

Notes on nest and breeding of Afghan Snowfinch *Pyrgilauda theresae*, Bamiyan province, Afghanistan

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Afghan Snowfinch *Pyrgilauda* (formerly *Montifringilla*) *theresae* is an endemic breeding species to Afghanistan, with specimens collected in winter in Turkmenistan and unsubstantiated records from Tajikistan (Tolstoy & Geypel 1990). The Afghan Snowfinch was first discovered for science in 1937 by R Meinertzhagen who collected specimens at the Shaibar Kotal and at Bamiyan (both Bamiyan province, Afghanistan). Niethammer (1967) observed this species breeding at 'about 3000 m' at Dasht-i-Nawar in the Koh-e-Baba range, Hindu Kush, in June 1965 and presented information on its breeding biology. This included the description of a nest c1 m under the ground at the end of a Souslik's *Citellus fulvus* burrow. It was constructed of animal hairs and feathers and contained five young, which were fed by both parents. The present note gives further information on the breeding of this species.

During ornithological fieldwork in 2008 in Bamiyan province, central Afghanistan, for the Wildlife Conservation Society, we found two nests of Afghan Snowfinch. Both were at Band-i-Amir, a proposed protected area in a westward extension of the Hindu Kush mountain range, 55 km west of Bamiyan town and 185 km north-northwest of Kabul.



Plate 1. Entrance of Pika burrow containing Afghan Snowfinch *Pyrgilauda theresae* nest, Band-i-Amir, Afghanistan. © Chris Shank



Plate 2. Chris Shank pointing at entrance of Pika burrow (Plate 1) containing Afghan Snowfinch *Pyrgilauda theresae* nest, Band-i-Amir, Afghanistan. © Simon Busuttill

The first nest (Plates 1 & 2) was found at 11.30 h a.m. on 29 May at 34° 51.288' N, 67° 12.852' E, 3031 m asl (Garmin GPS 60, non-barometric). Our attention was brought to the site when an adult bird carrying food (unidentified invertebrates) paused adjacent to and then entered a hole in the ground. The hole was almost certainly that of an Afghan Pika *Ochotona rufescens* and was on an uncultivated gently sloping (c20%, estimated) south-facing slope between a fallow rain-fed wheat or barley field (known locally as 'lalmi') and a dirt road.

The second nest was observed on 11 June close to 34.82153° N, 67.18652° E at c2900 m asl, c300 m north of the Band-i-Amir ranger station in a relatively flat uncultivated area of steppe. The nest was in an old burrow, again almost certainly that of an Afghan Pika. The entrance of the pika burrow lay in a small hollow (c50 cm diameter, c15 cm deep). RA reached c25 cm into the pika burrow but did not reach the nest, positioned beyond. Both parents were in the vicinity, giving alarm calls and the male at least was carrying food, indicating that the young had already hatched.

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