

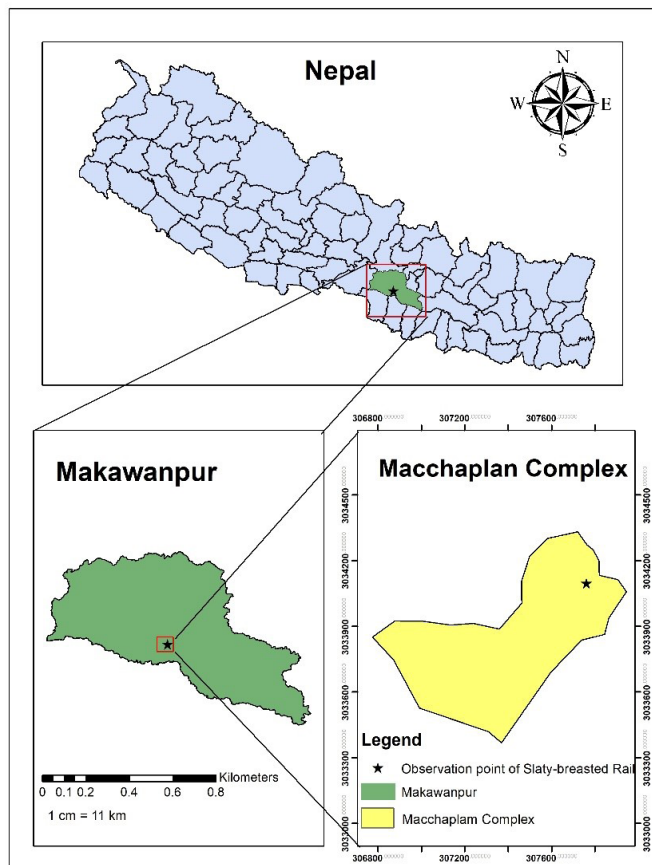
# First sighting of rare Slaty-breasted Rail in Hetauda, Nepal

Slaty-breasted Rail *Lewinia striata* is a water bird of the family Rallidae and are widely distributed resident in southeastern Asian countries (BirdLife International 2022). The adult's head and nape are chestnut, while the foreneck and breast are slate-grey, with white markings and dots on the upper parts, belly, flanks, and under tail coverts (Grimmett et al. 2016). The Slaty-breasted Rail likes deep foliage and forages freely in the morning and evening in marshes, bogs, mangroves, swamps, wet grasslands, and paddy fields (BirdLife International 2022).

In Nepal, the Slaty-breasted Rail was once thought to be a vagrant species because there were more than 10 recordings of the species in the nation. It is currently regarded as an extremely rare visitor and likely a rare resident (Inskipp et al. 2021). It is listed globally as Least Concern (BirdLife International 2022), however,



Slaty-breasted Rail *Lewinia striata* in Machhaplan, Hetauda, Nepal. © Prasan Shrestha



Map of Macchaplum Complex.

nationally they are listed as Vulnerable because of its small population, loss and degradation of habitat, illegal hunting, and disturbance (Inskipp et al. 2021).

On 16 February 1938, Frank M. Bailey collected one Slaty-breasted Rail as the first record for the country from the Haraincha, Morang District, eastern Terai of Nepal (Bailey 1938). The species is recorded mostly from Chitwan National Park and a few records from Kosi Bird Observatory, Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve (Inskipp et al. 2021). Outside the protected areas, one bird was recorded on 10 March 1992, on a small marsh near a temple in Nepalganj, Banke District (Baral 1992), and one bird was photographed in November 2016 on the farmland of Chitwan District which is outside of the Chitwan National Park and its buffer zone (Inskipp et al. 2021).

Machhaplan (Fish Farm) complex lies in the Hetauda Sub-metropolitan city, Makawanpur District, Bagmati Province in central Nepal. The complex sits at a height of 437 m from the sea level and occupies an area of 47.85 ha. This farmland and fish pond area are surrounded by Sal *Shorea robusta* forest. The agricultural land is dominated by paddy fields with dense reeds and marshes. Invasive plant species such as *Eichhornia crassipes*, *Pistia stratiotes*, and *Lantana camera* dominate the area. The complex consists of habitat suitable for various avifauna and is rich in bird diversity (Bhusal 2021).

On 3 March 2022, while bird watching, the authors heard a definite and loud sound emanating from the marshy reeds at 1651 h. We saw a crane-like bird taking off sprinting into the reeds, but it was visible owing to the flattened reeds. They were spotted among thick vegetation of the invasive species *Eichhornia crassipes*, *Pistia stratiotes*, and *Lantana camera*. We spent some time investigating the reeds and found two birds that were initially unconfirmed as Slaty-breasted Rails but were subsequently validated by ornithologists using a photo.

In the following days, an exhaustive search was conducted. Literature and 'eBird' data for the region were also investigated. However, we never saw the bird again. There are no prior records for the occurrence of the Slaty-breasted Rail in and around the area. We may infer from the literature research that the species has a new range record and the first-ever record of sighting in Macchaplan (27.416 N& 85.055 E), Hetauda, Nepal. A Sony a7R IV camera was used to photograph the birds.

A pair of adult Slaty-breasted Rail recorded on its extended range outside the protected areas of Nepal. The Slaty-breasted Rail prefers reedy marshes, mangroves, the borders of village tanks, and flooded rice fields (Ali & Ripley 1987). Macchaplan Complex, Hetauda, Nepal has water sources available throughout the year due to research facilities and fish rearing. Reeds and marshes are abundant which provided an ideal habitat for Slaty-breasted Rail.

Slaty-breasted Rail had not been recorded before in Makawanpur District (Bhusal 2021) or due to its quiet and skulking behaviors, as well as the difficulties in accessing its environment, it is often neglected (Kumar & Kumar 2009). This record shows that this species occurs in Makawanpur District, therefore we can infer that this is the first verified occurrence of Slaty-breasted Rail in Makawanpur District, Nepal. The year-round availability of water has resulted in the establishment of emergent and submerged plants, which has most likely attracted the species (Ameta et al. 2016; Bhusal 2021). The observation of the species occurred during its mating season. Therefore, it may be hypothesized that the species may be seeking appropriate nesting locations under rainfall shortage circumstances (Ameta et al. 2020). The first sighting of this species by us is significant for future research to collect breeding data for the species in the region. Overgrazing, pollution, and firing were observed at the site which are major threats to the species. We urge additional research on comparable prospective sites for population assessment because the population size of the Slaty-breasted Rail is unclear in Nepal (Inskipp et al. 2016).

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