

Early bird catches the cuckoo



A male Violet Cuckoo at CKBS. Picture by Anirban Pal

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The subcontinent's smallest cuckoo, never before recorded in south Bengal, was sighted and photographed at the Chintamani Kar Bird Sanctuary on the city's southern fringe earlier this month to the delight of birders hoping for a second consecutive winter of rarities.

Anirban Pal, a 40-year-old civil engineer, couldn't believe his eyes when he found what looked like a male Violet Cuckoo perched high on a tree at the Narendrapur sanctuary on the morning of December 7.

He stood rooted to his spot and kept clicking away with his camera for close to 10 minutes in the hope of getting a good enough shot to record the sighting.

"The little bird was on one of the upper branches of a tall tree. And I had

to be extra cautious lest it fly away," recounted Anirban.

The orange beak and the horizontal bars on the bird's belly helped Pal nail his find, probably only the fourth recorded sighting of a Violet Cuckoo anywhere in Bengal.

The previous three sightings were all in north Bengal, the latest by a birder named Anupam Mistry at Khunia in Jalpaiguri on November 11.

"This is the smallest cuckoo in the Indian subcontinent. The Violet Cuckoo is just 17cm long. The closest in size is the Asian Emerald Cuckoo, which is a centimetre longer," said Shubhankar Patra, whose Sunday Watch group hits the nature trail every Sunday to see and record birds, butterflies, insects, reptiles and trees.

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Super start to season

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The Violet Cuckoo is rarely sighted even in the Northeast, which is among its few habitats.

"The Violet Cuckoo is difficult to sight because of its small size. Moreover, the bird is not abundantly found. The CKBS sighting has again proved that if we look around, we can find many interesting birds," said birding veteran Sumit Sen, whose website kolkatabirds.com contains images, trip reports and checklists of species.

The appearance of the bird at CKBS has led birding enthusiasts to believe that this winter would be as productive as the last one, when the city's parks and few pockets untouched by concrete sprung a some avian surprises.

The rarities sighted in Calcutta over the last winter

include the Asian Stubtail, a tiny woodland bird previously not recorded in India. A Desert Wheatear in Rajarhat was the most photographed bird in town before a Slaty-backed Flycatcher in Rabindra Sarobar stole the shutterbug's heart at the fag end of the season.

The Violet Cuckoo has been sighted only once, though. The bird is usually seen in canopies of trees where it flits up and down, looking for insects. The male of the species wears violet on the head and upper parts. Its orange beak and black, green and violet horizontal bars near the belly are distinctive.

Anirban said he had initially struggled to ascertain whether the colour of the bird he saw was black or violet. But once he had a clear view, the ID wasn't in doubt.

The footfall at CKBS has soared since birder friends prodded Anirban to post an image of the Violet Cuckoo on online forums. But nobody else has had his luck so far.