NEWSLETTER

FOR ORNITHOLOGISTS

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Bird conservation organisations

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SALIM ALI CENTRE FOR ORNITHOLOGY AND NATURAL HISTORY: Director, Anaikatty P.O., Coimbatore 641108, India. Website: www.saconindia.org. Email: salimali@vsnl.com

BIRDWATCHERS' SOCIETY OF ANDHRA PRADESH: Honorary Secretary, P.O. Box 45, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500034, India. Website: www.bsaponline.org. Email: aasheesh@vsnl.in. **Publish:** *Mayura*; *Pitta.*

MADRAS NATURALISTS' SOCIETY: Honorary Secretary, No. 8, Janaki Avenue, Abhirampuram, Chennai 600018, India. Website: www.blackbuck.org. Email: info@blackbuck.org. **Publish:** *Blackbuck.*

INSTITUTE OF BIRD STUDIES & NATURAL HISTORY: Director, Rishi Valley, Chittoor District, India 517352. Email: birds@rishivalley.org. **Conduct:** Home Study Course in Ornithology.

ORIENTAL BIRD CLUB: P.O. Box 324, Bedford, MK42 0WG, U.K. Website: www.orientalbirdclub.org. **Publish:** *Forktail*; *OBC Bulletin.*

WILDLIFE INSTITUTE OF INDIA: Post Bag # 18, Chandrabani, Dehradun 248001, India. Website: www.wii.gov.in.

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Internet Resources

India Birds: http://www.indiabirds.com/

Birds of Kerala: http://birdskerala.com/

BirdLife International: http://www.birdlife.net/

Indian Jungles: http://www.indianjungles.com/

Birds of Kolkata: http://www.kolkatabirds.com/

Sanctuary Asia: http://www.sanctuaryasia.com/

Red Data Book: http://www.rdb.or.id/index.html/

The Northern India Bird Network: http://www.delhibird.com/

Zoological Nomenclature Resource: http://www.zoonomen.net/

N.C.L. Centre for Biodiversity Informatics: http://www.ncbi.org.in/biota/fauna/

John Penhallurick's Bird Data Project: http://worldbirdinfo.net/

Saving Asia's threatened birds: http://www.birdlife.net/action/science/species/asia_strategy/pdfs.html/

Optics: http://www.betterviewdesired.com/

Library

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CONTENTS

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Newsletter for Ornithologists

Publishes notes and observations on birds of the Indian region. We welcome articles, papers, annotated checklists, trip reports, notes on the behaviour and biology of one or more species, book reviews, audio-recording reviews, letters, announcements, notices, news from the birding world, etc. Also welcome is material for the cover (art, transparencies, photographs) and line drawings for the text pages. Papers should be typewritten with double spacing, clearly handwritten, or form part of an email. Please send all material to the Editor at the address given below. Whilst every care is taken, *Newsletter for Ornithologists* cannot be held responsible for accidental loss or damage of any material sent for publication or for their return whether they are accepted for publication or not. Material published in *Newsletter for Ornithologists* reflects the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the publishers.

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Editorial

Personal and national IBAs

For almost two decades I have been visiting Shamirpet, a small wetland near Hyderabad. To many it may seem the same as thousands of similar wetlands across agrarian, peninsular India: a man-made bund thrown across a depression in the land, to collect rainwater, with agriculture on the margins and below the artificial obstruction. Shamirpet's gently undulating countryside is strewn with extraordinary rock formations: weather-worn granite, in myriad shapes and sizes, piled haphazardly on top of each other, seemingly defying gravity. Low-lying areas, easily inundated through channels, are cultivated. Buffalos graze the uncultivated 'waste' areas, large swathes of which are flooded during overenthusiastic monsoons, spawning spontaneous ephemeral plant and animal life. Ignoring human perception of land-use or disuse, nature populates every available niche. I have spent several hours here, watching birds, soaking in the sense of the place.

It was here that I saw a Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* perched bolt upright on a rock in the middle of the water, its chest glistening white in the morning sun, eyeing the waterfowl as they swam all around. Once, a tentative Indian Courser *Cursorius coromandelicus* stepped gingerly across some fallow fields on the opposite shore, giving delightful views through the scope. Scores of Cliff Swallows *Hirundo fluvicola* dot the sky in frenzied pursuit of nutritious specks, or perched in the fashion of musical notes on telegraph wires, scattering at the least provocation. Graceful Small Pratincoles *Glareola lactea* perch on a large bare rock island in the water, flying hither and thither, flashing their milky-white belly as they twist and turn in mid-flight. On a chilly winter morning, the stillness of the water echoes the fluty whistle of a Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* or reflects a Eurasian Wigeon's *Anas penelope* cry. On land, the handsome Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius* stands silhouetted on boulders. As the sun rises higher in the firmament, lark-song permeates the air. At least six species use the 'wasteland' surrounding the waters. Red-winged Bush-Lark *Mirafra erythroptera* and Jerdon's Bush-Lark *M. affinis* shoot up into the sky and pour forth their melodies from whirred, hovering wings, parachuting down to a rock or into the grass stubble. Dapper Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark *Eremopterix grisea* males court diminutive females with impressive roller coaster flights and drawn out, haunting whistles. Rufous-tailed Finch-Lark *Ammomanes phoenicurus* rise like sods of earth into the sky, uttering their characteristic calls, flying from one place to another. The song of the Eastern Skylark *Alauda gulgula* washes down onto those who have the ears for it, in cascades of 'un-premeditated' melody. The rufous coloured peninsular endemic, Sykes's Crested Lark *Galerida deva,* moves around in exaltations of three or more, uttering its tremulous "*trew-trew*" call in flight, appearing suddenly from nowhere, alighting nearby and instantly engrossed in its search for food as though it was always there. What a wonderfully captivating place! For me it is my own important bird area. I am sure that each one of you has such a place that you visit repeatedly for what it contains, what it gives you and what you are able to bring back to enrich your daily lives. Shamirpet has of course fallen on bad times. Development and tourism have caught up with it and construction activity is rampant. Rock formations are disappearing under the hammer and chisel and the water is inexorably drying up, victim of failed monsoons and perhaps, base human greed for land. This situation is present throughout the country.

The rapid and rash destruction of viable bird habitats across the earth prompted BirdLife International to formulate various criteria, based on rarity of taxa, significant populations of species, etc., to identify and document what are called "Important Bird Areas" (IBA). IBAs highlight critical areas to the people and governments of countries and recommend that they be conserved for posterity. The Bombay Natural History Society has successfully compiled a list of IBAs for India and published a veritable tome containing this information (see review elsewhere in this issue). The cause of bird conservation would be furthered if relevant sections of this work were translated into regional languages, for wider dissemination at grass-roots level, among people and administrators.

At the end of our first year of publication we would like to place on record our gratitude to those who have helped us make the *Newsletter for Ornithologists* what it is. Sachin Jaltare for the magnificent cover of the inaugural issue and along with Anwar Hussain for layout; Clement Francis, Atanu Mondal, Harkirat S. Sangha, Rishad Naoroji, Niranjan R. Sant, Nikhil Devasar and Jawed Ashraf for use of their excellent photographs; ITC Limited's Paperboards and Speciality Papers Division for generously donating paper to cover six issues; Oxford University Press, Secon Surveys Pvt Ltd., Pitti Laminations Ltd. and G. B. K. Charitable Trust for taking advertisement space; Bombay Natural History Society and other donors for financial support; P. Rambabu for handling subscriptions, printing and posting; all our readers for their spontaneous and enthusiastic support and encouragement. Wishing all of you a wonderful 2005! ***Aasheesh Pittie***

Birds, forests and conservation: Critical issues in Sariska Tiger Reserve, Rajasthan, India.

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While it is a common generalization that degradation of forests causes a general decline in bird life, little is known about the nature of this decline. We are still ignorant about the magnitude of this decline, the species that are particularly prone to local extinction or those that are relatively adaptable, the specific changes in forest vegetation that trigger these declines or even the size or intensity of disturbance that can affect different bird species. This is especially true for tropical countries where dependence of rural people on forests is very high and the number of bird species requiring study, phenomenal.

For the past year or so, we have been studying the exact contours of changes in bird communities triggered by intensive biomass extraction, in the form of grazing and fuelwood collection, in Sariska, a Tiger Reserve in Rajasthan, India. In this effort, Wildlife Conservation Society-India Program, Council for Social Development (Delhi), Wildlife Protection Society of India (Delhi), Rajasthan Forest Department and the Oriental Bird Club (U.K.) have generously supported us.

Sariska is one of the prime candidates for biodiversity conservation in north-western India, being one of the best-known protected areas in the semi-arid biome. Located in the Aravalli Hills of Rajasthan, Sariska represents the few remnants of tropical dry deciduous and scrub forest that still exist in this part of India. It harbours a rich diversity of flora and fauna including large and small mammals, notably the Caracal *Caracal caracal*, Fishing Cat *Prionailurus viverrinus*, and Tiger *Panthera tigris* and high densities of herbivores such as Common Langur *Semnopithecus entellus*, Sambar *Cervus unicolor*, and Bluebull (Nilgai) *Boselaphus tragocamelus.*

Available information (Sankar, et al. 1993) indicates that Sariska is extremely rich in avifauna and has been identified as one of the Important Bird Areas (IBA) in the state of Rajasthan by BirdLife International and Bombay Natural History Society (Islam and Rahmani 2004). Sariska supports avifauna typical of tropical dry deciduous forests, including a large number of resident Galliformes such as Painted Spurfowl *Galloperdix lunulata*, Common Buttonquail *Turnix suscitator*, Indian Peafowl *Pavo cristatus* and Grey Francolin *Francolinus pondicerianus* and, raptors such as the Crested Serpent-Eagle *Spilornis cheela*, White-eyed Buzzard *Butastur teesa* and the Brown Fish-Owl *Ketupa zeylonensis*, all of which are resident in the area. Rare wetland species such as the Black Stork *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus*, Bar-headed Goose *Anser indicus* and the Great White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus* have also been recorded from the waterbodies within Sariska during years of good rainfall. The globally threatened species reported from Sariska include the critically endangered White-backed Vulture *Gyps bengalensis* and Long-billed Vulture *Gyps indicus* (BirdLife International 2001).

The survival of Sariska Tiger Reserve as an area for biodiversity conservation is today threatened by an array of anthropogenic factors. Eleven small villages are located inside the core zone of the Reserve, all of whose inhabitants depend on its forests for their biomass needs, including fodder, fuelwood and medicinal plants. Livestock grazing for commercial production of milk, the only source of income available to local people is the most extensive pressure on Sariska's forests. Significant pressure for fuelwood has been noticed from outside the Reserve as well, as this is one of the few forested areas that remains intact in the north-eastern section of the Aravalli Hills. Another serious long-term threat to the ecological integrity of the area is mining. Quarrying for marble and stone may cause changes in the ground-water regime of the entire region, which in turn, is likely to affect flora and fauna inside Sariska. The pressure on the state government to open up more areas for mining has recently increased with rise in commercial demand for talc, marble and other minerals that occur in this area. Increasing traffic and tourism in Sariska also causes a great deal of disturbance and pollution in some of the best areas available for native fauna. In response to drought in past years, the forest department has initiated a number of management measures inside Sariska to increase the duration of water availability during the year, such as construction of a large number of check-dams and ponds. However, the effects of these water storage structures on the dynamics of a naturally drought-prone ecosystem, are yet largely unknown and have been questioned by ecologists.

It was in the context of the rich bird life of this protected area and the looming threats from human use that it faces, that we decided to evaluate the ecological impacts of forest use inside Sariska Tiger Reserve. Our approach was to compare occurrence of various bird species between areas facing high and those facing relatively low biomass extraction pressure. We also wanted to assess the changes in the forest vegetation, caused by such extraction, which could possibly account for the observed impacts of forest use on birds.

During March through May of 2003 and from October 2003 through February 2004, we carried out systematic and repeated bird observations in 90 carefully chosen sites scattered all over the core zone of the Reserve. These were located in the three most common forest types inside Sariska: scrub forests, slope forest and mixed riparian (streamside) forest. The sites were selected on the basis of widely accepted indicators of disturbance such as the incidence and scale of tree lopping and actual observations of human use such as livestock-grazing and fodder-collection. Bird species were observed and recorded along with observations of foraging by birds such as the plant parts being fed on and height of foraging above the ground. In addition, detailed notes were made on vegetation, separately on trees, shrubs, grasses and ground vegetation including all the features that are likely to affect bird habitat use.

Our results indicate that intensive human use is significantly changing bird species composition of this tropical dry ecosystem as was seen by the significant difference between bird communities of intensively used and relatively undisturbed areas inside the Tiger Reserve. Some bird species that appear vulnerable to local extinction in the face of continuing habitat degradation include

the White-bellied Drongo *Dicrurus caerulescens*, Red-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer*, Oriental Magpie-Robin *Copsychus saularis*, Hume's Warbler *Phylloscopus humei*, Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker *Dendrocopos nanus*, White-browed Fantail-Flycatcher *Rhipidura aureola*, Red-throated Flycatcher *Ficedula parva*, Grey-headed Flycatcher *Culicicapa ceylonensis*, Oriental White-eye *Zosterops palpebrosus*, Indian Treepie *Dendrocitta vagabunda* and Great Tit *Parus major*. Some of these species are frequently seen in scrublands and gardens of densely populated metros like Delhi. Thus the decline of such species in intensively used areas of the Reserve point to the extreme levels of degradation. Omnivorous and commensal species such as Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*, House Crow *Corvus splendens* and House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* were found to increase in density in intensively used sites in comparison to relatively disturbed areas. Species preferring open forest such as the Eurasian Collared-Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*, Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus*, Brahminy Starling *Sturnus pagodarum*, Indian Robin *Saxicoloides fulicata* and Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros* were also found to be encouraged by forest degradation.

Interestingly, nectarivorous and insectivorous birds appear to be adversely affected by habitat degradation, a trend that remains to be confirmed by more detailed observations throughout the year. Changes in bird species composition were related to changes in canopy cover, height of trees and density of understorey (shrubs, saplings and grass), changes that were evidently brought about by intensive human use. Structurally, vegetation also changed drastically in response to human use. Specifically, there is significant reduction in canopy cover, density of trees, density of shrubs and saplings and average height of trees in intensively used forests in comparison to relatively undisturbed areas. In scrub forest, the number of tree species is much lower in used forests than in undisturbed areas.

During our year-long study, we observed important bird-plant interactions that probably form the basis for the long-term sustenance of this ecosystem. The flowers of kair *Capparis decidua* and palash *Butea monosperma* were food for a large variety of bird species during the harsh summer, including Indian Peafowl, Brahminy Starling and Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri*. Fruits of rohini *Mallotus phillippensis*, growing along streams were consumed by Indian Treepies and Red-vented Bulbuls. The flowering of date palms *Phoenix sylvestris* in March triggered a hive of activity of nectar-feeders such as Oriental White-eyes and Red-vented Bulbuls. In the monsoon, pods of hingot *Balanites aegyptiaca* and jaal *Capparis sepiaria* appeared to be other important food sources. In late monsoon and winter, flowers and fruits of ber *Zizyphus mauritiana* sustain many bird species such as Yellow-legged Green-Pigeons *Treron phoenicopterus*. Since many of these shrub species are dominants, the local disappearance of even one could cause cascading damage to the bird community. Many of these trees and shrubs are also evergreen and are therefore utilized by local villagers as cut fodder during summer, affecting their fruiting activity and possibly impeding their regeneration in intensively extracted areas.

During the study we discovered the critical importance of the habitat mosaic of scrub, slope and riparian forest for sustaining bird communities in Sariska, a naturally species-poor (in flora) and seasonally dry ecosystem. The common tree species in the riparian forests include date palm, arjun *Terminalia arjuna*, bahera *Terminalia bellerica*, pilkhan *Ficus infectoria*, gular *Ficus glomerata*, and bamboos *Dendrocalamus* sp. The study particularly indicates the importance of protecting the tall and dense riparian forest habitat, which is vital as a source of shade, water and food for mammals and birds during the harsh dry season. Riparian forests also harbour several habitat-restricted bird species such as the Brown Fish-Owl, Crested Serpent-Eagle, and Tickell's Blue-Flycatcher *Cyornis tickelliae* and migratory species such as Verditer Flycatcher *Eumyias thalassina* and Grey-headed Flycatcher, that cannot survive in other, more open habitats. Riparian forests are particularly threatened in Sariska due to their naturally small extent and because they attract villagers and livestock due to the presence of perennial springs and green fodder. Lately, pollution from tourism, such as washing and cooking, around perennial water sources such as Pandupol has emerged as an important threat. Observations indicate that riparian forest patches as seen in Sariska, are geographically scarce in the Aravallis. A trip to the hilly Nahargarh Sanctuary in the same eco-zone and close to Sariska revealed that the catchment area of the only perennial water source in the area had been completely denuded and was bereft of the diverse flora typically found in such spots inside Sariska. The importance of reviving and maintaining the extremely diverse vegetation along the springs and rivers in Sariska, as a critical element of landscape-level diversity, needs to be emphasized in future conservation planning for this region.

We also built up a detailed profile of the highly diverse bird community of this region, including the population status, seasonal movements and habitat preferences of bird species, including some that are highly endangered in India. We listed a total of 193 species including 121 residents, 64 winter migrants, 3 summer migrants and 5 passage migrants. This list adds 41 species to the checklist compiled by Kartik Sankar, et al (1993). Most of these additional species are migrants and some are naturally rare species such as the Eurasian Wryneck *Jynx torquilla*, Finn's Weaver *Ploceus megarhynchus*, Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina* and the Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*. Sariska has substantial populations of two species of vultures, the Red-headed Vulture *Sarcogyps calvus* and Long-billed Vulture and a small population of Indian White-backed Vultures. This is significant in view of the recent large-scale declines in vulture populations elsewhere in northern India. The Indian Peafowl, increasingly threatened in Indian forests, is also abundant here. Trips to the Tiger Reserve always bring forth surprises such as a large noisy group of Rusty-tailed Flycatchers *Muscicapa ruficauda* and a Tickell's Thrush *Turdus unicolor* close to a waterhole in winter, or a breeding pair of Brown Fish-Owls in the secluded Bandipul Valley or large flocks of Common Rosefinches *Carpodacus erythrinus* that pass through Sariska during their annual migration from the Himalayas to Indian plains. We discovered, first hand, what a small patch of native forest could do to protect biodiversity at the regional scale and this further justifies the addition of Sariska to the national Important Bird Areas (IBA) list.

In another component of our study we attempted to devise quick-and-easy ways to monitor changes in habitat conditions using birds as indicators. This we did by comparing the efficiency of different techniques in recording bird diversity. We found that species lists obtained using line transects were similar to those obtained by point counts, though line transects consistently yielded greater numbers of individuals per unit time. We also studied the

distinctiveness of bird communities of different forest habitats in Sariska. We found that it would be necessary to cover different vegetation zones in any bird-monitoring programme as these zones were quite distinct in their bird compositions. Certain species were identified as possible indicators of habitat change, using simple presence-absence data, such as Hume's Warbler, Oriental White-eye, Indian Robin and Great Tit. Various species were found to respond to specific changes in vegetation structure such as reduction in canopy cover, height of trees, and density of understorey vegetation. An important finding of our study is the tremendous change in bird species composition even from week to week, making it difficult to comprehensively cover entire bird communities through brief snapshot surveys, a feature that may be common to many other forests of northern India.

Our study has also brought to light the physical extent and scale of habitat degradation over large parts of Sariska Tiger Reserve. We have estimated that forests in as much as one-third of the proposed National Park area (Core Zone I of the Reserve) may be highly degraded. Observations on vegetation reveal that there may be severe limitations in regeneration of tree and shrub species almost everywhere in Sariska. In addition, signs of lopping of trees and overgrazing were seen in most places apart from a few well-protected valleys.

We hope that our study will help to inform the ongoing debate in India on the ecological impacts of biomass extraction and provide justification for appropriate management steps that can be taken to save this area from further degradation. There is an acute need for providing alternatives to various biomass and livelihood needs of the villagers residing inside the Reserve, who are mainly dependent on livestock rearing for their income. Interviews indicate that many of the local people are willing to relocate outside the Reserve, but only on the basis of an equitable rehabilitation plan that is prepared and executed jointly with them. Tourism activities also have to be controlled and managed better if continuing habitat degradation is to be stalled in this prime biodiversity conservation area of the Aravallis.

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(*Copies of the technical reports for the project described here are available with Dr Ghazala Shahabuddin at ghazalafarzin@yahoo.com*).

Additional site records of Green Avadavat *Amandava formosa* (Latham, 1790) from Mount Abu, Rajasthan, India.

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Mount Abu (24°36'N and 72°45'E; 1,219 a.s.l.) is situated at the south-western limits of the Aravalli Hills in Sirohi district (Rajasthan, India). Though 328km^2 of Mount Abu are declared protected, officially only 112.98km^2 are notified as the Sanctuary area (R.F.S. 2003). This hill station comprises of chains of hills with altitudes ranging from 300m to 1,700m. Its unique habitat, in a state where the desert predominates, has attracted many ornithologists over the years: Butler (1875-1877), Devarshi and Trigunayat (1989) and Prakash and Singh (1995). Sharma (2002) prepared a complete list of fauna, including birds, for this Sanctuary. Butler (1875-1877), Prakash and Singh (1995) and Sharma (2002) listed the Green Avadavat *Amandava formosa* as a common resident of Mount Abu. They identified Oriya village as the main site for this species. Tiwari and Varu (1999) and Lodhiya (1999) added two more sites, namely Adhardevi Temple Forest and Delwara Temple area. At every instance, either a pair or flocks of up to four individuals were seen.

During our survey (15 February-15 June 2004) we located this species at two new locations: Palanpur Point and Achalgarh. Achalgarh had more than 50 individuals of this species. Palanpur Point had only two. Beside these, we saw six individuals on agricultural land near Pandu Caves and four individuals behind Teachers Training Centre. Both of these sites are close to Delwara or Kanyakumari Temple from where the species was earlier reported.

Sightings of Green Avadavat on Mount Abu

Important areas in Mount Abu where confirmed sighting of this species is possible, include:

Palanpur Point: It is located 3km from the bus stand of Mount Abu, on a small hill. The terrain is an undulating plateau, with open areas of sparse vegetation including bushes of *Lantana camara*. Two birds were seen here on the evening of 11 June 2004. The two, probably male and female, were feeding on the ground. As we approached they flew towards the *Lantana* and not were not seen afterwards.

Behind Teachers Training Centre: This area is near the Kanyakumari Temple, south of the Delwara Temples. The rear portion of the center is full of *Lantana* along with the semi-evergreen trees of Mango *Mangifera indica*. Around 11:00 hours we sighted one male on a branch of a mango tree. Due to some disturbance it flew towards the *Lantana* bushes, accompanied by three other birds, where all disappeared.

Pandu Caves: These lie behind the Kanyakumari Temple. In front of these caves there are small holdings of agricultural fields, that have a small seasonal *nallah* in the south, tall grasses interspersed with bushes in the north, semi-evergreen trees with ascending hills on the west and open land with pathway on the east. On 12.vi.2004 at 08:30hrs we saw 5 pairs of small birds flying in to the grasses in the *nallah*. In flight, the barring on their sides and black tips of their tails were clearly visible. We returned to the same spot

in the evening at 16:30hrs. We observed three pairs of Green Avadavats feeding on the spikes of tall grasses inside the *nallah* for 10min. Their red beaks and zebra-striped flanks looked beautiful. On our approach, they hid inside the tall grasses for a short time then flew towards the big trees on the eastern side of fields.

Achalgarh: It is about 11km from Mount Abu city and is famous for its Shiva Temple. The open area in front of the temple has some abandoned construction. Lantana bushes and grass cover the rest of the unobstructed ground. At 06:45 hrs we sighted a flock of more than 12 Green Avadavats, flying towards the *Lantana*. At 07:30 hrs, to our amazement we sighted a large flock of 50 Green Avadavats feeding on the ground. On our approach the feeding group broke up in to several smaller flocks, ranging from a pair to more than 10 individuals. We observed their activity till 09:15 hrs by which time the birds gradually and in varied sized flocks, flew towards the patches of semi-evergreen trees around Achalgarh.

The importance of this bird lies in the fact that it is listed as *Vulnerable* in the C1 and C2a categories (C1 = continuing decline in population, C2a = severe fragmentation) (Collar, et. al. 1994). According to Ali and Ripley (1968–1998), the Green Avadavat is very locally and unevenly distributed.

Threats and conservation issues in Mount Abu

Trade is considered a major threat to Green Avadavat (Ahmed 1997, 1998). Owing to its relative fearlessness it can be trapped very easily (Ahmed 1997), and as a result of continued trapping, its populations appear to have been wiped out in certain areas (Bhargava 1996). The second major threat is habitat loss, but due to utilization of broad range of regenerating and open habitats, the species is not thought to suffer from this threat (BirdLife International 2001).

In Mount Abu, habitat loss is the predominant threat to the Green Avadavat. Although construction activities are banned in the sanctuary area, illegal clearing of land takes place. Being a tourist spot, development of hotels and other temporary activities like camping or parking of vehicles near or on the feeding areas of this species, threatens the species. Beside this, unconfirmed reports exist, of killing the bird for traditional medicinal purposes by tribal and local residents of the foothills. The birds are apparently located and stoned to death.

To our astonishment we found that local people are unaware of the rarity of the Green Avadavat. They consider it a common resident of the area and so its status is unimportant to them.

Acknowledgements

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Puttanahalli Tank, Bangalore (India), and surrounds

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Puttanhalli Tank is a shallow waterbody located on the Bangalore-Hyderabad road, about 16km due north of Bangalore. The site, maintained as part of a nursery by the Karnataka State Forest Department (KSFD), is a veritable bird paradise, the like of which has not been recorded during nearly 200-year ornithological history of Bangalore [as defined by George (1994)]. The tank is basically a shallow basin with an area of 11.89ha. At present, the northern and southern boundaries of the tank have been walled-up by existing residential areas. On its eastern side, the Bangalore-Hyderabad road passes over what was once the main bund of the tank.

Over the last four years, more than 126 bird species belonging to 50 bird families have been recorded at the site (see Annexure), indicating that the site supports over 30 per cent of the bird species recorded in Bangalore (George 1994). Also, this site is an important nesting and roosting site for a large number of waterbirds in Bangalore area (see Annexure). Ten large waterbirds nest on the trees growing on the two islands created by the KSFD. The nesting of Darter *Anhinga melanogaster* and Painted Storks *Mycteria leucocephala* at the site are the first ever records for Bangalore. Several thousand birds including egrets (Ardeidae), herons

(Ardeidae), cormorants (Phalacrocoracidae), ibises (Threskiornithidae) and storks (Ciconiidae) regularly roost on the trees growing on the islands, right through the year. The waterbirds that gather to roost at the site have been observed to fly in from over 10km.

Over the last decade, the KSFD has established a nursery on a narrow strip of land on the northern bank of Puttanahalli Tank. During this period, two islands were created in the Tank and planted over with trees. The main island, which is closer to the road (eastern boundary), has a number of trees including *Acacia auriculiformis, Acacia nilotica, Albizia* sp., *Anthocephalus chinensis* (Kadamba), *Lagerstroemia flos-reginae, Muntingia calabura, Pithecellobium dulce, Santalum album* and clumps of Bamboo *Dendrocalamus strictus*. This island is surrounded by waist-deep water. The second island, located behind the main one, is densely vegetated with bamboo, *A. auriculiformis, Muntingia calabura Pongamia glabra, Phoenix sylvestris, S. album* and overgrown with *Bougainvillea* sp., and *Lantana camara*. Reedbeds of *Typha* grow in several patches within the tank area. The open area along the water's edge and above the waterline is overgrown with Alligator Weed *Alternanthera philoxeroides*, which supports a mixed colony of nearly 200 Common Coots *Fulica atra* and Purple Moorhens *Porphyrio porphyrio*, both of which actively breed on the dense bed of this emergent weed.

The nursery area, which is a narrow strip of about 15m land located along the northern margin of the tank, is used for growing tree saplings by the KSFD. The nursery has several types of trees like, *Acacia, Anthocephalus, Eucalyptus and Muntingia and Teactona grandis.*

As the tank area is being used by the KSFD, it is not accessible to public and as a consequence, the site is totally protected at present. The extent of protection enjoyed by the birds is evident in the shortness of flushing distances recorded for most of the waterbirds found at the site. During evenings when the nursery area is free of human movements, birds like Purple Moorhens have been observed to wander all over the grounds.

Given the diversity of species at Puttanhalli and its attractions for the nesting and roosting of a large number of waterbirds like herons, egrets, cormorants and storks, the site holds a great potential of being developed as a "Bird Refuge". There is an urgent need to preserve the area without altering its ecological structure and value. If properly developed and maintained, Puttanahalli can become an important site for education and research.

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Appendix

Checklist of the birds recorded at Puttanahalli Tank*:

Species observed breeding at Puttanahalli: Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis,* Little Cormorant *Phalacrocorax niger,* Indian Shag *Phalacrocorax fuscicollis* (?), Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo,* Darter *Anhinga melanogaster,* Little Egret *Egretta garzetta,* Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea,* Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea,* Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis,* Indian Pond-Heron *Ardeola grayii,* Black-crowned Night-Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax,* Painted Stork *Mycteria leucocephala,* Lesser Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna javanica,* White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus,* Purple Moorhen *Porphyrio porphyrio,* Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus,* Common Coot *Fulica atra* , Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus,* Red-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer,* Streaked Fantail-Warbler *Cisticola juncidis,* Ashy Prinia *Prinia socialis,* Red Munia *Amandava amandava,* Spotted Munia *Lonchura punctulata.*

Residents:** Spot-billed Pelican *Pelecanus philipensis*, Large Egret *Casmerodius albus,* Median Egret *Mesophoyx intermedia*, Chestnut Bittern *Ixobrychus cinnamomeus*, Asian Openbill-Stork *Anastomus oscitans*, Oriental White Ibis *Threskiornis melanocephalus,* Black Ibis *Pseudibis papillosa*, Spot-billed Duck *Anas poecilorhyncha,* Black-shouldered Kite *Elanus caeruleus*, Black Kite *Milvus migrans,* Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus*, Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus,* Shikra *Accipiter badius*, Red-headed Falcon *Falco chicquera,* Blue-breasted Rail *Gallirallus striatus,* Bronze-winged Jacana *Metopidius indicus*, Greater Painted-Snipe *Rostratula benghalensis*, River Tern *Sterna aurantia,* Blue Rock Pigeon *Columba livia,* Spotted Dove *Streptopelia chinensis,* Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri*, Brainfever Bird *Hierococcyx varius,* Asian Koel *Eudynamys scolopacea*, Greater Coucal *Centropus sinensis,* Spotted Owlet *Athene brama,* Asian Palm-Swift *Cypsiurus balasiensis,* House Swift *Apus affinis*, Small Blue Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis,* White-breasted Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis,* Lesser Pied Kingfisher *Ceryle rudis*, Small Bee-eater *Merops orientalis,* Indian Roller *Coracias benghalensis,* Common Hoopoe *Upupa epops,* White-cheeked Barbet *Megalaima viridis,* Coppersmith Barbet *Megalaima haemacephala,* Black-shouldered Woodpecker *Chrysocolaptes festivus,* Singing Bush-Lark *Mirafra cantillans,* Skylark *Alauda gulgula,* Wire-tailed Swallow *Hirundo smithii,* Red-rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica*, Large Pied Wagtail *Motacilla maderaspatensis,* Black-headed Cuckoo-Shrike *Coracina melanoptera*, Red-whiskered Bulbul *Pycnonotus jocosus*, White-browed Bulbul *Pycnonotus luteolus*, Common Iora *Aegithina tiphia*, Rufous-backed Shrike *Lanius schach*, Indian Robin *Saxicoloides fulicata,* Pied Bushchat *Saxicola caprata*, White-headed Babbler *Turdoides affinis*, Plain Prinia *Prinia inornata*, Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius,* Asian Paradise-Flycatcher *Terpsiphone paradisi*, Great Tit *Parus major*, Tickell's Flowerpecker *Dicaeum erythrorhynchos*, Purple-rumped Sunbird *Nectarinia zeylonica*, Purple Sunbird *Nectarinia asiatica*, Loten's Sunbird *Nectarinia lotenia*, White-throated Munia *Lonchura malabarica*, White-rumped Munia *Lonchura striata*, Spotted Munia *Lonchura punctulata*, Black-headed Munia *Lonchura malacca*, House Sparrow *Passer domesticus,* Streaked Weaver *Ploceus manyar*, Baya Weaver *Ploceus philippinus*, Brahminy Starling *Sturnus pagodarum*, Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*, Jungle Myna *Acridotheres fuscus*, Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus*, Indian

Treepie *Dendrocitta vagabunda*, House Crow *Corvus splendens*, Jungle Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos*

Migrants:** Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*, Northern Shoveller *Anas clypeata*, Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*, Garganey *Anas querquedula*, Common Teal *Anas crecca*, Western Marsh-Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*, Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*, Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*, Pintail Snipe *Gallinago stenura*, Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*, Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*, Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis*, Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*, Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*, Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*, Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*, Little Stint *Calidris minuta*, Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*, Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybridus*, Indian Pitta *Pitta brachyuran*, Common Swallow *Hirundo rustica*, Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*, Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus*, Blyth's Reed-Warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum*, Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata*, Greenish Leaf-Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides*, Brown Flycatcher *Muscicapa dauurica*, Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*, Ashy Drongo *Dicrurus leucophaeus*.

*****The names and order of listing follow Manakadan and Pittie (2001); **Species considered to be residents or migrants in Bangalore area as per George (1994).

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* breeding in Kerala, India

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Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* is found in small numbers in almost all the large wetlands of Kerala. Up to 25 birds have been seen at a time at Kattampally, a major wetland in north Kerala. But here, they are seldom seen during the monsoon, June to August, which is the season when the heronries of the area become active. Ali (1969) states that there is no breeding record of Grey Heron in Kerala, neither are there any recent reports of it breeding here. Grimmet, et al (1998) and Kazmierczak (2000) have given the breeding range of the species only in Andhra Pradesh in south India and Gujarat on the west coast; in the rest of south India, it is a winter visitor. C. P. Sethumadhavan recovered a bird, ringed at Pune (Dr S. Balachandran *pers. comm*.), Maharashtra, at Punnayoorkulam (Thrissur District, Kerala) in 2002.

On 5.vii.2004, while surveying the heronries around Kannur as part of the Common Bird Monitoring Programme of the Malabar Natural History Society, Kozhikode, we chanced upon a breeding colony of the Grey Heron at Koduvally near Thalassery. There were five nests, placed on mangrove trees at the edge of a small islet east of the railway line. The nests were about 3m above the ground, about 0.6m in diameter and 0.3m thick, made of thick twigs. Two chicks each, probably more than two weeks old, were seen in four nests; the contents of the fifth nest were not clearly visible. One adult bird was sitting on guard at each of the nests. Change over of the adult birds was observed a few times; the birds were found foraging in the shallow lagoon around the islet. There was a heronry consisting of 231 nests of Little Cormorant *Phalacrocorax niger* and Indian Pond-Heron *Ardeola grayii* on eight Rain Trees *Samanea saman* and one Gulmohar *Delonix regia* beside NH 17, about 500m from the islet. But none of these birds nested on the mangrove islet.

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Sighting Of Thick-billed Warbler *Phragmaticola aedon*[1] near Panchgani, Maharashtra, India.

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On 30.i.1998, at 10:00hrs, we were bird watching at the Pasarani Ghat near Panchgani. We had stopped to watch raptors, and paid scant attention to the various hard "*tek*" sounds made by scrubland passerines in the low bushes and grasses on the hillside. One sound, however, did seem a little different. It was a loud, solid and low-pitched "*tchak*" coming from low bushes immediately by the roadside. We quickly located the bird, which was hopping confidently through the bushes close to us. Its general shape reminded us of a wren-warbler, mainly because of its short wings and long tail, though it was clearly much larger, about the size of a bulbul. Also the tail was not waved from side to side in the characteristic manner of a *Prinia* species, but was held out straight as the bird made its way steadily along the hillside. We watched it for over 5 minutes at close range. At no time did it fly or show itself for a clear view. Instead, it skulked through the bushes giving partial views in a manner typical of *Acrocephalus* warblers.

In general the bird appeared uniform brown above with a hint of rufous, and with a striking pale brown patch between eye and bill, reaching above the level of the eye but terminating in front of the eye, so that no supercilium as such was formed. There was no wing-bar. Apart from the patch on the lores, the entire upper parts appeared uniform in colour. The breast appeared brownish, though paler than the upper parts. The throat, belly and vent were whitish.

The bill was of medium length and thickness for a warbler, contributing to the overall impression of an outsize wren-warbler rather than the typical long and pointed bill of *Acrocephalus* species. The lower mandible was pale and, the upper appeared mainly dark.

[1]**Editors' note:** This taxon was earlier treated in *Acrocephalus*. The change to *Phragmaticola* is following the molecular findings of Helbig, A. & I. Seibold. 1999. Molecular phylogeny of Palearctic-African *Acrocephalus* and *Hippolais* warblers (Aves: Sylviidae). *Molec. Phylogen. Evol.* 11: 246-260.

We realised that this species was new for us. Though one of us (DIA) is familiar with several *Acrocephalus* species from the marshes of the U.K. and Europe, the habitat at Pasarani Ghat was hot, dry and scrubby and the possibility of an *Acrocephalus* did not cross his mind at the time. RP is familiar with most of the birds of Maharashtra, and he tried and failed to think of a large wren-warbler fitting the description. The books that we carried (Ali 1996; Ali and Ripley 1989) did not have a good illustration for 100% accurate identification and so it remained unidentified for over a week.

However, on 2.ii.1998, DIA was reading a book he had brought with him from the U. K. (Lewington, et. al. 1992). The birds it covers are those that are extralimital to Europe but for which stray records have occurred. European birdwatchers are fortunate to have a wide range of field-guides with extremely good illustrations and very detailed text, and DIA had brought this one with him on his business trip to Pune precisely for this reason, considering that many of these vagrants to Europe are regular wintering species in India. Field marks are especially carefully described in this book, so that bird-watchers, believing they have observed an extralimital vagrant in Europe, can be absolutely sure of the species before notifying a records committee and alerting other bird watchers. While flicking idly through the pages of this book, DIA suddenly saw an exact illustration of the head of the bird we had seen at Pasarani Ghat, with the loral patch clearly shown. DIA was absolutely certain that the bird we had seen was the Thick-billed Warbler *Phragmaticola aedon*. Further perusal of the text and the illustrations confirmed the identification, since size, coloration, proportions of wings and tail, voice and habitat all matched our field observations. In particular, the habitat is given as "…favours bushy, scrubby areas...not associated with wet habitats and reeds etc," (p. 360). Furthermore, no field marks are given which contradict our observations. We were thus fully convinced that this is the bird we saw.

Abdulali (1981) does not include the Thick-billed Warbler in his checklist. Ali and Ripley (1987) include southwestern Maharashtra in the distribution of this species. However, the exact location has not been mentioned. Prasad (2003) records sightings by various people from Gangapur Dam, Nasik district; Panchgani, Satara district; and Purandar, Pune district. We feel that the species has been under-recorded in at least this part of the country.

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Green Vine Snake *Ahaetulla nasuta* preying on a Baya Weaver *Ploceus philippinus*

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In the summer of 2000 we decided to survey the tanks in the Yelandur area in the Chamarajnagar district of southern Karnataka, for nests of Black-bellied Terns *Sterna acuticauda*. But unfortunately, by the 20th of May, when we made our third visit to the area (within a month), many of the largest tanks had dried up. But the Agara Tank ($12^0$6'N, $77^0$4'E), the largest in this group with a water-spread of over 6km^2 (600ha), had sufficient water and we concentrated our efforts there. The lake bund is crowded with large *Prosopis* shrubs on the downstream side that faces paddies, and there is a small outlet canal that leads from the tank to the fields embracing the bund for quite a distance, also lined by the *Prosopis* bushes.

It was around two in the afternoon when we were walking along the eastern end of the 2km long bund, that we heard loud, disembodied cries of some bird from a nearby turn of the bund. When we rushed to the source of the sounds, all we could see was a group of around 50 or so highly agitated Baya Weavers *Ploceus philippinus*. These birds were hovering around frenziedly and in batches of 2-3 birds were diving in succession towards a particular patch of *Prosopis* bush, apparently attacking something. The birds would then settle down on the bush, circumscribing what looked like a 'no-landing' zone! Our attention was drawn to a baya in that 'patch', which initially appeared to be caught in the long spines of the bush and was trying to free itself, in the process showing signs of a violent struggle. But what was not immediately apparent was the green Vine Snake *Ahaetulla nasuta* that was holding the bird by the neck and had probably caught the bird by the head and neck. The fresh green foliage of the plant had so effectively camouflaged the snake that it took us a minute or so, at a distance of a couple of meters, to discern its presence! The bird had probably been captured just a minute or so before we arrived at the scene. The struggle proceeded for a further ten minutes with the bird losing out slowly, and ended with a few dramatic convulsions by the bird before it went limp. All the while the other bayas relentlessly attacked the snake by pecking, and made quite a lot of noise that attracted other birds like Common Mynas *Acridotheres tristis* to join the brawl. But the snake had its way and took nearly 70 minutes to swallow the entire bird, head-first.

Daniel (2002) describes the food of this snake as "Small mammals, birds, lizards, and occasionally other snakes," and this report of a baya in its dietary enhances the list. Daniel's description

of the hunting strategy of this snake ["On seeing prey, the forebody is slowly raised, and coiled in a zig-zag manner and at the opportune moment darted forward to unerringly catch the prey just behind the head, drag it off its support and keep it dangling till its struggles cease. It then swallows the prey, which may take more than half an hour after capture…"] matched our own sighting, as to what happens after the prey is captured, although we did not observe the actual capture of the bird. But life-and-death struggles as the one described are not witnessed everyday, and we considered it worthy of record.

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Introduction to natural history through birds

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"Are they kids to fight and make such a noise?" remarked a little girl while observing some parakeets creating a cacophony perched atop a Gulmohur tree at Cubbon Park one day. This was heard at a nature trail conducted for five-year olds. This and more innocent and interesting comments as well as intriguing questions by children make me ponder about the impact that birds and other wildlife can have on young minds. The way children (and adults) can relate to nature, if oriented in the right way, is noteworthy!

Being involved with sharing information on natural history, I have always hoped that in the bargain, I'd be able to do a little more for a change in attitude than just what the work demanded. The thought that I could take help from birds for this purpose is perhaps well summed up by Sir David Attenborough in his book '*The life of birds*.'

Attenborough says, "It is easy to understand why so many of us are so fond of birds. They are lively; they are lovely; and they are everywhere. They have characters with which we can easily identify – cheeky and shy, gentle and vicious, faithful – and faithless. Many enact the dramas of their lives in full view for all to see. They are part of our world yet, at a clap of our hands, they lift into the air and vanish into their own with a facility that we can only envy. And they are an ever-present link with the natural world that lies beyond our brick walls. It is hardly surprising that human beings have studied birds with a greater dedication and intensity than they have lavished on any other group of animal."

This is something that all of us interested in birds must have experienced time and again. And each time one tends to be intrigued, wonder-struck and spellbound!

It was with the view to generate interest in natural history that one day, many years ago, I offered to go out with a group of Zoology teachers to a wilderness area. I was looking forward to this interaction, hoping to learn something from this congregation of formally oriented intellectuals, but was highly disappointed!

My interaction with the teachers was for a few minutes before lunch. Luckily for me, a little creature decided to venture upon me before I spoke with them. It was an ant-mimicking spider and I "held on" to this little fellow until it was my turn to address the audience. When I got my chance, I summoned them to have a closer look at the not so glamorous little fellow on my palm. The audience, who had by now settled well into their chairs, reluctantly got up and came closer to me. They all peered at my palm; some were even adventurous to pull my hand for a closer look. And, almost in unison, they said it was an insect, while others were specific and said it was an ant.

At this stage, I coaxed them to have a second look at the creature as I differed with their identification. Most of them stuck to their identification while others were noncommittal. Agreed, the mimicry was very good! But what surprised me was the lack of careful observation prior to identification, that too for a group of people formally trained in the subject. I ended my interaction by saying that all of zoology cannot be taught between the four walls of the classroom. Of course not failing to add that students (along with their teachers) should venture outdoors at least once in a while to learn zoology as this would then help in putting into perspective the classroom learning.

There is a formal need to encourage nature study – call it by any name, field biology, ecology, research, etc. The skill set required for field study is already on the endangered list. The need to educate and encourage development of such skills is imperative to save them from going the dodo way. Birdwatching as a hobby can give students an ample opportunity to learn more about a host of other aspects of natural history apart from birds. It also provides for learning skills that are not formally taught.

Besides learning, one can also, by constant practice, hone skills. This is essential. In times when biodiversity is one of the most discussed global issues, it becomes important to have people with identification skills. Birds are excellent subjects to start with as they provide for non-invasive field identification, particularly with the plethora of field guides available in the market today. Naming birds is the first step towards doing something more productive for their conservation. As Malcolm Tait says in his article in *The Ecologist* (July/August 2003), "You have to be aware before you can care."

This being the case, I have always wondered why students of life sciences, at least at the degree level, are not exposed to the fascinating hobby of birdwatching. Moreover, many are often ignorant / misinformed, even about the fundamental aspects of biology / natural history despite being prescribed in their curriculum. The experience that I have narrated above probably explains why students are not interested in natural history and also explains the lacunae in our education system. What is true for birds is true for most other wildlife; a lot of it is overlooked by many of us.

An interest in natural history need not necessarily be restricted to students of life sciences. It is something any one with an inclination towards nature can indulge in. Over two decades of birdwatching, I have seen several people getting interested in birds.

Birds provide an opportunity to understand the ways in which nature functions. Interdependence and interaction among organisms, the diversity in life forms, their form and function, ecology, and biology to mention a few.

Incidentally, amateurs have contributed a lot to the wealth of knowledge about birds, complementing and supplementing the contributions of professionals. This only tells us that there is much more out there than we already know, waiting to be noticed and reported. So, the more the people getting into serious bird study, the better!

In spite of the rather depressing side of the story that I have detailed above, there is another brighter, cheerful side to all this. Looking at the world around us, I am amazed to see how much birds have already influenced the young and old alike - people from all walks of life. Though the regular birdwatching outings in Bangalore stand testimony to this, the numbers are still very small and the interest cursory.

Birds continue to inspire not just birdwatchers and ornithologists, but also authors, scientists, poets, painters, dancers and fashion designers. Needless to say, a lot of authors have resorted to writing bird books for expression of their finding and feelings. Birds also satisfy the gastronomic desires of society, forming an integral part of traditions such as 'Thanksgiving'. They also find their way into our social lives. Most catholic weddings are incomplete without the popular 'Birdie Dance'. Tchaikovsky has enthralled ballet audiences with his 'Swan Lake'.

Birds have also contributed several words and proverbs to the English language. "A bird in hand is worth two in the bush" or "Birds of the same feather flock together".

Lastly, curiosity, interaction with fellow birdwatchers, some reading, and exploration of the valuable insight all this provides, has caused enlightened folk, in the recent past, to shift their focus to a variety of other organisms like butterflies, spiders, plants, etc. Many of them have very little or no formal education in Life Sciences. This is a very encouraging sign indeed.

All this suggests only one thing. Anyone can take interest in birds and other aspects of natural history. Birds and bird study have contributed much to the way we "think and do" science. On the scientific front, they have made field identification acceptable. Amongst the zoological sciences, bird study has perhaps done most to the philosophy of "*Ahimsa Paramo Dharma*". They have brought about an attitude change. But we still have a long way to go, and more serious-minded people are needed to take the process further and better our understanding of our feathered friends.

Recoveries from *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* – 4.

Zafar Futehally

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It will be seen that initially our newsletters were formless. They had no standard "morphology". Long articles, short notes, correspondence, were all at sixes and sevens. It is interesting to note how long it took to establish a common format – Contents – Editorial – Articles – Correspondence. This evolution is an interesting study of my own disordered mind.

Starting with No. 3, February 1961 and continued over the next three issues, I included portions of an article courtesy *New Scientist*, titled "The geography of birds". It was a splendid piece and I reproduce a few paragraphs to indicate its main content and approach:

"Although they are free to fly wherever they please, few birds are cosmopolitan. After 150 million years of evolution in a constantly changing environment, most species are confined to provincial abodes…

"When birds took to the air, some 150 million years before the Wright brothers, they had a highway to every possible habitat on the earth's surface. Today they are at home in the Polar Regions and the tropics, in forest and desert, on mountain and prairie and on the ocean and its islands. Yet when one considers the superb mobility of birds and the aeons of time they have had to populate the globe, it is surprising how few cosmopolitan species there are. Some shore and sea birds – sandpipers and plovers, petrels and gulls – are fairly worldwide in distribution. The barn owls, kingfishers, hawks and acrobatic swallows are at home on every continent. Ravens have inherited the earth except, for some obscure reason, South America. But what we mostly see, especially in land birds, is a picture of curiously limited and seemingly haphazard distribution.

"Why are the birds of England and Japan more alike, though 7,000 miles apart, than the birds of Africa and Madagascar, separated by a mere 250 miles? Why does South America have more than 400 species of hummingbird, and Africa, with quite similar habitats, not a single one? Why have the finches, found on even the most isolated oceanic islands, not found their way to Australia? Why does the North American turkey, Benjamin Franklin's nominee for our national bird, occur nowhere else in the world? How explain the even more circumscribed range of the wirebird plover, unique to the little island of Saint Helena; or the confinement of a species of Ecuadorian hummingbird to the slopes of the volcano Chimborazo at an elevation of 16,000 feet; or the perilous distinction of the 161 remaining Laysan teal that inhabit the tiniest range of all, the shores of a marshy lagoon, one square mile in area, on the tiny Hawaiian island of Laysan…

"Even without man, of course, the bright tapestry of bird geography will continue to be alternately torn and mended by the wearing and restorative forces of nature. But since man has willy-nilly taken a hand in the process, we must hope he will acquire the wisdom to provide refuge for the most threatened species before they too go the way of the dodo…"

Unfortunately, newsletter No. 5 of April 1961 has become extinct and I proceed with No. 6 of May 1961. It starts with an absorbing piece by K. S. Lavkumar, then of Rajkumar College, Rajkot, describing the different feeding habits of waders. He wrote, "A very interesting difference in the ecological needs of the Common Sandpiper to those of the others of the same genus could be noticed in that whereas the former bird was quite plentiful on rocks, or open sand, shingle or mud along stretches of cleaner water, the other sandpipers were equally if not more common in the grass-edged, sewage-sullied water below the confluence of the main sewer.

Similarly, the Little Ringed Plover, and the Temminck's Stint seemed to prefer rocks, sand or open mud. The other sandpipers and waders show a greater propensity to wade out into the shallows or even alight on the thickly matted floats of plants growing in deeper water. This latter seems a favourite feeding mode of the Spotted Sandpipers. The Marsh Sandpiper is chiefly a wader foraging in the water rather than along its edges.

"It was also interesting to note the total absence of the fish-eating River Tern which is a common bird on all the rivers of Saurashtra, while the few migratory Caspian and Gull-billed Terns which did pass over, flew without a downward glance at the sullied water. Pied and Common Kingfishers both fish-eating birds, were absent. A similar polarisation in species of egrets was obvious. Cattle Egrets present in large flocks but the other egrets were few and far between, and both the Grey and Purple Herons though present, were uncommon…"

The next was a valuable article by Salim Ali requesting readers to report on roosts of Rosy Pastors *Pastor roseus*. He describes roosts, which he came across in Kutch, Gujarat and Delhi. This is what he said about roosts in Delhi, "Roost observed 14th and 15th April. Occupation continuing. Swarms concentrating at sunset to roost in a grove of rather scattered but large and dense thickets of *Salvadora persica* at Raisina, near the transmitting station of All India Radio. The birds were reported to have come here only within the last ten days. All now in perfect summer plumage and evidently on passage to their northern breeding grounds. Party after party of 10 to 50 birds, and dense well-drilled formations of 500 arriving from all directions, flying at great speed close above the ground, sweeping up suddenly from time to time as if to clear some imaginary obstacle ('hedge-hopping'), wheeling, banking, and circling in the air before alighting on bare trees and *Salvadora* bushes in packed, typically starling-like clusters, and overflowing on to the ground. Numbers difficult to estimate: may be 25,000 or 50,000 birds, or more! Were reported on the evening of 15 April to have decreased noticeably…"

The other items in this issue related to the problem of choosing a national bird for India. It will be recalled that Salim Ali opted for the Great Indian Bustard, while members of the Lok Sabha decided on the Peacock. There was also a reference to the 13th International Ornithological Congress to be held at Cornell University in June 1962. The Secretary General then was Charles C. Sibley. In the correspondence section there was a letter from Dr W. Rydzewski, editor of *The Ring*, Wroclaw, Poland. He arranged for an exchange between *The Ring* and our newsletter, and from *The Ring* we were able to discover some fascinating facts about the long distance migration of birds as a result of the information found from the rings on their legs.

Cdr. N. S. Tyabji I.N. reported on the presence of 42 species of birds near Cochin harbour from December 1957 to April 1960.

Two contradictory letters about the newsletter from Dehra Dun are worth mentioning. P. D. Stracey, Honorary Secretary of Wildlife Preservation Society of India, Dehra Dun, suggested that instead of starting a new newsletter we should block a few pages in their magazine *Cheetal*, which was brought out every six months. This way, he said, our material would reach a wider public. [Stracey was the C. C. F. of Assam, author of a book on elephants and after retirement, was sent to Abyssinia, to set up their wildlife service.].

M. A. Rashid, Honorary Secretary, Wildlife Club, Dehra Dun, said, "We sincerely hope that your efforts to form an Ornithological Society will soon bear fruit. Please note that we shall be only too glad to join the same." [M. A. Rashid was later Chief Wildlife Warden of Gujarat and helped to promote the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*.].

In Memorium: Shama Futehally (1952-2004)

Professor at the National School of Drama, Delhi, writer, critic, and translator, Shama was a passionate bird watcher, and contributed occasionally to the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*. Extracts from some of these are reprinted below in honour of a true bird lover.

Birding in Kumaon

"The next day was to be dedicated to adventure. We had heard that the trek to Peenath, i.e., to the Pinakeshwar temple some distance away, was uniquely beautiful, and had collected a guide and sandwiches for the event. The trek is also a good twelve kilometres of nearly vertical climb, but our guide appears to have taken a good look at the two memsaabs who had hired him, to have sized them up unerringly, and to have left this fact for them to find out. We left early in the morning and reached the base of the mountain around eight. It was here that we had our first view of the red-billed blue magpie, that strikingly colourful denizen of the mountains. Three of these birds flew across the fields in front of us to confabulate together on the pines. Then there was the pleasant sight of a cinammon tree sparrow, which I remember seeing on every branch during a visit to Kashmir in the seventies…"

"The day after that we drove to Binsar, which adjoins the Corbett National Park on one side and the Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary on the other. It is also one of the most beautiful places I have seen. Weighty with forest, it swirls in and out of mist, swoops into deep ravines, disappears into cloudy mountains, and opens up to flaming sunsets. Early in the afternoon Zai and I were walking to the 'Snow Viewing Point' immediately after another of those mountain storms which threaten to end the world without further ado. We reached a small clearing where the sun was shining glassily on emerald leaves, and as we arrived it burst into life. Hundreds of small birds began to fly crazily about, apparently in demented search of the berry-like fruit of a particular tree. These turned out to be chestnut-bellied nuthatches, which I had assumed were never seen in large numbers. Interestingly enough we saw another flock of these nuthatches, behaving in much the same way, early the next morning in another spot. This, too, was after a shower. It seems to me that this would make a perfect subject of study for some eager young ornithologist." [1999. *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* 39 (6): 97-99.]

Revisiting Kihim

"My knowledge of, birds such as it is, is all mapped on to Kihim – ring plovers are the dots you see by a certain large patch of rocks, black bellied finch-larks are the flash of brown and black by the Kihim pond, the call of the spotted babbler is the call you hear as you walk past the third house from ours. This time I was returning after some years, and in the interim a fertiliser complex had raised an ugly head in the next village. But I discovered, with primitive relief, that my bird map was more or less unchanged and that

therefore all was, more or less, wel with the world…"

"Apart from the beach, Kihim etiquette requires that one follow a proper birding route which has been hallowed by time. This begins along the kaccha road behind our house and leads first to a tried and tested banyan tree, then to mixed deciduous jungle (teak, madhuca, odina) beyond. As we walked along the road one morning we heard the call of our spotted babbler, but we also heard a whitethroated ground thrush, tantalisingly near but impossible to locate. On the same road redwhiskered bulbuls are heard and seen all over; a grave coucal is a frequent sight. We found that the banyan tree was thickly inhabited by Coppersmiths, and we had a lovely view of a golden oriole for some minutes. Some flitting in the bushes was doggedly followed up, to be rewarded by the sight of an iora. We went past the banyan to a coconut grove where a pair of grey hornbills were known to be nesting. We located the nest-hole, halfway up the trunk of a coconut tree, but had to give up on the hornbills after waiting for some time. As we came back on to the road we were luckier with the nest of a pair of ashy swallow-shrikes, which was built high up in a palmyra, with the birds themselves circling fiercely around it." [*Newsletter for Birdwatchers* 23 (7-8): 11-14.].

A list of articles on birds by Shama Futehally, published in *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*.

1967. A visit to Periyar. 7 (7): 4-5.
1967. A week in Bharatpur. 7 (11): 7-11.
1968. Birdwatchers' Field Club outing. 8 (3): 2-3.
1968. Birds of Mahableshwar. 8 (7): 4-5.
1970. Birds on a Kashmir holiday. 10 (6): 1-3.
1975. Birding in Pudukottai. 15 (4): 1-4.
1976. A day at Sultanpur. 16 (7): 1-3.
1977. Birding in Sikkim. 17 (7): 5-6.
1983. Revisiting Kihim. 23 (7-8): 11-14.
2000. Birding in Kumaon. 39 (6): 97-99. (1999).

Announcement

Mr Zafar Futehally wishes to announce an award of Rs 5,000 in memory of his daughter, Shama. This award shall be given for a general article on Indian birds, published in 2005 in the *Newsletter for Ornithologists*. Articles should be submitted to The Editor, *Newsletter for Ornithologists*, P. O. Box # 2, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500034, India. The winner shall be announced in January 2006. The decision of the editorial board of the *Newsletter for Ornithologists* will be final.

Reviews

Important Bird Areas in India. Priority sites for conservation. By Zafar-ul, and Asad R. Rahmani. (Eds.) 2004. 1st ed. Mumbai: Indian Bird Conservation Network, Bombay Natural History Society and BirdLife International (UK). Hardbound. (20.5 x 30.0cm with illus. cover), pp. i-xviii, 1-1133, innumerable colour photogrpahs (by; 88 photographers), maps (by; Irfan Ullah Khan & Sham Davande), tables and text-figs. (ISBN 019-567333-6.). Price: Rs 3,000/- (Rs 2,000/- for members of Bombay Natural History Society).

Contents: Title (p. i); imprint (p. ii); Contents (pp. iii-vi); Foreword (p. vii, by HIH Princess Takamado, with portr.); Foreword (p. viii, by Michael Rands, with portr.); Foreword (p. ix, by Graham Wynne, with portr.); Foreword (p. x, by Prodipto Ghosh, with portr., dated 7.x.2004); Foreword (p. xi, by B.G. Deshmukh, with portr.); Acknowledgements (pp. xii-xviii); Background [pp. 1-29: India: General information (pp. 1-7); Avifauna of India (pp. 8-24); Wildlife legislation and policies: A brief account (pp. 25-29)]; Objectives and methods of Indian IBA programme [pp. 30-40: Process of IBA identification and selection (pp. 33-38); GIS based mapping of the IBAs of India (p. 39); Data presentation (p. 40)]; National overview [pp. 41-65: Analysis and results (pp. 41-65); Some burning issues (pp. 66-88)]; IBAs in different states of India (pp. 89-1111); Appendices (pp. 1112-1126); Postscript: Vultures decline (p. 1127); Index to sites (pp. 1128-1133).

The section entitled "Some burning issues" (pp. 66-88), contains the following chapters: 'Illegal bird trade' by Abrar Ahmed (pp. 66-70); 'Undermining India's ecological sensitive areas' by Neeraj Vagholikar (pp. 71-75); 'IBAs in northeast India: Threats to habitats and opportunities for conservation' by Manju Menon and Neeraj Vagholikar (pp. 76-79); 'Can communities protect important bird areas?' by Ashish Kothari and Neema Pathak (pp. 80-88).

The main section of the book is divided into a chapter each for India's 28 States and six Union Territories. "All state accounts contain an overview of the status of the Important Bird Areas (IBAs) and their conservation, followed by a series of site accounts describing the IBAs in that particular state," (p. 40).

The appendices are as follows: Appendix I: Important Bird Areas: Summary of global categories and criteria; Appendix II: A1: Globally Threatened Species; Appendix III: A2: Restricted Range Species; Appendix IV: A3: Biome Restricted Assemblage; Appendix V: A4i: ^{3} 1% biogeographic population of waterbirds.

This monumental publication is an inventory of 465 IBAs in India. This is "the first comprehensive study in which sites have been identified for bird conservation in India on the basis of globally accepted criteria" (p. 41). The application of these criteria to India reveals that we have 130 Globally Threatened species of which 8 are Critically Threatened, 10 Endangered, 57 Vulnerale, 1 Conservation Dependant, 2 Data Deficient and 52 Near Threatened. Further refinements in the process list species that qualify as Restricted Range Species (79) and those that comprise Biome Restricted Assemblages (8 biomes are identified containing 372 species). Sobering lists indeed. Especially in the light of 199 (42%) of the 465 IBAs being 'not officially protected' by the Indian government. It is inevitable that this percentage will grow in the future. Who will 'protect' these areas and how, in a nation where land is at a premium? Kothari and Pathak give concrete suggestions and positive answers in the chapter, "Can communities protect Important Bird Areas?" (pp. 80-88).

Having been marginally associated with this project since its inception, I know the amount of work, cooperation (seven pages of acknowledgements!), coordination, compilation, assmilation and synthesis, which has gone on behind the scenes to bring this path-breaking book to fruition. For this the authors and the entire IBA team are to be wholeheartedly congratulated .

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Birds of Kangra. By Jan Willem den Besten. 2004. Mosaic Books & Moonpeak Publishers, New Delhi & Dharamsala. Rs. 395/-.

Till about the 1970s, for an average Indian the more commonly accessible books on India's birds could be counted on the fingertips of one hand. Beginning with the decade of 1980 there was a phenomenal growth of bird books; textual, photo-guides and illustrated field guides. Each new publication was hailed as a benchmark in excellence only to be outpaced just a couple of years later by yet another! A good time to have been living in. The first of these trendsetter publications was the slim Collins Handguide (176 pages) in 1980 and the latest arrival in 2004 *Birds of Kangra* is equally slim, also exactly 176 pages. In between was that fabulous magnum opus by Grimmett and the Inskipps. This period also introduced us to the auditory pleasure of birdcalls and song. The BNHS and Nature Club Surat became pioneers of this new dimension to the bird life of India. [P.S. Sivaprasad's was perhaps the first commercial audio-cassette on Indian birds, released in 1994.]

All books serve the one common purpose of sharing knowledge but what sets one book apart from the other is the personality of its author. Now Besten combines a questing mind and dogged perseverance with a winning smile and an outgoing friendly disposition; all of it summed up by the photograph on page 176. Unlike the scientist, he delights in his surroundings with empathy and compassion at the personal level. Little wonder that his book portrays birds in an intimate matrix of peoples (their history, culture, livelihoods, monuments, their demons and gods) and landscapes (geology, forests, crops, wetlands and water-bodies) of the Kangra Valley. Beginning in 1996, he has painstakingly observed, researched and documented 555 species: breeding residents, winter and summer visitors, passage migrants and vagrants. And listed them all at the end of the book showing altitude range, grand total separately for Dharamsala and Pong Dam for each species. The list also shows who first recorded each species beginning with Hugh Whistler in 1920-24 leading to his own effort up to 2003. But why the grand total for Dharamsala when the book is about Kangra as a whole? Well, once you see the map of Kangra (p. 173) you will notice that six of the eight birding areas listed are within a day's excursion from Dharamsala; especially if you are Besten whom I found inseparable from his Royal Enfield when we met briefly over tea at a friend's in Upper Dharamsala in May 1998.

Besten's book has two unique attributes. Firstly, he has illustrated the text with over 500 photographs and all of them taken by him. To the best my knowledge, Otto Pfister is the only other author to have achieved this distinction. Besten's photo portrait of the Great Barbet (p. 106), the Dhauladhar mountain-scape with Bar-headed Geese in the foreground (pp. 10-11), Brahminy Ducks in flight (pp. 174-175) and an interloper among birds the Yellow-throated Marten (p. 29) are among the many photographs that I have gone back to, time and again. And secondly, Besten recounts local legend or folklore pertaining to each connected group of birds, following the scientific text. Unlike Jerdon, Hume and Whistler who were tutored in elementary Sanskrit, Urdu and Persian as part of pre-service education, Besten has had no such facility. He is obviously a good listener and quick learner. For his gleanings stand out incisive and authentic as for instance, the recounting of the "epic tale" of the Great Barbet (p. 107).

It is up to each reader to judge for himself the merits of the book. But for me Besten has above all crowned his love of birds by having His Holiness the Dalai Lama to write the first page of *Birds of Kangra*. For, we know from history that Emperor Asoka, the most devoted adherent of Buddhism had made preservation of animals an instrument of State policy. "In Rock Edict I, Asoka forbids animal sacrifices" (the late Dr S. Radhakrishnan). That tenet of Buddhism, nurtured and refined over centuries, now finds a poetic and most sensitive expression on page one of *Birds of Kangra* in HH the Dalai Lama's text:

"Ever since I was a boy in Tibet, I have particularly enjoyed watching birds, the dignified Bearded Vulture soaring high above…the flocks of geese, and occasionally…the call of the Eagle Owl…It is very relaxing just to enjoy the dawn and listen to the birds." That is also the voice of the innermost anguish of an émigré.

Thank you Besten for unwittingly leading us Indians back to our heritage of caring for our birds first etched indelibly on a rock in 247 BC.

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The bird man. The extraordinary story of John Gould. By Isabella Tree. 2004. Ebury Press, U.K. Paperback, pp., i-x, 1-324. Distributed in India by Rupa & Co. Price £4.55.

If genius is sharpened and accelerated by adversity and if good fortune flows from dogged focus on a single, noble obsession, then providence had marked such a man in John Gould. Coming from a poor, working class family, he had no formal school education and none at all at the college level. At 76 when John Gould passed away on 3 February 1881, he was the undisputed illustrator and publisher of the most magnificent and extant work on birds ever to have been created; 15 definitive books comprising 46 folio volumes containing 2,638 plates in colour and 16 significant monographs with 332 coloured plates. On the periphery, when he momentarily broke free from birds his two publications on mammals, "A monograph on kangaroos" and the more definitive, "The mammals of Australia", were received with equal acclaim. John Gould was also among the greatest pioneers of taxidermy.

Writing John Gould's biography with 200 years of detachment, Isabella Tree's narrative holds interest right up to the last word. She refrains from passing judgments but with access to monumental research material, she uses John Gould's contemporaries, employees, peers and family to do the "speaking". The result is a rounded self-made mad, warts and all; part intuitive genius but mostly a primed work-engine, a devoted husband who could detach from home for months without regrets, a conscientious and doting father where providing comforts of home were concerned but could never bridge the gap between conventionality and intimacy with his children, had an uncanny eye to spot talent, paid his assistants more than the times, worked them down to bones but did not acknowledge their talent in any narrative, affable but had no friends among peers, instead successfully cultivated plenty of steadfast patrons from aristocracy and royalty in Europe and America. And from the bigger picture that emerges, none could match him then or now in our times, in running the publishing business both for superlative quality and mind boggling output.

Much as he was proud and happy with his professional attainments, his personal life was terribly sad. Behind the scenes, Elizabeth his wife was the bedrock both of his business and his home. She was among his very best bird artists and painters. For when she passed away at the age of 37, an unfortunate victim of

"bad medical practice," and just 12 years in marriage, she had borne eight children and contributed 500 outstanding coloured plates and over 600 drawings to Gould's works already published. John Gould was devastated. A lesser man may have slowed down but not John Gould; he held his chin up, assumed Elizabeth's place as best he could with the children and kept publishing with ever-greater vigour. When his eldest son passed away in the prime in India with cholera, Gould stumbled, but steadied himself yet again. When cruel fate felled his third son, also in his prime, that was a blow too strong even for this indomitable spirit. Even so, he conceived the book, "A monograph of Pittidae" of which Part I, containing 13 plates, was published just months before his death.

Till today, I did not know that John Gould could neither sketch nor paint! But his knowledge of the living bird was so acute that of the over 3,000 plates he published in his lifetime, the proof copy of each carries corrections, criticism, suggestions and directions to artists for improvements, in Gould's hand. He wrote the letterpress on each plate. Much as he loved all species of birds, the one that possessed him the most were the humming birds, even though he never saw one alive till much after he had published comprehensively on them. At long last, he visited the Americas to see and bring live specimens home. He obtained three but I am amazed that a man of his stature did not realise that the birds could not survive indefinitely on a diet of honey and saccharine water alone. For want of insect-protein in their diet, two died on board ship and the third after two days in England.

There is just no doubt that above all else in Nature John Gould loved birds the most. But he loved science (Ornithology) and his business of publishing even more. In the Australian bush, he had shot the male of a new species of raptor. Not satisfied, a few days later he added a female of the species to the collection along with nest and eggs knowing full well that its numbers were already critically low. For the fear of set-back to his business and losing his influential patrons from feudal aristocracy, Gould's voice was conspicuous by its total silence from the decade-old movement in U.K. which culminated in the legislation of the Bird Protection Act in 1880. The British Ornithologists' Union, which came into being in 1850, admitted his papers and even published them in the *Ibis*, but they did not admit him in to the Union. For the new breed of ornithological scientists, Gould remained essentially an outstanding illustrator of birds and publisher of fine bird books, and no more; not withstanding his established claim to discovery of about two score new species of birds and animals and the fact that some of his observations and inferences were acknowledged to have helped Darwin with the theory of natural selection. Perhaps Gould accepted the verdict with equanimity and so wished his epitaph to read, "Here lies John Gould, the 'Bird Man' ".

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Saving Asia's threatened birds: A guide for government and civil society. By BirdLife International. 2003. 1st ed. BirdLife International, Cambridge, U. K. Paperback [21 x 29.5cm, (illus. cover, col. photographs)], pp. i-x, 1-246, 191 photographs (colour), 3 portraits, 37 maps, numerous tables, text-figs., graphs. (ISBN 0-946888-47-7.)

Contents: Half-title (p. i); title (p. iii); imprint (p. iv); Contents (p. v); Foreword by HIH Princess Takamado (p. vi); Foreword by Michael Rands (p. vii); Foreword by Jorgen Thomsen (p. viii); Acknowledgements (pp. ix-x); Summary (pp. 1-2); Asia: Birds, habitats and people (pp. 3-17); Asia's threatened birds and their habitats (pp. 18-24); Conservation issues and strategic solutions (pp. 25-40); Data presentation [pp. 41-240: Forests (pp. 43-112), Grasslands (pp. 113-136), Wetlands (pp. 137-234), Seabirds (pp. 235-240)]; Appendix: Threatened bird species covered in this analysis (pp. 241-245); References (p. 246).

Chapters of special interest to the region are: Sino-Himalayan mountain forests [covering: China; Pakistan; India; Nepal; Bhutan; Myanmar; (pp. 61-68)]; Indian peninsula and Sri Lankan forests [India; Sri Lanka (pp. 69-74)]; Indo-Burmese forests [India; Bhutan; Bangladesh; Myanmar; (pp. 75-82)]; Indo-Gangetic grasslands [Pakistan; India; Nepal; Bhutan; Bangladesh; (pp. 119-124)]; South Asian arid habitats [Pakistan; India; Nepal; Bhutan; Bangladesh; (pp. 125-136)]; Tibetan plateau [China; India; Bhutan; (pp. 177-180)]; Indus basin [Pakistan; (pp. 187-190)]; North Indian wetlands [India; Nepal; (pp. 191-196)]; South Indian and Sri Lankan wetlands [India; Sri Lanka; (pp. 197-202)]; Assam and Sylhet plains [India; Bangladesh; (pp. 203-208)]; Bay of Bengal coast [India; Bangladesh; Myanmar; (pp. 209-212)]; Myanmar plains [Myanmar; (pp. 209-212)]. 82 avian species are threatened in these regions (see below).

"This book is a synthesis of the conservation recommendations in BirdLife International (2001)", (p. 246). "I am certain it will serve as a 'field guide' for decision-makers as they seek to target their energies and resources towards safeguarding the most threatened bird species and protecting Important Bird Areas throughout Asia" (p. vi). The Appendix "includes the 303 globally threatened bird species covered in the analysis of this book. It gives their IUCN Red List Categories..." (p. 241).

To write an executive summary of the mammoth 3,000 page, two-volume *Threatened birds of Asia* (BirdLife International 2001) is a daunting tax indeed; to do it with such felicity, impressive. It is especially commendable, as it becomes a document for decision-makers in governments and society. How quickly it reaches those hands and the way they use it, will of course measure its success. But its ultimate contribution will be when its recommendations are applied in the field and yield positive results.

Aasheesh Pittie
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Forest trees of south India. By S. G. Neginhal. 2004. Published by the author, Bangalore. Price: Rs 895/-. For subscribers of this *Newsletter* Rs 700 + Rs 75 (postage).

For birdwatchers this book is a boon as it helps them identify 988 forest trees belonging to 89 families, found in tropical moist and dry deciduous forests of peninsular India. It contains 170 colour pictures and 193 line-drawings of trees, indicating key identification features. Local names of trees are given in respective regional languages. Economic importance of trees and usage of their various parts are also given.

Copies available from:
S.G. Neginhal,
643, 9th Main, II Cross,
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CORRESPONDENCE

Berwala Bird Safari

I want to draw your attention to some points in the article "Berwala Bird Safari" by Lt. Gen. Baljit Singh [*Newsletter for Ornithologists* 1 (5): 72-73].

Cuckoos: Since the bird safari is at an altitude of 300m a.s.l., breeding of Lesser Cuckoo *Cuculus poliocephalus* (which breeds at much higher altitude) is highly unlikely, but the writer mentions, "during the hottest and driest, the magic of this little sanctuary is hard to rival. The narrow valley reverberates with the incessant calls of the Lesser Cuckoo…" On more than10 visits I have never seen this species there, nor has any other member of the Delhi Bird Club. There are very few sightings of this bird from Haryana/Delhi – and that too in autumn when the bird migrates silently to the peninsula and Sri Lanka and possibly to Africa. The author also mentions the Indian Cuckoo *Cuculus micropterus* at Berwala. This bird too, is a summer breeder at higher altitudes.

Yellow-billed Blue Magpie: The author further mentions sighting Yellow-billed Blue Magpie *Urocissa flavirostris* at Berwala. There are just two sightings of this bird from Morni Hills (1,250m) that too in severe winter. Berwala at 300m is out of the altitudinal range of this magpie.

Wallcreeper: There are regular winter records of this bird from the area, and this is not the first as claimed by the author.

Green Bee-eater: This species does not breed in the vertical mud cliffs at Berwala in May. I (and others) have been regularly observing Blue-tailed Bee-eaters *M. philippinus* breeding there during April and May.

Berwala has at least 140 species (pamphlet of the Forest Dept.) and not 83 as claimed by the author.

Suresh C. Sharma, Haryana.

***Tecoma* sp.**

"In volume 1 number 4 (July-August 2004) of the *Newsletter for Ornithologists*, p. 54, Shivanand and Shivaprakash mention thickets of *Tecoma stans*. About two decades ago I used to travel this route often and had observed quite a few trees of *Tecoma argentea*. During March / April this tree blooms into thick bunches of yellow flowers after shedding all its leaves, a most fascinating sight! *T. stans*, which is in front of our porch, flowers intermittently throughout the year, but never loses all its leaves during flowering. Is this a case of mistaken identity? If not, whatever happened to the *T. argentea* trees?

M. Shafaat Ulla, Hyderabad

ERRATA

Vol. 1 No. 5

1. The cover picture is that of a Laggar Falcon *Falco jugger* and not of a Peregrine Falcon *F. peregrinus*, as stated on the inside front cover (last line). The editor's apologies to artist and readers.
2. Page 71, para 3, lines 15-16: For "dead carcasses" please read 'carcasses.' Apologies for letting slip the obvious!

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Date palm-dominated forests, occurring around perennial springs, are a critical element of landscape-level bird diversity in Sariska Tiger Reserve.

Dry deciduous forest, typical of the Aravallis, in green splendour after the rains.

Photos: Jawed Ashraf, Sept 2002, Sariska.