural differences are observed among them. The Tufted Duck are easily disturbed when paddy field workers passed by the pond and disappear in the grass covered edge, while the Baer's Pochard simply avoid the passers-by by swimming to the other side of the pond. The Tufted Duck left the small pond on the 9th November 2023 while the lone Baer's Pochard stayed on the same pond till the 16th November 2023. Baer's Pochard is already reported to winter in the wetlands of neighbouring state of Tripura⁶ and Assam⁷ which further supports the possibility of Champhai Plain being used as stop-over sites by this species. This may be the first and only sighting report from Mizoram.

The pond is located at 23°27'41"N 93°21'28"E with an altitude of 1319.9m. The pond is surrounded by paddy field on all sides and a small jeep-able approach road to the eastern side. The short stay on the location may be due to disturbances and small size of the pond with no immediate water bodies in the vicinity as all the paddy fields are dry during the winter months. Also, ponds are sometimes dried and ploughed to be used as a paddy field for the next season. Hunting and trapping of rats in the paddy field is a common practice in the area during winter months, this may lead to opportunistic hunting of water-birds and other available wild fowl.

Therefore, it is accepted that Champhai Plains served as an important stop-over site for many migrating water-birds like the Baer's Pochard, Gadwal, Tufted Duck, Garganey, Common Teal etc which are also sighted during the survey. The Champhai Plains need to be thoroughly monitored for arriving water-birds; restrictions and control of opportunistic harvest of wild fowl and other wild animals need to be in place especially during the winter migration months. Sustainable use of water and resources in the field will replenish the flora and fauna. Controlled use of pesticides and herbicides during the monsoon and harvest season will have a positive impact in the wild flora and fauna which in turn will generate eco-tourism revenue. The field if protected and well managed

during the winter months i.e, un-cultivated season will allow the migrating birds to stop over in the area for longer period thus boosting bird-watching and eco-tourism activity which will help farmers earn extra revenue during the fallow season.

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