



Open Access

10.11609/jott.2026.18.7.29159-29374
www.threatenedtaxa.org

26 July 2026 (Online & Print)
18(7): 29159-29374
ISSN 0974-7907 (Online)
ISSN 0974-7893 (Print)



Vachellia nilotica



P Krítika



ISSN 0974-7907 (Online); ISSN 0974-7893 (Print)

Publisher
Wildlife Information Liaison Development Society
www.wild.zooreach.org

Host
Zoo Outreach Organization
www.zooreach.org

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continued on the back inside cover

Cover: Parts of *Vachellia nilotica*, medium - watercolours. © P Kritika



Decline in winter visiting Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* (Falconiformes: Falconidae) at Rani, Assam 2011–2024

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The Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*, a raptor with three races known from the Indian subcontinent (Naoroji 2006). The races *interstinctus* and *tinnunculus* are winter visitors (September/October and March/April) throughout the lower hills and plains of the eastern Himalaya, including Garhwal, Assam, and associated northeastern states. It also visits southern India, Andaman Islands, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. The species hunts insects, rodents, amphibians, reptiles, and small birds, and inhabits the open grassland and farmlands (Naoroji 2006).

The species was recorded in the Rani block (26.12756° N, 91.59464° E), Kamrup District, Assam (Image 1). From July to November, the Rani landscape has paddy fields, and after harvest, it becomes a vast open land as a second crop is rarely cultivated (Image 2). The pesticide use is moderate, and the use of tractors over bullocks for ploughing is increasing. The fields are bordered by tall trees, bamboo clumps, beetle nut orchards, and single-storeyed houses. The Common Kestrel takes advantage of electrical poles in the field for perch and from there it pounces on the prey. It has been noted hovering over the harvested fields, for hunting mice, lizards, and insects. Common Kestrels were monitored during the winter season (November–February). The observations were recorded for 14 winter seasons from 2011–12

to 2024–25 (Table 1), on a 5-km road while slowly driving from Bongra–Rani and Jogipara–Rani. The data consisted of 15 transects per month, for 56 months ($n = 840$) (Archana et al 2024). The species encounter rate was calculated season-wise as: (number of sightings per season) / (transect length (5 km) x number of transects in the season ($n = 60$)). Out of 422 sightings, on 388 occasions the individuals were sighted singly, while on 34 occasions they were sighted as a pair. The encounter rate was plotted against the time period and showed a decline from 2020 onwards (Image 3). Post 2022–23, no individuals were observed in this area. The absence was confirmed as the same road was traversed almost every day throughout these years, and raptors were recorded opportunistically in Rani block. The raptors generally sighted in the areas are Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis*, Oriental Honey-buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus*, Eurasian Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*, Pied Harrier *Circus melanoleucos*, Black Kite *Milvus migrans*, and Black-shouldered Kite *Elanus caeruleus*.

During 2022–25, the Common Kestrel was observed in other parts of Kamrup District, as well as in Assam (pers. obs.). The eBird data of Assam show the presence of the species from 15 November to 15 February (2008–2022) with a mean relative abundance of 0.09 (Fink et al 2023). Yet, recent absence recorded from this Rani

Editor: H. Byju, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.

Date of publication: 26 July 2026 (online & print)

Citation: Ranade, S. (2026). Decline in winter visiting Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* (Falconiformes: Falconidae) at Rani, Assam 2011–2024. *Journal of Threatened Taxa* 18(7): 29357–29359. <https://doi.org/10.11609/jott.9764.18.7.29357-29359>

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Funding: None.

Competing interests: The author declares no competing interests.

Acknowledgements: The author is thankful to the Bombay Natural History Society for constant support.





Image 1. A Common Kestrel perched on an electric pole, Kamrup District, Assam in 2018. © Sachin Ranade.

Table 1. Sightings of Common Kestrel for 14 seasons (2011–2025).

	Year	Number of sightings
1	2011–12	38
2	2012–13	45
3	2013–14	48
4	2014–15	34
5	2015–16	37
6	2016–17	42
7	2017–18	38
8	2018–19	45
9	2019–20	40
10	2020–21	35
11	2021–22	20
12	2022–23	0
13	2023–24	0
14	2024–25	0
		422



Image 2. Habitat at Rani Block, Kamrup District, Assam, in 2020. © Sachin Ranade.

block evokes a question—whether the birds are pushed away by the urbanization pressure of the expanding Guwahati city or declining in numbers due to any other reason. The population of Common Kestrel is in decline (BirdLife International 2021). Many factors affecting various species of Kestrel populations are known, e.g., pesticides used in agriculture affecting the species (Bird & Bowmen 1987), food shortage affecting both Common Kestrel and Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni* (Davis 1975; Aparicio et al. 2022), predation of Common Kestrel by Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis* (Petty et al. 2003) and hatching asynchrony due to climate change affecting the American Kestrels *Falco sparverius* (Callery et al. 2022). As the species is a winter visitor in India, large-

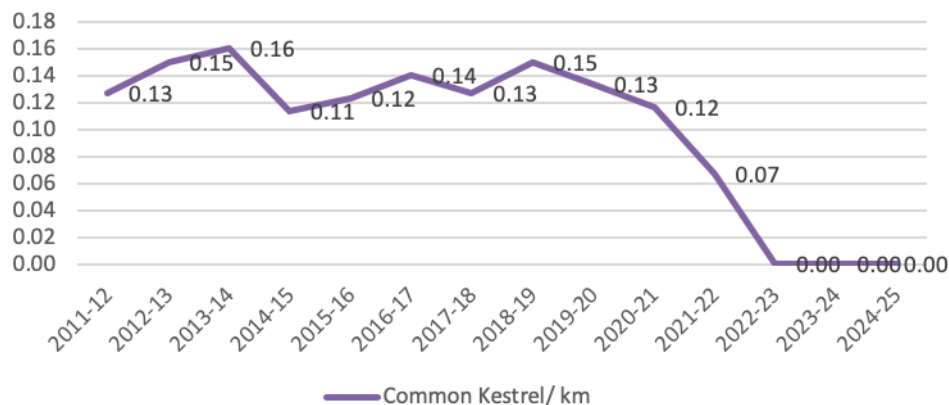


Image 3. Encounter rate of Common Kestrel during winter season, 2011–2024 at Rani, Assam.

scale counts using citizen science, telemetry studies, and intensive studies of feeding habits and habitat would throw some light on this issue.

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NAAS rating (India) 5.64



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ISSN 0974-7907 (Online) | ISSN 0974-7893 (Print)

July 2026 | Vol. 18 | No. 7 | Pages: 29159–29374

Date of Publication: 26 July 2026 (Online & Print)

DOI: 10.11609/jott.2026.18.7.29159-29374

Articles

The need for rigorous peer-review of Environmental Impact Assessments: a case from the Western Ghats, India

– Malaika Mathew Chawla, Sinead D'Silva, Madhushri Mudke, Anushka Rege, Nisha Bhakat, Nandini Velho, Vidyadhar Atkore, R. Sahanashree, Jerusha D'Souza, Aparna Kolekar, Anuja Date, Anish Paul, Aayush Gupta, Karthik Teegalapalli, Giridhar Kulkarni, Pronoy Baidya, Ajinkya Bagal, Katrina Fernandez, Omkar Dharwadkar & Parag Rangnekar, Pp. 29159–29180

Regional, ecological and biodiversity context of the Kashmir Valley, northwestern Himalaya, India

– Mohsin Javid, Khurshed Ahmad, Orus Ilyas, Junid N. Shah & Affiullah Khan, Pp. 29181–29195

Metabarcoding-based diet characterization of the Kolar Roundleaf Bat *Hipposideros hypophyllus* Kock & Bhat, 1994 (Chiroptera: Hipposideridae) and its peninsular Indian congeners

– Bhargavi Srinivasulu, Aditya Srinivasulu & Chelmala Srinivasulu, Pp. 29196–29211

A decadal study on the waterbirds and an analysis of the declining species in Perur-Sundakamuthur Lake, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

– G. Parameswaran, R. Sivashankar & R. Vridhi, Pp. 29212–29225

Diversity and habitat associations of avifauna in the Poovar Estuary, Kerala, India

– B.S. Bipitha, V. Reshmi, H. Maitreyi & H. Byju, Pp. 29226–29237

Abyssinian Blue-winged Goose *Cyanochen cyanoptera* Rüppell, 1845 population size, distribution, and habitat association in the central-south highlands of Ethiopia

– Solomon Mengistu & Afework Bekele, Pp. 29238–29250

Foraging postures and techniques used by the White-bellied Heron *Ardea insignis* Hume, 1878 (Aves: Pelecaniformes: Ardeidae) in Namdapha Tiger Reserve, India

– Himadri Sekhar Mondal & Gopinathan Maheswaran, Pp. 29251–29260

Breeding ecology and nest-site characteristics of the Black-necked Stork *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus* in Khijadiya Bird Sanctuary, a Ramsar Wetland of Gujarat, India

– Sandeep Munjpara, Divyrajsinh Jadeja, Nita Solanki, Amitkumar Nayak & B.P. Pati, Pp. 29261–29268

An updated checklist and new records of butterfly species in Kedarnath Musk Deer Sanctuary (western Himalaya), Uttarakhand, India

– Anand Kumar, Priyanshu Kumar, Gourav Lochan, Prachi Arya & Rajeev Lochan, Pp. 29269–29286

Abundance, habitat preference, and ethnobiological assessment of the invasive Golden Apple Snail *Pomacea canaliculata* (Lamarck, 1822) in selected rice fields in Lanao del Sur, Philippines

– Ashiah M. Dimalutang, Mohammad Al-Thanie U. Paudac, Jonald C. Bornaes, Rosabeth M. Macapil, Mayleen P. Malagamba & Naima R. Sirad, Pp. 29287–29301

An annotated checklist of bryophytes of Rajouri District, Jammu & Kashmir, India

– Manju Sharma, Nazia Kouser, P.L. Uniyal & Shreekar Pant, Pp. 29302–29313

Communications

First successful post-release breeding of captive-bred White-rumped Vultures *Gyps bengalensis* (Accipitriformes: Accipitridae) in the wild at Buxa Tiger Reserve, India

– Soumya Sundar Chakraborty, Debal Ray, Apurba Sen, P.J. Harikrishnan & Nabi Kanta Jha, Pp. 29314–29321

A checklist of the avifauna of the Noakhali Science and Technology University campus, Noakhali, Bangladesh

– Ashikur Rahman Jibon, Tanzina Alam & M. Rakibur Rahman, Pp. 29322–29330

Record of the crambid moth *Aethaloessa calidalis* (Guenée, 1854) (Lepidoptera: Crambidae: Spilomelinae) from Chhattisgarh, India

– Akanksha Chandrakar & Shashi Gupta, Pp. 29331–29335

Short Communications

First photographic record of the Northern Swamp Deer *Rucervus duvaucelii* *duvaucelii* in Upper Ganga River Ramsar Site, India

– Aftab Alam Usmani, Pichaimuthu Gangaamaran, Ruchi Badola & Syed Ainul Hussain, Pp. 29336–29339

First image-based evidence of Wroughton's Free-tailed Bat *Otomops wroughtoni* (Thomas, 1913) (Chiroptera: Molossidae) from the Yamuna Floodplain, New Delhi, India

– Umendra Sirohi, Mohan Singh, M. Faisal, Ekta Khurana, Sumit Dookia & Faiyaz A. Khudsar, Pp. 29340–29344

New distribution record of *Hydrocotyle bonariensis* Lam. (Magnoliopsida: Apiales: Araliaceae) from India

– Balasiewdor Kharsyntiew, H.T. Lalmuankima, Vijay, Poonam Sharma & Rambir Singh, Pp. 29345–29349

Recorded and lost: *Methles indicus* Régimbart, 1899 (Coleoptera: Dytiscidae) a new distribution record from the state of Telangana: a case study on habitat loss due to urban encroachment

– Shiva Shankar, Deepa Jaiswal & Devadoss Kumar, Pp. 29350–29353

Notes

Camera-trap record of the Indian Grey Wolf *Canis lupus pallipes* (Sykes, 1831) (Mammalia: Carnivora: Canidae) from Karlapat Wildlife Sanctuary, Odisha, India

– Siddhanta Kumar Mohanta & R. Kalaivanan, Pp. 29354–29356

Decline in winter visiting Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* (Falconiformes: Falconidae) at Rani, Assam 2011–2024

– Sachin Ranade, Pp. 29357–29359

Coprophagy in Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* (Accipitriformes: Accipitridae) at Jorbeer carcass dump, Rajasthan

– Sachin Ranade & Hemant Bajpai, Pp. 29360–29363

New record of cob-web spider species *Steatoda albomaculata* (De Geer, 1778) (Araneae: Theridiidae) from Kachchh, India with detailed distribution of Indian species of *Steatoda* Sundevall, 1833

– Subhash I. Parmar, Vivek U. Chauhan, Ketankumar Yogi & Pranav J. Pandya, Pp. 29364–29366

Predation record of the hornet *Vespa basalis* Smith, 1852 (Hymenoptera: Vespidae) by the orb-weaver spider *Nephila pilipes* (Fabricius, 1793) (Araneae: Araneidae)

– Shantam Ojha & Gautam, Pp. 29367–29369

Notes on the occurrence of southeastern Asian taxon *Scopellaria marginata* (Blume) W.J.de Wilde & Duyfjes (Cucurbitaceae) in the Nicobar Islands: a new distribution record in the Indian part of Sundaland

– K. Pradheep, K. Joseph John, I. Jaisankar & P.K. Singh, Pp. 29370–29374

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