

Indian Birds

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January - February 2005



Newsletter for Ornithologists now re-launched as ***Indian Birds***

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Bird conservation organisations

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English and scientific bird names used in *Newsletter for Ornithologists* follow Manakadan, R. & A. Pittie. 2003. Standardised common and scientific names of the birds of the Indian Subcontinent. *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* 42 (3): i-viii, 1-36.

Guidelines to contributors of *Indian Birds*

Indian Birds publishes original articles and notes about birds and birdwatching with an emphasis on South Asian birds (South Asia: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka). We welcome articles on behaviour, ecology and conservation, counts and censuses (particularly those covering multiple years), annotated checklists, trip reports, book reviews, reviews of audio recordings, letters, announcements, notices, news from the birding world, etc. Authors proposing reviews of published material should first discuss this with the editor. All manuscripts should be easy to read and understand. Manuscripts will be edited for length, content and style, and will be sent to referees when appropriate. The Editor will discuss contributions with authors and advise on modifications. Some basic guidelines are given below:

General When a bird species is first mentioned, both the English and scientific name must be given, thereafter the English name only. English and scientific names should follow Manakadan, R., and Pittie, A. 2001. Standardised common and scientific names of the birds of the Indian Subcontinent. *Buceros* 6 (1): i-ix, 1-38. Metric units and their international symbols must be used; dates and times should be of the form 1.i.2005 and 13:45hrs respectively. Numbers one to ten should be written in full, except when used with a measurement abbreviation or higher number, thus: five birds, but 5km and 5-15 birds. Numerals are used for all numbers greater than ten: 12, 120, 1,200 and 12,000.

Preparation and submission of manuscripts These should preferably be sent electronically as an email attachment or mailed on a PC-formatted floppy disk or CD-ROM to the contact addresses given below. The text, tables, figure legends (which must be self-explanatory) and appendices should be combined in one MS Word file. Alternatively, hard copies of typescripts, original maps and diagrams can be sent by mail, but this should be an option of last resort.

Images Photographs, artwork, maps, diagrams, etc. should be digitised and sent either as an email attachment or on CD-ROM. These should be in TIFF and at least 8"x11" in 300dpi resolution. JPEG files must be "maximum" quality, that is, at their minimum compression. Maps should be marked with a scale and north arrow.

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Aims & Objectives

- To publish a newsletter that will provide a platform to birdwatchers for publishing notes and observations on primarily, birds of South Asia.
- To promote the awareness of bird watching amongst the general public.
- To endeavor to establish and maintain liaison with other associations or organized bodies in India or abroad whose objects are in keeping with the objects of the Trust (i.e. to support amateur birdwatchers with cash / kind for projects in ornithology).



Indian Birds

Vol. 1 No. 1. January-February 2005.

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Contents

Editorial.	2
Nest re-use in White-bellied Shortwing <i>Brachypteryx major</i> in the Nilgiri hills, India. <i>Senthilmurugan B., Ashfaq Ahmed Zarri & Asad R. Rahmani</i>	2
In the footsteps of T. J. Roberts. <i>Rishad Naoroji</i>	3
Salvage, relocation and in-nest behaviour of Barn Owl <i>Tyto alba</i> chicks. <i>Satish Pande, Amit Pawashe, Umesh Karambelkar & Sandeep Shrotri</i>	5
Stoliczka's Bushchat <i>Saxicola macrorhyncha</i> in Hissar District, Haryana. <i>Suresh C Sharma & P. S. Sangwan</i>	6
Of birds and botanizing. <i>Suchitra Ghosh</i>	7
Another pond. <i>Shama Futehally</i>	9
The day of the Indian Pitta. <i>Lt Gen. Baljit Singh</i>	10
Birding in Finland. <i>Ashish Kothari</i>	11
Sighting of Black-necked Grebe <i>Podiceps nigricollis</i> at Gangapur Dam, Nashik District, Maharashtra, India. <i>B. Raha, N. Bhure, R. Sarada & I. Bob</i>	13
Nidification and site fidelity of the Black-crowned Nigh-Heron <i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i> in Chilika Lake, Orissa, India. <i>P. Sathiyaselvam</i>	13
Decline of vultures in Sriharikota, Nellore District, Andhra Pradesh, India. <i>S. Sivakumar & Ranjit Manakadan</i>	14
Brood protection by Greater Painted-Snipe <i>Rostratula benghalensis</i> . <i>Raza H. Tehsin</i>	15
Pied Tit <i>Parus nuchalis</i> in Pali District, Rajasthan, India. <i>Raza H. Tehsin, Saadat H. Tehsin and Hasnain Tehsin</i>	15
Fea's Thrush <i>Turdus feae</i> (Salvadori, 1887) at Lava, West Bengal, India. <i>Anand Prasad</i>	15
Nesting of Common Moorhen <i>Gallinula chloropus</i> in Kerala. <i>P.K. Ravindran</i>	17
Recoveries from <i>Newsletter for Birdwatchers - 5</i> . <i>Zafar Futehally</i>	17
Reviews.	18
Recent ornithological literature on South Asia and Tibet. <i>Aasheesh Pittie</i>	19
Correspondence.	22

Cover Picture: Barn Owl *Tyto alba*. 2000.

Acrylic (18x24cm). Collection of: Gábor Vasuta.

Artist: Szabolcs Kókay. H-1212 Budapest, Széchenyi u. 49, Hungary.

"I was born in 1976, in Hungary. After finishing secondary school in 1994 I started to work for BirdLife Hungary as a civil servant. These years were very fruitful for I was working in nature conservation. I didn't stop working for the society after finishing civil service but stayed here until the spring of 1999. From BirdLife Hungary I moved to the Ministry for the Environment, Authority of Nature Conservation. I was working on the Washington Convention (CITES) for 2 years.

"I started birdwatching at the age of 12. I was drawing all my life, but interestingly I turned to birds and nature only in 1996. I was given more and more order for illustrations from National Parks and non-governmental organizations. I was doing this illustration work beside my main job, but it became very exhausting. In the summer of 2001 I became a full time illustrator.

"I'm self-taught having no formal art training. At first I was doing only black-and-white line drawings then tried also painting. Now I'm working almost exclusively on paper with acrylic colours. My favourite topic is 'birds in the modern world'. I enjoy illustrating how nature can adapt to the changing environment. I feel this is very important topic."

Editorial

New Ornithologists Foundation

In the inaugural issue of *Newsletter for Ornithologists* (Vol. 1 Nos. 1&2, p. 1) I had written, "...ultimately it is the content of the newsletter that will make it popular among birdwatchers, not the title." Why then, this change of name? There are several reasons. One is that we are consolidating the way we manage our publication. You will be happy to learn that we have registered a trust, "New Ornithologists Foundation", which owns *Indian Birds*. Indeed the main objective of the Foundation is to publish *Indian Birds*. This arrangement, of a Registered organisation controlling and owning the publication, rather than an individual or a group of individuals, we feel, will prove stable in the long run. New Ornithologists Foundation will have seven Trustees who will ensure that *Indian Birds* reaches those who are interested in birds, regularly. So this is a good time to start afresh under a new banner.

The other reason that emboldens us to

take this step is that after just a year of publication, amateur and professional ornithologists now eagerly await the *Newsletter for Ornithologists* across India, and in several countries abroad. We are confident of their faith in our commitment and in the quality and content of future issues. Their support is strong and will not waver with the name change.

The third reason is that *Indian Birds* does not clash with the title of any other ornithological publication, as *Newsletter for Ornithologists* did. It also rests easy on the tongue.

In *Indian Birds* we will publish, like we did in *Newsletter for Ornithologists*, notes and articles on the birds of South Asia and Tibet. There could be an occasional piece from further afield, such as Ashish Kothari's in this issue, for the charm of feathered denizens spans continents. Articles of a popular nature, which make the science of ornithology and the art of birdwatching

interesting and easily comprehensible, are encouraged. We would like our readers to tell us what they want to see published in *Indian Birds*.

We believe that art enhances text and request readers to send line-drawings and/or colour paintings that can be used in the body of the publication and on its cover.

The Foundation will now have a permanent website. On this, besides some standard features, like subscription form, guidelines to authors, checklist of Indian birds, etc., we plan to upload photographs relevant to articles in *Indian Birds*. Issues of *Indian Birds* will be archived on the website.

I erred in vol. 1 no. 5 of *Newsletter for Ornithologists* (p. 65) when I credited Lavkumar Khacher as having started the Gujarati newsletter *Vihang*. It was actually started by Dr Bakul Trivedi and friends. Dr Trivedi has been its editor since its inception.

- Aasheesh Pittie

Nest re-use in White-bellied Shortwing *Brachypteryx major* in the Nilgiri hills, India

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White-bellied Shortwing *Brachypteryx major* (Jerdon, 1841) is one of the nine Western Ghats endemics (Stattersfield et al. 1998) recorded from Upper Nilgiris Plateau (Zarri et al. 2002). Of the five Shortwing species found in India, this is the only one distributed in the Western Ghats (Ali and Ripley 1987). It has two sub species: *Brachypteryx major major* (Jerdon, 1841) and *B. m. albiventris* (Blanford, 1867), the former being found in the hills of southern Mysore (Bababudan, Brahmagiri and Nilgiri hills) up to 2,100m, while the latter in western Tamil Nadu and southern Kerala from the Palni to the Ashambu hills (Ali and Ripley 1987). The White-bellied Shortwing is classified as 'Vulnerable' owing to habitat loss and a possible declining population (BirdLife International 2001). Its declining population could be the result of habitat loss and fragmentation (Robin and Sukumar 2002).

During the bird community study in the Nilgiri Upper Plateau between 2001-2004, we recorded an interesting behaviour of White-bellied Shortwing, perhaps undescribed before. Two nests were located in the bank

of a road passing through a Wattle *Acacia mearnsii* plantation at Avalanche (11°10'N, 76°26'E). Avalanche has recently been identified as a globally Important Bird Area (IBA) (Islam and Rahmani 2004) and is a Reserve Forest under the Nilgiris South Forest Division.

The first nest, recorded on 14.v.2002, was placed in a small cavity dug in the road bank. The second, recorded on 20.vii.2002, was placed under an over-arching roadside rock. Nests mainly comprised of green moss and some grass twigs. Both parents performed nesting duties like incubation / feeding nestlings (two each in both nests). Every time a vehicle crossed the road, the bird flew out of the nest and perched on trees on the other side of the road. The chicks from both the nests fledged successfully. The nest remained intact till the following year.

Interestingly on 13.vii.2003 we recorded that both the previous year's nests had been re-occupied by two White-bellied Shortwing pairs. There was very little rearrangement done to the older nests. Both nests contained two eggs each again and

were actively guarded by the respective pairs. It was not clear from our observation, whether the pairs occupying the nests were the same that bred successfully in them, in the previous year. Perhaps colour banding of pairs can answer such questions, but the observation is worth reporting, as this is perhaps the first record of nest-reuse in the White-bellied Shortwing.

Unlike hole-nesters, very few open nesters reuse their nests (Clark and Mason 1985). Some of the North American open nesters have been reported to reuse their nests. There is also considerable variation in the longevity of open nests built by passerines. Some nests deteriorate during and shortly after the breeding attempt (Briskie and Sealy 1988), whereas others may last for several years (Watts 1987).

Cavitt et al. (1999) suggested in the case of the Brown Thrasher *Toxostoma rufum* that an old nest might benefit a nesting population as a resource to reduce the time spent in nest construction. The accumulation of the old nest on the territories of breeding birds has led to the supposition that they may provide an

adaptive function. Three hypotheses proposed for the function of the old nest include: (1) reuse and thus saving in time and energy to breeding pairs, (2) protection from search-strategy predators (Watts 1987), and (3) their use as an indirect cue to the nest site selection (Erckmann et al. 1990).

We recorded eight nests in the Wattle plantations, a habitat apparently not scarce in Nilgiris. Apparently the nest material and nest site for White-bellied Shortwing is not at a premium. It would be interesting to test these hypotheses and understand the adaptive significance of such behavior.

Acknowledgements

These observations were made during our fieldwork for Ecology of Shola Grasslands Project. We thank U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service for their generous funding and Tamil Nadu Forest Department for permission. We thank Mr Veluswamy and Mr Velumani for their services during our fieldwork.

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In the footsteps of T. J. Roberts

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As a family visit to Karachi was planned for November 2004, I decided to use the opportunity to observe raptors around Karachi. I remembered T. J. Roberts' article in the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* (2003) and requested him for more information via email. The area is semi-arid and I was interested in comparing the avifauna of Sindh with Saurashtra, Kutch and the desert areas of Rajasthan. Well in advance of leaving for Karachi I contacted Mr Babar Ali, Mr Ali Hasnain and Dr Ejaz Ahmed from WWF's Karachi office for details on good raptor watching areas. The first eight days were spent in Karachi as everything came to a standstill for the Eid holidays. Next week, at the WWF office, we shortlisted three days for raptor viewing. The first day would be spent at Kirthar National Park from the Karachi entrance. The second day we would follow in T. J. Roberts' footsteps, covering north-eastern areas of Sindh where he observed twenty-three species of raptors in one day during the 1970s. The third day we would explore the north-western area of Kirthar National Park. WWF kindly put their

Toyota 4-wheel drive at my disposal and deputed a knowledgeable Conservation Officer, Jahangeer Durrane, to accompany me.

Kirthar National Park lies in Sindh Province, north of Karachi and west of the Indus River. Its area comprises 1,192 square miles of dry, arid landscapes with sparse, hardy vegetation and imposing rocky outcrops. Most spectacular is the 3,000 feet high Kirthar range of rocky hills ranging into Baluchistan — home of the spectacular Urial *Ovis orientalis* and Sindh Ibex *Capra ibex*. In the plains of Kirthar, Chinkara *Gazella bennettii*, Striped Hyena *Hyaena hyaena*, Jackal *Canis aureus* and Desert Fox *Vulpes cana* can be observed. Kirthar National Park lies in the arid sub-tropical scrub forest zone with very hot, dry summers and frost-free winters.

On 19.xi.2004 we visited Kirthar National Park via the easily accessible Khar entrance, due north of Karachi. Raptors seen: Fifteen Tawny Eagles *Aquila rapax*, Short-toed Snake-Eagle *Circaetus gallicus*, many Black Kites *Milvus migrans* with a

few being the northern wintering subspecies *lineatus*, two Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*, one juvenile Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus* in fresh plumage, and two to three juvenile Steppe Eagles *Aquila nipalensis*. Some years ago Bill Clark (*pers. comm.*) had seen a juvenile Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* at Khar.

At Gadap village saw a Desert Fox chased by two dogs belonging to local herdsmen.

We were able to get very close to a rather confiding Barbary Falcon *Falco peregrinus babylonicus* in typical plumage: pale, buffy-pink underparts with sparse spotting on breast, barring restricted to lower belly and thighs and diagnostic reddish nape. Got as close as fifteen feet! In the morning papers we had read that over a hundred falcons had been confiscated and released in Kirthar National Park. The three Barbary Falcons we saw appeared to have been from among those.

20.xi.2004: Following Tom Roberts' route. The next day to Thatta and Hadiero via Haleji: Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus*,

Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*, Tawny Eagle. After Gharo, all marshy areas mentioned by T. J. Roberts, have been built up, destroying excellent habitat for waders and marsh birds.

Turning left from the main road for Haleji we saw: Short-toed Snake-Eagle, two Marsh Harriers, Booted Eagle *Hieraaetus pennatus*, Black-shouldered Kite *Elanus caeruleus*, Long-legged Buzzard (pale morph) *Buteo rufinus*, Common Kestrel.

At Haleji: 12 Booted Eagles, one Tawny Eagle, two Marsh Harriers, two Greater Spotted Eagles *Aquila clanga*, Brahminy Kite, one Black-eared Kite *M. m. lineatus* (typical individual), Pelicans (Pelecanidae), Cormorants (Phalacrocoracidae).

Haleji appears to have degenerated since Tom Roberts' days. Haleji wetland is a Ramsar site and very well known for birds. However there appeared to be a total lack of management. The staff told us they had not been paid for six months. The Reception / Interpretation centre is not maintained and was in shambles. No designated authority is in charge. Instead four different departments are involved with the park, with different agendas and priorities, hindering proper management. These are: Sindh Wildlife Department, Irrigation Department, Karachi Water and Sewerage Board and, Pakistan Steel Mill (which draws water through a canal system to fill huge ponds).

Over and above this the surrounding fishponds are draining off water. We were told that fishing and poaching were rampant. We also witnessed illegal fishing. The bund surrounding the wetland and its environs up to 3km is disturbed and devoid of large trees which are cut or lopped, reducing perches for birds. Haleji wetland has great potential but needs a farsighted management policy, strict protection, motivated staff and habitat restoration.

To Hadiero Lake: a large brackish water

lake nestled between stony hills, not far from Haleji. Three Tawny Eagles on power lines.

En route to Thatta: Two White-eyed Buzzard *Butastur teesa*. Before Thatta Roberts saw a group of *Gyps* vultures. We didn't see any.

Thatta to Kalri (Kinjhar – local name): Two Black-shouldered Kite, several Marsh Harriers, and one White-eyed Buzzard.

21.xi.2004: To Kirthar via super highway entrance. Eight / nine Steppe Eagle juveniles near Dagai Hospital, three Tawny Eagles on pylon, three Black-shouldered Kites, and one Common Kestrel.

Nooriabad: Two Booted Eagles, two adult Cinereous Vultures, five Steppe Eagles – juvenile to third year plumage.

After Thanobulla Khan: Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*, two Long-legged Buzzards, Black-shouldered Kite.

Park entrance: Black-shouldered Kite.

At Esar: Black-shouldered Kite, one Steppe Eagle on way to Dadabhai. Not a single *Gyps* sp. vulture was observed throughout the three days of extensive travelling.

Rapid development throughout Sindh will eventually restrict wildlife and also raptors to protected areas. A network of viably large protected areas needs to be created comprising different habitats typical of Sindh e.g., semi-arid areas, the large lakes, desert, mangroves, wetlands, etc. These areas should be scientifically managed and local people sensitized (not marginalized). Without the support of local people, no conservation exercise can be successful. More emphasis should be placed on public awareness in rural areas. I was very impressed with the work done at the Sea Turtle Centre at Sandspit (see below).

WWF (Mr Hasnain and Jahangeer Durrane) arranged a visit to their Sea Turtle Wetland Conservation Centre at Sandspit on 23.xi.2004. The knowledgeable

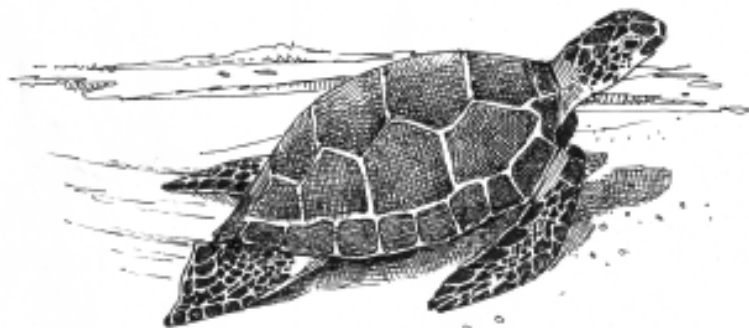
conservation officer, Babar Hussain, took us around the Centre, informing us the nature of their educational and conservation work. The laying beaches are protected night and day. Two Green Turtles *Chelonia mydas* (Olive Ridley *Lepidochelys olivacea* are very rare in these parts) were laying their last cluster of eggs. We watched, captivated, as the females meticulously covered the eggs with sand, moving forwards three to four times their body length before heading to the sea, with intermittent rest stops. We saw one emerging from the sea to lay her eggs. We released a few one to two day old hatchlings in the sea. Holding these young hatchlings and touching the adults as they headed back to sea was a life experience for me. Satellite tracking and tagging showed that the same females could lay as much as three times in adjacent areas on the same beach. The carapace of one female was 100cm and adults usually weigh 100-150kg. Main threats at Sandspit and Hawkes Bay are stray dogs, which dig out the eggs, and the mania for beach bungalows. The active laying beaches are protected right up to the Makran coast and beyond to the Sindh / Baluchistan coastal border. The Sindh Wildlife Department has its own sea turtle programme and co-ordination and communication with NGOs like WWF is vital for effective protection of the Green Turtle. The lifespan of the Green Turtle is approximately one hundred years, according to Babar Hussain, and young mature to adults in ten to fifteen years before coming to shore to lay their first clutch of eggs.

The wetland conservation centre is well planned out with displays, lecture hall (where school children of all ages and adults are introduced to wetlands and turtle conservation), and a visit to the beach to observe laying turtles. The local community has been sensitized and wanton killing of turtles and disturbance has been minimized. A schoolgirl who attended the sessions at the centre found a Green Turtle being sold in the Karachi market. When the vendor refused to give it up she bought it and took it to the Centre from where it was subsequently released.

I plan to go back one day and survey Kirthar and Baluchistan up to the Iran border.

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Salvage, relocation and in-nest behaviour of Barn Owl *Tyto alba* chicks

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Barn Owl *Tyto alba* (Scopoli, 1769) is a widely distributed, resident, nocturnal raptor in India and is closely associated with man and agriculture (Ali and Ripley 1969; Marti et al. 1979; Kahila et al. 1994 and Pande et al. 2003). Its nests are found in tree hollows, cliff crevices, un-used as well as used buildings, temples, barns, ruins, burrows, etc. (Nagrajan et al. 1998). Its diet consists chiefly of rodents but birds, reptiles and bats are also eaten (Ali and Ripley 1969).

On 4.xi.2003, we came across an active Barn Owl nest in the false ceiling of a newly constructed, un-occupied flat, on the third floor of a building in Satara, Maharashtra (17°41'N; 74°01'E). Due to the fowl smell from dead rats brought by the owls, the nest was found. The owners wanted the nest to be removed immediately and demolition of the false ceiling was undertaken. They however agreed to the option of salvaging the very noisy chicks, provided the procedure was done in two days, since the house-warming ceremony was due. We offered to help. Two of the seven chicks had died during the cleaning operation. We placed the remaining five chicks in a nest-box made of a corrugated carton. On the first night, the nest-box with chicks was placed on the landing of the staircase leading to the terrace above. The parents located the chicks in the nest-box and fed them. On the second night, the nest-box was moved to the terrace to a safe isolated corner. When the Barn Owl parents began feeding their young at this new site, we decided to study the behavior and other aspect of the nestlings. 50 hours of observations at night were planned from 18.xi.2003 to 6.xii.2003. Observations of the nest were made from a hide constructed on the terrace and a night-vision camera was used for better visibility.

Observations

Vocalisation: Five noisy chicks were present in the nest-box from 6.xi.2003. The age difference between the youngest and the oldest was ten days, since Barn Owls lay and hatch eggs asynchronously (Ali and Ripley 1969). The two chicks that had died earlier were the youngest that had just fledged, and the eldest, that had suffered a fall. The chicks screeched throughout the night with a frequency of one screech per

two seconds, from 18:30hrs to 06:00hrs. The duration of the screech was about two seconds. The calls of the parents and the chicks were different. The calling of the chicks became feverish and loud when parents approached the nest with or without food. Different calls with variable frequency, intensity and pitch were uttered for different occasions or situations: begging for food (this was the routine call, perhaps a continuous stimulus for parents to bring food); on sighting parents; when parents arrived with food; taking food from another chick - a rather infrequent incidence. When all five chicks called simultaneously the hissing was very irritating. This is the major reason for conflict of the nesting Barn Owls and man.

Activity: The chicks spent 90% of their time at one place in the nest and continuously screeching. The remaining time was spent either in preening or allopreening, especially the face and neck; dozing; changing position every 45 minutes; eating, when food was delivered. Chicks followed approaching parents with gyrations of the neck while extending and flexing the body. Yawning was noticed after they fed. A brief pause occurred in their screeching when they dozed. Wing flapping was noted after six weeks age.

Male parent (smaller of the two parents, this was confirmed by trapping and ringing the parents after morphometry) stayed at the nest only momentarily during the transfer of prey to one of the chicks, which did not appear to be random, but decided by the parent. Prey was never dropped in the nest. Interestingly, the chicks were not fed in the nest on the night of their fledging, probably to induce them to get prey by coming to another perch. Female stayed at the nest even after prey transfer for a period of up to 60 seconds. In the early stage of nesting, female spent considerable time on nest for feeding the chicks piecemeal. Later, after chicks started swallowing whole rats, this time was reduced. As soon as any one chick received the prey, one of the remaining deprived chicks attacked the parent noisily as if to force it to get new prey. Parents brought prey held in talons to the same perch on the terrace wall, transferred it to the beak and then flew to the nest. We recorded

rodents, bird (once), bat (once) and beetles as prey items. Rodents were the main food item. Chicks swallowed small rodents (average weight 20gm.) in 30 seconds, medium-sized rodents (average weight 45gm.) in 60 seconds and larger rodents (average weight 110 gm.) in 300 seconds. Rodents were always swallowed head-first. Very rarely was the prey eaten piecemeal. Large rodents were brought in a decapitated condition by the parents. The rodents were killed by tracheal compression without any visible external laceration except bruising on the neck and frothing at the mouth of the dead rodent. (A fact observed by us on several occasions). Smaller rodents were fed to smaller chicks. When swallowing larger rodents, which were as big as the chicks themselves, the chicks briefly paused for breath. A forced, laborious hissing was heard during expiration and swallowing was aided by jerks of the neck and jumping up and down. Pellets were regurgitated the following day around 16:00hrs to 18:00hrs. One pellet was ejected every 24 hours. Rarely was a pellet ejected after 36 to 48 hours. Rodent bones in fresh pellets were yellow-tinged due to bile stain and the pellets were covered with a slippery mucous coat. This prevents the corrosive action of the acidic pellet on the oesophageal mucosa and facilitates its expulsion (Duncan 2003).

Cannibalism: The youngest of the five salvaged chicks died on 9.xii.2003. It was eaten by two chicks from 23:00hrs till 17:30hrs. The skull, wings and legs were not eaten. Unsuccessful attempts of swallowing the large skull were made by the chicks. Feathers of the devoured chick were seen in their pellets. The two chicks ate approximately 200gm. of flesh of the dead Barn Owl chick. In December 2003, cannibalism was noted by us in Barn Owls in a nest at Wai, district Satara, Maharashtra, about 40km north of Satara town. It remains unclear whether the chick that was eaten died a natural death or if it was killed by the other chicks prior to eating. Aggressive interactions amongst Barn Owl chicks are rare. Food-snatching is rare and chicks are very tolerant of one another.

Fledging: Two chicks fledged on 10.xii.2003 and one of these returned to the nest-box at

dawn for a week, for roosting during the day. The third chick fledged on 24.xii.2003 and the last on 29.xii.2003. The fledging age was 45 to 47 days.

Conclusions

Threats to owls: Noisy behavior of the chicks is a cause of annoyance to persons in whose dwellings the nests are found. We are aware of three recent instances (2003) when people have harassed nesting Barn Owls. At Belgaum, Karnataka, people ruthlessly burned five live Barn Owl chicks to death. The reasons given were 'bad omen' and noise. At Pune, two Barn Owl nests were located in buildings in urban areas. The residents did not tolerate the noisy chicks that screeched at night. Crackers were exploded and kerosene bombs were hurled at one nest. This caused chicks to fall, leading to premature interruption of nesting activity. Transfer of such chicks to an orphanage is a popular method of rescue. However this deprives the chicks of parental care and they do not learn the art of survival in the wild. The alternative methods of *people education* and making them tolerant towards the nesting owls or *relocation of the chicks* to adjacent sites where the noise is minimized should always be tried, prior to the option of orphanage care.

Authors have succeeded in the past in both the options in respect of barn owls. Education: We persuaded a family at Kothrud, Pune, in whose building noisy Barn Owl chicks were found in 1999. They initially wanted the owls to be killed or shifted. They however tolerated the noise till the chicks fledged. They were then shown photographs of the nesting owls. People were not even aware that chicks and not adult owls call at night, and that it is their way of telling parents that they want food (Pande 2000).

Nest relocation: We would like to stress that nest relocation, a systematic and step-by-step transfer of chicks to another safer place using a nest-box, should be tried before taking them to an orphanage. This ensures continued parental care to the growing chicks. It gives them an opportunity to learn from the parents and later survive in the wild. If people remain un-cooperative and deny any of the above rescue alternatives to the nesting Barn Owls, the provisions of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, should be utilized, with the active participation the Forest Department, to make them see reason. Owls face another danger, from superstition. Man-made alternative of an orphanage should be exploited as a last resort, only when parents of the truly orphaned birds are not traceable. It should not be used in the presence of live, active parents, just to quickly overcome a man-made contingency. Nothing is more worthwhile than giving the chance of complete freedom to a bird in jeopardy than merely allowing it to survive in confinement. Though difficult to implement, alternatives do exist.

Acknowledgements

We thank the Khatavkar family and Mr Patil of Satara for helping the Barn Owls on their terrace and paving a way of tolerant co-existence with owls. We thank the Dole family of Kothrud, Pune that had helped the owls in 1999 by tolerating the presence of noisy chicks till they fledged. Anand Abhyankar of Soft Lab, Pune and Prashant Deshpande, both of ELA Foundation, deserve grateful mention for editing video footage and for providing video camera with night vision facility, respectively. We thank Dr Chandrakant Shete, Banda Pednekar, Avinash Nagare, Dr Anil Mahabal and Dr Radhesham Sharma, the latter two of the

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Stoliczka's Bushchat *Saxicola macrorhyncha* in Hissar District, Haryana

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Introduction

Stoliczka's Bushchat *Saxicola macrorhyncha* has been recorded from Haryana at Ambala, November 1866 (Whistler 1915, specimen in BMNH); Rori in Sirsa (erstwhile Hissar, then in Punjab), March 1915 (Whistler 1915, specimen in

BMNH); Sahuwala (=Sohuwala) in Sirsa (erstwhile Hissar), winter 1914 (Whistler 1915); 4) Bhutto (=Bhattu), December 1867 (specimen in BMNH); Sirsa c1850 and 1878 (Hume 1878, specimen in BMNH); Lumbee (=Lumba), Sirsa, November 1876 (specimen in BMNH); Raniya in Sirsa (erstwhile

Hissar), November 1914 (Whistler 1915, specimen in BMNH); Hansi, Hissar, c1878 (Hume 1878a); Sultanpur National Park, Gurgaon, 5.ii.2001-2.iv.2001 (Harvey).

We saw two of the mysterious Stoliczka's Bushchats near Berwala in the Hissar area on 25.i.2003. 500ha of un-

cultivated and un-irrigated desert-like habitat is still present in its original form, possibly similar to what Whistler might have witnessed about a century ago. It was warm and we observed the birds from 14:00-15:30hrs. We restricted ourselves to a 20ha patch due to paucity of time.

Habitat

The habitat was a 500ha patch of typical desert. 30% of it was covered intermittently with bushes and herbs varying in height from 0.25-1.50m, 70% was a gently undulating open dry sandy stretch, broken up here and there. No cultivation was done here and therefore, no irrigation. But on two sides of its borders, mustard and wheat fields surround the area. Of vegetation, we were able to identify *Acacia nilotica*, *Calotropis* sp., *Aerva pseudotomentosa* and *Capparis deciduas*. The sandy, loose soil was bare of grass cover.

One of the birds, a sub-adult male, was coming into breeding plumage. He showed a distinct white supercilium. His upperparts appeared streaked due to his darkish head and back. The wing panel had buff fringes. He had dark ear-coverts and a white chin and throat. The second bird also showed a conspicuous supercilium and looked similar to the male but lacked dark ear-coverts and its underparts were washed with rufous. Both birds had a rufous rump. Though the second bird looked like a female, illustrated in Grimmett et al. (1998), a close examination of its photograph in Urquhart (2002) revealed that it was a first-winter male.

The Stoliczka's Bushchat could be confused with Common Stonechat *Saxicola torquata*. But white chin and throat, clearly visibly white supercilium, longer tail, and bill should be enough to avoid any confusion. Both birds appeared slimmer, longer and livelier during foraging.

Behaviour

The behaviour of both birds was more or less similar to what Rahmani (1996) had observed. During our observations of 90 minutes, the first-winter male hunted repeatedly. Usually, he would perch on any metre-tall bush and from there, alight on the ground to catch and eat insects. But thrice, we saw him on a three metre tall perch (leafless babul tree) and fly up a further 3 metres, hover for a while (not more than 2sec.), catch the flying insect and return to the same perch or a lower one. He restricted his perching and hunting forays to a 20m long and 6-8m wide stretch. The sub-adult male did not show much interest in catching insects in the air, but would frequently alight on the ground to catch and eat an insect. He was wary and hid behind a bush, or entered thin and leafless bushes. The first-winter male fed more actively than the sub-adult. The sub-adult, after eating an insect, would look in the direction of the first-winter bird and vocalise with puffed white throat feathers. We managed to hear his faint 'chai chai' call – audible upto 4-5m. Both birds kept to their individual 'foraging areas'. No other interaction was observed.

A male Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti*, in fine breeding plumage, moved about in the 'foraging territory' of the sub-adult bushchat, but we did not notice any hostility between the two. However, while on the ground, the sub-adult male would occasionally inflate his white throat and breast and sway a little bit, even though no other bird was seen nearby. No aggression was noted between the two bushchats and the wheatear.

Conclusion

This is largely an undisturbed area (no agriculture) except for grazing (goats), and

does not seem to be under any imminent threat. It is possible that more Stoliczka's Bushchats exist in this area and breeding may take place or might have occurred in the past. Regular monitoring may spring a few surprises for the ornithological community, though during 2004 winter the species was not seen.

Acknowledgements

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Of birds and botanizing

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We were travelling from Lalkuan (Lucknow district, Uttar Pradesh) to Kapkote (1,000m, Almora district, Uttaranchal) in June 2004. The rains had arrived and the vegetation all around was a glistening green. From time to time, we saw profusely flowering rose-coloured *Lagerstroemia indica*; they looked gorgeous. We do see it flower in the plains

but never in such profusion as we did in the Himalayan foothills.

Kapkote is about 24km from Bageshwar on the bank of river Saraju. It is a quiet little village with a number of low-forested hills. The main thoroughfare here runs on a shelf above the river and has many interesting species of plants. Tilphar *Cocculus laurifolius* was one of them. It is a common

evergreen shrub found almost everywhere. There was one Kakri *Pistacia integerrima* (Anacardiaceae) festooned with *Aerides multiflora* (Orchidaceae), which bloomed *en masse*. Of the figs, Timul *Ficus auriculata* was quite common. Most of them were laden with edible figs.

Khinna *Sapium insigne* (Euphorbiaceae) is quite common in Kapkote

and a host plant for *Aerides multiflora* as well. It is a deciduous tree but now in June was sporting bright green foliage. It flowers in January-March, while the tree is leafless. Its fruit is a spike of numerous ovoid capsules on a thick rachis. At Jainti (northern West Bengal) we found, in late March, the green pigeon feeding on them.

We had been to Kapkote before but did not stay long enough to go round the place. This time we stayed there for about a week and went further afield. Sri Rajendra Kapkoti who runs an NGO (HEED = Hill Ecology & Environment Development Society) helped us in this. He took us to Falda-Ason village on a ridge that we liked very much. It had a stream below it that had fish with bands along the body and a jungle on the opposite slope. It was pretty wild and the stream added to its charm.

Here we came across a Kakri tree. We found birds of many hues guzzling its fruit (a drupe). Rathpath *Ajuga bracteosa* was identified. The other interesting tree that we saw was Silang *Osmanthus fragrans* (Oleaceae). Flower white or light yellow, exquisitely fragrant. Sri Kapkoti said it was the only specimen he had seen in the area. We came across some clumps of Ningal *Thamnocalamus falconeri*.

It rained pretty heavily at Kapkote and we started worrying about the next leg of our journey. Would it be worthwhile going to Mukteshwar (2,286m, Nainital district, Uttaranchal)? What if it rained? We would be stuck indoors. However, we noticed that it usually rained in the evening or at night. That decided for us. We would take a chance. On the morning of the 23rd we took

the bus to Bhowali (1,706m, Nainital district) en route to Mukteshwar.

On arrival we found that the last bus to Mukteshwar had left. We took a jeep to Ramgarh (1,789m, Nainital district). We decided to stay at Ramgarh because we found Bhowali very crowded.

Ramgarh has a Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam tourist lodge where we stayed for two nights. This was the apple-season and there was much packing and shipping activity visible. A 10-kg box of apples was selling for Rs 150.00.

There were a number of nests of Common Swallow *Hirundo rustica* at Ramgarh. One such nest was above the entrance of a grocery. What amused us was the feeding sequence by the parents. The adult bird flew in with a morsel and put it in the mouth of Chick No. 1. The next time food was put in the mouth of Chick No. 2. Each chick was treated at par with the other! In another provisions store we found a number of swallows perched on whatever there was to roost on, near the ceiling. Nobody disturbed the birds, neither at the nest nor at the perch. They were indeed treated with a great deal of indulgence.

On the way to Mukteshwar we noticed a lily growing at many places. It could have been "*the orange-coloured lily, the round hard seeds of which can be used as shot in a muzzle loading gun*" as mentioned by Jim Corbett in Muktesar man-eater. We are not sure if it was the Red-hot poker (Liliaceae) *Kniphofia* sp. – flowers in dense terminal racemes atop leafless stems. There was another lily on the grounds of the Indian Veterinary Research Institute (IVRI)

hospital. We presumed it was the African lily (Alliaceae) *Agapanthus* sp. Headbourne Hybrid – flowers in rounded umbels (very pretty).

At Ramgarh we had seen swallows feeding chicks. Here we observed the perseverance of a nesting Himalayan Pied Woodpecker *Dendrocopos himalayensis*. On the grounds of IVRI there was a Walnut tree *Juglans regia*. Its fruit is a drupe with an outer fleshy covering. The bird kept hammering at the fruit until it reached the kernel inside the hard shell. It then filled its beak with the pulp and fed the chick. This went on for sometime. It was intermittently calling while feeding the chick and this attracted our attention.

The place has excellent stands of oak, especially around Chauki Ki Jali. Besides oak there was Deodar *Cedrus deodara*, Kail *Pinus wallichiana*, Katus *Castanopsis indica*, Columbine *Aquilegia pubiflora*, Darhaldi *Berberis aristata*, Pangar *Aesculus indica*, and *Roscoeia purpurea*, among others.

We stayed three nights at Mukteshwar KMVN dormitory, which fortunately, was a detached unit of the tourist lodge. This saved us from the boisterous gang that had taken over the entire lodge. We are grateful to the staff. They ensured our comfort and that we had our meals in peace.

Whenever I see people making a nuisance of themselves and defiling the sanctity of a place like Mukteshwar I am reminded of Noel Coward's "*Please do not think that I criticize or cavil / At a genuine urge to roam / But why oh why do the wrong people travel / When right people stay back at home?*"

List of birds seen at Kapkote, Ramgarh and Mukteshwar from 18-28 June 2004

Legend: 1 = Kapkote (1,000m); 2 = Ramgarh (1,789m); 3 = Mukteshwar (2,286m).

Indian Pond-Heron <i>Ardeola grayii</i> 1	Slaty-headed Parakeet <i>Psittacula himalayana</i> 2 3
Black-shouldered Kite <i>Elanus caeruleus</i> 2	Plum-headed Parakeet <i>Psittacula cyanocephala</i> 1
Black Kite <i>Milvus migrans</i> 1	Brainfever Bird <i>Hierococcyx varius</i> 1
Egyptian Vulture <i>Neophron percnopterus</i> 1	Indian Cuckoo <i>Cuculus micropterus</i> 2 3
Himalayan Griffon <i>Gyps himalayensis</i> 1	Common Cuckoo <i>Cuculus canorus</i> 2
Shikra <i>Accipiter badius</i> 1	Oriental Cuckoo <i>Cuculus saturatus</i> 2
Black Eagle <i>Ictinaetus malayensis</i> 2	Asian Koel <i>Eudynamis scolopacea</i> 1
Common Kestrel <i>Falco tinnunculus</i> 3	Asian Barred Owlet <i>Glaucidium cuculoides</i> 1
Black Francolin <i>Francolinus francolinus</i> 1 2 3	Small Blue Kingfisher <i>Alcedo atthis</i> 1
Red-wattled Lapwing <i>Vanellus indicus</i> 1	White-breasted Kingfisher <i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i> 1
Blue Rock Pigeon <i>Columba livia</i> 1 2 3	Greater Pied Kingfisher <i>Megaceryle lugubris</i> 1
Oriental Turtle Dove <i>Streptopelia orientalis</i> 1 2 3	Lesser Pied Kingfisher <i>Ceryle rudis</i> 1
Spotted Dove <i>Streptopelia chinensis</i> 1 2	Great Barbet <i>Megalaima virens</i> 1 2 3
Eurasian Collared Dove <i>Streptopelia decaocto</i> 1 2	Blue-throated Barbet <i>Megalaima asiatica</i> 1
Emerald Dove <i>Chalcophaps indica</i> 1	Fulvous-breasted Pied Woodpecker <i>Dendrocopos macei</i> 3
Wedge-tailed Green Pigeon <i>Treeron sphenura</i> 2	Yellow-fronted Pied Woodpecker <i>Dendrocopos mahrattensis</i> 2 3

Himalayan Pied Woodpecker <i>Dendrocopos himalayensis</i> 3	Rufous-bellied Niltava <i>Niltava sundara</i> 3
Little Scaly-bellied Green Woodpecker <i>Picus xanthopygaeus</i> 1	Grey-headed Flycatcher <i>Culicicapa ceylonensis</i> 1
Black-naped Green Woodpecker <i>Picus canus</i> 1 2 3	Asian Paradise Flycatcher <i>Terpsiphone paradisi</i> 1
Common Swallow <i>Hirundo rustica</i> 1 2 3	White-throated Fantail Flycatcher <i>Rhipidura albicollis</i> 1 2
Red-rumped Swallow <i>Hirundo smithii</i> 1 2 3	Red-headed Tit <i>Aegithalos concinnus</i> 2 3
Large Pied Wagtail <i>Motacilla maderaspatensis</i> 1	Spot-winged Crested Tit <i>Parus melanolophus</i> 3
Scarlet Minivet <i>Pericrocotus flammeus</i> 1	Great Tit <i>Parus major</i> 1
Himalayan Bulbul <i>Pycnonotus leucogenys</i> 1 2 3	Green-backed Tit <i>Parus monticolus</i> 2 3
Redvented Bulbul <i>Pycnonotus cafer</i> 1 2	Black-lored Yellow Tit <i>Parus xanthogenys</i> 1 3
Black Bulbul <i>Hypsipetes leucocephalus</i> 1 2	White-tailed Nuthatch <i>Sitta himalayensis</i> 1 2
Common Iora <i>Aegithina tiphia</i> 1 2 3	Eurasian Tree Creeper <i>Certhia familiaris</i> 3
Blue-headed Rock Thrush <i>Monticola cinclorhynchus</i> 2	Thick-billed Flowerpecker <i>Dicaeum agile</i> 3
Blue Whistling Thrush <i>Myiophonus caeruleus</i> 1 2 3	Fire-breasted Flowerpecker <i>Dicaeum ignipictus</i> 3
Oriental Magpie Robin <i>Copsychus saularis</i> 1	Purple Sunbird <i>Nectarinia asiatica</i> 1
Plumbeous Redstart <i>Rhyacornis fuliginosus</i> 1	Crimson Sunbird <i>Aethopyga siparaja</i> 1
Pied Bushchat <i>Saxicola caprata</i> 1	Oriental White-eye <i>Zosterops palpebrosus</i> 1 2
Grey Bushchat <i>Saxicola ferrea</i> 1 2 3	Crested Bunting <i>Melophus lathamii</i> 1
White-throated Laughingthrush <i>Garrulax albogularis</i> 3	Yellow-breasted Greenfinch <i>Carduelis spinoides</i> 2 3
Striated Laughingthrush <i>Garrulax striatus</i> 3	White-browed Rosefinch <i>Carpodacus thura</i> 2
Streaked Laughingthrush <i>Garrulax lineatus</i> 1 2 3	White-rumped Munia <i>Lonchura striata</i> 1
Red-headed Laughingthrush <i>Garrulax erythrocephalus</i> 2	House Sparrow <i>Passer domesticus</i> 1 2
Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler <i>Pomatorhinus erythrogenys</i> 2 3	Cinnamon Tree Sparrow <i>Passer rutilans</i> 1 2 3
Black-chinned Babbler <i>Stachyris pyrrhops</i> 2	Grey-headed Sterling <i>Sturnus malabaricus</i> 1
Red-winged Shrike Babbler <i>Pteruthius flaviscapis</i> 3	Brahminy Sterling <i>Sturnus pagodarum</i> 1
Rufous Sibia <i>Heterophasia capistrata</i> 2 3	Common Myna <i>Acridotheres tristis</i> 1 2 3
Yellow-naped Yuhina <i>Yuhina flavicollis</i> 2	Jungle Myna <i>Acridotheres fuscus</i> 1 2 3
Brown Prinia <i>Prinia cryniger</i> 2 3	Eurasian Golden Oriole <i>Orilus orilus</i> 1
Franklin's Prinia <i>Prinia hodgsonii</i> 1	Black Drongo <i>Dicrurus macrocercus</i> 1 2 3
Common Tailor Bird <i>Orthotomus sutorius</i> 1 3	Ashy Drongo <i>Dicrurus leucophaeus</i> 2
Western Crowned Warbler <i>Phylloscopus occipitalis</i> 1 2	Bronzed Drongo <i>Dicrurus aeneus</i> 3
Grey-headed Flycatcher Warbler <i>Seicercus xanthoschistos</i> 1 2 3	Black-headed Jay <i>Garrulus lanceolatus</i> 2 3
Rufous-breasted Blue Flycatcher <i>Ficedula hyperythra</i> 3	Red-billed Blue Magpie <i>Urocissa erythrorhyncha</i> 1
Little Pied Flycatcher <i>Ficedula westermanni</i> 2	Grey Treepie <i>Dendrocitta formosae</i> 1 2
Verditer Flycatcher <i>Eumyias thalassina</i> 1 2 3	Jungle Crow <i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i> 1 2 3

Another pond

Shama Futehally¹

Surely one test of loyalty in a reader of the *Newsletter* is a willingness to read articles written by the Futehally family about Kihim. In my youth I have been guilty of producing an annual essay on the Kihim pond, and ensuring that it got into print. That pond has remained in my imagination as the archetypal Indian *jheel* – rich and life-sustaining, and commemorated in our collective memory by Rajasthani miniatures as much as by medieval poetry. It was covered with lotus-pads, and in the early morning sun it sparkled with white and pink; here and there you picked out long-necked white birds; a little temple gleamed in one corner. It was of course a scene of ecological co-existence – buffaloes waded peacefully,

carrying their Cattle Egrets about with them; washerwomen washed; kingfishers and cormorants fished. So undisturbed a setting was naturally a haven for birds. The lake was dotted with Common Coot and Little Grebe, jacanas and lapwings, with Common Redshanks, Common Greenshanks and Black-winged Stilts. It had its own private Lesser Pied Kingfisher, sitting atop its own private pole. In winter, a half-hour on the bank would show you Common and Cotton Teal in the middle of the lake; Whistling-Duck, both Lesser and Large, as I recall; sometimes Northern Pintail, and once a pair of Spot-billed Duck. Occasionally flocks of Little Stint swept across the surface in miraculous formation.

That pond, alas, has now been leased out by the panchayat for fishing, and all has ended. The lotus has been ripped away and the birds sent packing; and the surface

of the water is as empty as a blank television screen.

Given this loss, we were much consoled to find another bird-rich lake in the vicinity of Kihim this April. It is astoundingly located in the middle of Alibag town. A small, tarred road winds out behind the main cinema hall, and to one side of this, tall bulrushes screen a *jheel*. Here the lotus has been allowed to spread over the lake, and stout formations of Bhendi trees *Thespesia populnea* rise out of the water. As we first approached it we were greeted by the flapping and squawking of Purple Moorhens in different parts of the lake, making enormous purple splotches in the landscape. There were Common Moorhens in equal numbers, and we saw one sitting on a rough straw nest among the bulrushes very near the edge. We later saw another gliding away with straw in its beak,

¹Shama Futehally passed away on the 1st of December 2004. This previously unpublished piece, written in April 2004, was her last on birds.

presumably to make another nest. Incidentally, this was April, and the *Book of Indian birds* describes the nesting season as June-September. Is the *Book*, a little inaccurate, I wonder? (After all, there is nothing to prevent one from behaving like the boatman at Ranganthitoo, who is supposed to have snubbed Dr Salim Ali for his lack of knowledge of birds.)

With the jacanas too, both species were present in strength. The iridescent Bronzewing made ungainly landings on the lily-pads, their long legs stuck out behind them; the Pheasant-tailed, as always, picked their way over the pads as delicately as dancers. There were one or two magnificent male specimens of the latter in full plumage. At another site I have noticed these jacanas turning lotus leaves upside-down with their beaks, to examine? scratch? eat from? the underside. I did not see this happen here, but another member of the party did. Another revelation about this species was to see, on a thickly grassed part of the lake, a virtual colony of juveniles, perhaps twenty altogether, in a small area.

There were other good things on the grassy edge. White-breasted Waterhens darted distractedly about. What seemed to be a crane was startled out of a clump of

reeds by our approach, leaving us with an impression of earth-brown barred with black. Two egrets, one Large and one Median, stood silently back-to-back. We spotted a Chestnut Bittern among another clump of reeds, well hidden in spite of its bright chestnut colouring, enormous yellow bill and beady yellow eye. I think that this is now, for reasons unknown, also called Cinnamon Bittern. Rather carried away by the bittern theme, I was prepared to discover another bittern on the far bank, but this turned out to be an Indian Pond-Heron in breeding plumage. This plumage – red-brown back and elegant crest-feathers – makes it startlingly different from the dull bird for which we normally have so little time. A sandpiper, beautifully spotted, with yellow legs and a white eye-stripe, allowed us to have a pleasant little argument about whether it was the Wood or the Spotted. I now find that the two are the same.

Finally, the wildfowl, which were largely in the center, and the back of the lake. I was glad to see plenty of the fat comforting Common Coots, which always provide a lake with an air of all's-well-with-the-world. Little Grebes do the same, but here we saw only one or two, and that after some hard looking. In the process, though, we discovered a

Darter. I suspect there were some Lesser Whistling-Ducks in the distance, their small pinky-brown fronts distinctive, as I remember from the days of the Kihim pond. But the crowning glories of this group were the Garganey. There were one or two drakes, unmistakable with their handsome chocolate-striped heads. They were accompanied by many ducks that had an indeterminate buff colouring and black spots. We were in hopes that these might turn out to be Common Teal and provide one more species for our list – but finally it was clear that they were female Garganey, partly because of their largish size, and partly because they obediently followed the actions of the male, as happens with other creatures on this planet. The chief of these actions consisted of 'up-ending', that diverting performance which I have never before been able to observe so well. With a rude suddenness, as if interrupting a conversation, a duck disappears vertically into the water and remains so, its tail defying the sky. Let us borrow from this creature a little of its cheerful intrepidity, enough to hope that its homeland will remain untouched and unharmed.

The day of the Indian Pitta

Lt Gen. Baljit Singh

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I was in the car park, some hundred yards from the entrance to Berwala Sanctuary and the first bird I heard loud and clear was the Indian Pitta *Pitta brachyura*. I was enjoying the lingering resonance of that call in my mind yet, when a startled Indian Peafowl *Pavo cristatus* flew up in the air with laboured wing-beats and hysterical cackling until out of breath. As he leveled in a powerful glide and passed overhead, he looked unbelievably invincible. Now that was an exciting start (06:00hrs on 6.v.2004) to a two-hour morning walk.

The Berwala Bird Sanctuary (30°41'N, 76°41'E; 300m a.s.l.) is about 15km from Chandigarh in the Morni Hills. It was created in April 2003. At 250ha it may well be the smallest of all in the country. Along its longest axis it is less than 4km and at the widest a mere kilometer. But within this compact space there is an amazing abundance of birds, mammals, butterflies and flora: taking the level trail through the

bed of a seasonal stream could result in four hours of uninterrupted wildlife sightings. During winter, you could spend the better part of a day walking over game-trails, which mostly follow the crests of ridges. Because Berwala is at the junction of the Shivaliks with the plains, it is a busy transition zone for the annual to-and-fro altitudinal movement of wildlife, synchronous with the seasons of the year.

I am lucky to be mostly accompanied by Sada Ram, a wildlife Inspector, whose store of jungle-lore is enviable. When we came by several cow-dung pats, freshly scattered by birds to pick food from, Sada Ram, taking one glance at the disturbed dung, pointed towards the thicket the birds were sheltering in. And sure enough we put up a few Red Junglefowl *Gallus gallus*. For the first time, I saw two moulting cockerels. There was none of the splendour of colourful feathers or the strutting bearing associated with the male of the species.

Instead, they were two gawky birds in overall dark grey stubble. Mr J. C. Daniel of the Bombay Natural History Society, who told me of this litmus test for the genetically pure breed of the Red Junglefowl, would be glad to read of this encounter. And of course, I imparted some knowledge to Sada Ram!

On being persistently directed, I did pick up the notes of a faint birdcall, entirely new to me. We scanned but there were no birds to be seen. Sada Ram was sure that there were at least two Crimson Sunbirds *Aethopyga siparaja*. Shortly, we saw one on a eucalyptus branch. Last year too, I had seen them hereabouts and so I assume that they perhaps breed at Berwala. Otherwise these birds ought not to be here at their peak nesting time. As we watched, calls of Indian Pittas filled the background. May be, they too breed here. Looking at another eucalyptus cluster, there was a family of Indian Treepies *Dendrocitta vagabunda*, two adults and three juveniles, the size of

babblers. Even though the chicks of birds be grown up enough, they remain conditioned to beg food, should parents be in sight!

Prominent features of the topography of the Shivaliks are the vertical mud cliffs, mostly bare and smooth. There is one in the middle of the sanctuary which last year had some 180 active nests of Small Bee-eaters *Merops orientalis*. I would like to know from ornithologists why there was not a single active nest this year? As we stared at the desolate cliff face, we were cheered to see several Crested Buntings *Melophus lathami*. They were attracted to the trickle of water oozing from the base of the cliff. And there was one female of the species whose mellow colours, the tidy crest and slender body gave her a delicate presence. I can bet my last Rupee that the male Grey Bushchat *Saxicola ferrea* we saw next was my fourth sighting on that same bush in the last two years!

On the skyline of the mud cliffs, we saw four Gorals *Naemorhedus goral* [the locals conveniently call them “*Van bakri*” (= Forest goats)]. We should have seen many more. But then we had also encountered two packs of 6-10 village dogs that have become predators. A wildlife guard, attempting to rescue a cornered young Sambar *Cervus unicolor* the previous evening, was chased away by the emboldened pack. I am told that such packs are also playing havoc with

birds’ nests on the ground and on bushes. What good is the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972, if it can neither deter organised poaching of wildlife nor be implicit to permit pragmatic management of sanctuaries where predators are altering the prey-base drastically?

While we watched one Common Iora *Aegithina tiphia* and one Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*, there were more pittas calling from close quarters. A Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus* flew down and perched a few paces away. He carried no evidence of the “diagnostic” white rictal spot. Sometimes I begin to doubt its authenticity. In my experience (which is strictly of an undisciplined amateur) you come by this spot once on every 20 to 30 birds seen at random. There were two persistent bird calls, which with the aid of Kazmierczak’s book (maps and syllabised calls), we thought belonged to Hodgson’s Scimitar Babbler *Pomatorhinus schisticeps* (?) and the Indian Plaintive Cuckoo *Cacomantis passerinus*. Of the latter’s identity there was just no doubt.

The sanctuary’s wildlife guards use the most innovative methods to create water storage for birds and animals during these bone-dry days of May-June. At one spot, a hole had been excavated at the base of a clay mound. It was full to the brim. Here was the biggest spoor of Sambar I had ever seen. And in stark contrast, one tiny foot print of

a Porcupine *Hystrix* sp., along with the drag-mark of her quills. We were lucky to locate the pugmark of a Leopard *Panthera pardus* that a local had directed us towards.

Near the car park there were three Egyptian Vultures *Neophron percnopterus*, all in the chocolate-brown plumage of the juvenile. One Indian Roller *Coracias benghalensis* flew overhead with his monumental slow wing beats. We spotted a Yellow-fronted Pied Woodpecker *Dendrocopos mahrattensis* hammering away at the trunk of an ‘*Amaltas*’ in bloom. Amidst the thick foliage of a Jamun, a female Asian Koel *Eudynamis scolopacea* sat so concealed that for a long time she had us guessing. I was truly sorry that so many White-breasted Kingfishers *Halcyon smyrnensis* were all sitting out-of-job in this parched landscape. Next we were drawn to considerable bird activity as we neared another small puddle of water. There were at least twenty Yellow-throated Sparrows *Petronia xanthocollis*. This was my first sighting of this species here. At long last, we saw the Lineated Barbet *Megalaima lineata* looking all the more plump because of a cloud of White-eyes *Zosterops palpebrosus* in his close proximity.

And then, one pitta flew across, the two white moons on his wings in full display. Time to go back home, refreshed in body and soul.

Birding in Finland

Ashish Kothari

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Amongst many other things, Finns are great at two pastimes: drinking coffee, and birdwatching. It is said that Finland has the highest density of birdwatchers in the world. I can well believe it, having spent two weeks travelling with my wife from the southern to the northern tip of the country this summer.

Our host, Mikko Pyhala, an ambassador, birding freak, avid traveller, and keen environmentalist all in one, drove us from Helsinki in the south to Utsjoki in the north, and then into the Norwegian countryside up to the Arctic Ocean. On the way we visited a host of protected areas, including Linnansaari, Siikalahti, Koli, Kevo, Oulanka, and Urho Kekkonen. Birding was of course special at these sites, but it was quite lively even outside, not least because

of the way in which café owners’ and shopkeepers’ eyes would light up when they heard of our interest in birds. In the protected areas, there were beautifully designed interpretation facilities to guide us, but at the road-side cafes and shops, the informal tips we got on nearby spots where rare birds could be seen, were no less helpful. It was truly an amazing experience to be in a country where literally everyone seemed to be in love with birds, or at least with birdwatchers!

We saw a total of 107 species in those two weeks, counting the brief stint in Norway (see list below). We covered forested habitats (rather uniform, dominated through the country by species of pine, birch, and spruce), lakes (Finland has 1,88,000 of them, mostly quite shallow),

marshes and bogs (a considerable part of Finland is low-lying, hence perennially wet), gently rolling hills with stunted tree growth and grassy stretches, and the coast along the Arctic Ocean. The last also included one spectacular bird colony, with tens of thousands of seabirds like gannets, various gull species, puffins, and the like.

At Kuusamo, we were in for a special treat. We met up with Hannu Hautala, the country’s best-known nature photographer. Big and burly, with a bushy beard and kindly eyes, Hannu reminded us of the naturalists of the past, completely engrossed in their passion. He and his wife Irma took us birding to a forest patch near their house, in search of the Hawk Owl...and sure enough after an hour of trying, it was spotted. One image that will remain forever etched in my mind:

Hannu standing just under the tree on which the owl was sitting, the two looking at each other with possibly equal levels of interest. Another, that my wife Sunita never tires of recounting, is when our host Mikko expressed a desire to try and find the Little Bunting, which he had never seen before. In no time at all, Hannu had fished out a CD player and two speakers, and played back the calls of the bunting, and magically, a pair of these birds appeared from nowhere and gave us a clear sighting for a good 20 minutes!

Other highlights included the sighting of a nesting Gyr Falcon, a bit into the Norwegian side; a group of Ptarmigan in the hilly Urho Kekkonen National Park; the wonderfully graceful Whooping Swan; nesting Osprey; the strikingly handsome Snow Bunting and a chick of the Black Woodpecker peeking out of a tree hole.

The extent to which Finnish birders can

indulge their passion was brought home to us at a spot on way to Lemmenjoki. We'd heard that a pair of American Black Duck *Anas rubripes* had been seen here. This species is a vagrant to this part of the world, so ripples of excitement had spread through the country's birders. When we reached the spot, we found half a dozen ornithologists standing on the side of some water purification trenches, all armed to their teeth with Swarovski scopes, binoculars, field guides, coffee flasks and snacks. We stayed an hour, but did not see the ducks. As we bade farewell to the birders, they told us they would wait the whole day in the hope that the birds would show up, since they had actually flown up from Helsinki just for this!

One final episode that amused and amazed us no end: somewhere near the Arctic Circle in the center of Finland, Mikko went off the highway and turned into some

side lanes. He had heard that some birders had seen the rare migrant Arctic Warbler *Phylloscopus borealis* here. He even had precise coordinates of where it may be. We waited there for a while, and sure enough, heard it calling from a distance. We could not sight it, but the call was adequate proof, and so Mikko sent off a message to someone. Within three minutes, he got a message back on his mobile; a Finnish birders' network was flashing the news of the 'hearing' to all birders in the country!

Indeed, for anyone going to Finland, the best thing to do is to get in touch with one of these networks. Check out the Finnish Chapter of BirdLife International (www.birdlife.fi/eng). Useful information on Finland's protected areas can be obtained from its nature conservation agency Metsähallitus (www.metsa.fi).

And don't miss the coffee!

Birds seen on visit to Finland and Norway: 15-29 July 2004

(Compiled by Mikko Pyhala and Ashish Kothari & arranged alphabetically)

- | | | |
|--|---|--|
| Bittern (heard) <i>Botaurus stellaris</i> | Guillemot, Black <i>Cephus grylle</i> | Sandpiper, Common <i>Actitis hypoleucos</i> |
| Bluethroat <i>Luscinia svecica</i> | Guillemot, <i>Uria aalge</i> | Sandpiper, Green <i>Tringa ochropus</i> |
| Brambling <i>Fringilla montifringilla</i> | Gull, Black-headed <i>Larus ridibundus</i> | Sandpiper, Wood <i>Tringa glareola</i> |
| Bullfinch <i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i> | Gull, Common <i>Larus canus</i> | Scoter, Velvet <i>Melanitta fusca</i> |
| Bunting, Lapland (heard) <i>Calcarius lapponicus</i> | Gull, Great Black-backed <i>Larus marinus</i> | Shag <i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i> |
| Bunting, Little <i>Emberiza pusilla</i> | Gull, Herring <i>Larus argentatus</i> | Shrike, Great Grey <i>Lanius excubitor</i> |
| Bunting, Reed <i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i> | Gull, Little <i>Larus minutus</i> | Siskin <i>Carduelis spinus</i> |
| Bunting, Snow <i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i> | Harrier, Hen <i>Circus cyaneus</i> | Skua, Arctic <i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i> |
| Buzzard, Common <i>Buteo buteo</i> | Jay, Common <i>Garrulus glandarius</i> | Snipe, Common (heard) <i>Gallinago gallinago</i> |
| Buzzard, Rough-legged <i>Buteo lagopus</i> | Kestrel <i>Falco tinnunculus</i> | Sparrow, House <i>Passer domesticus</i> |
| Chaffinch <i>Fingilla coelebs</i> | Kite, Black <i>Milvus migrans</i> | Stint, Temminck's <i>Calidris temminckii</i> |
| Chiffchaff <i>Phylloscopus collybita</i> | Kittiwake <i>Rissa tridactyla</i> | Swallow, Barn <i>Hirundo rustica</i> |
| Cormorant <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i> | Lapwing, Northern <i>Vanellus vanellus</i> | Swan, Whooping <i>Cygnus cygnus</i> |
| Crane, Common <i>Grus grus</i> | Magpie <i>Pica pica</i> | Swift, Common <i>Apus apus</i> |
| Crow, Hooded <i>Corvus corone cornix</i> | Mallard <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i> | Teal, Common <i>Anas crecca</i> |
| Cuckoo <i>Cuculus canorus</i> | Martin, Sand <i>Riparia riparia</i> | Tern, Arctic <i>Sterna paradisaea</i> |
| Dipper <i>Cinclus cinclus</i> | Merganser, Red-breasted <i>Mergus serrator</i> | Thrush, Mistle <i>Turdus viscivorus</i> |
| Diver, Red-throated <i>Gavia stellata</i> | Osprey <i>Pandion haliaetus</i> | Thrush, Redwing <i>Turdus iliacus</i> |
| Duck, Long-tailed Clangula <i>hyemalis</i> | Owl, Hawk <i>Surnia ulula</i> | Thrush, Song <i>Turdus philomelos</i> |
| Duck, Tufted <i>Aythya fuligula</i> | Oystercatcher <i>Haematopus ostralegus</i> | Tit, Grey <i>Parus major</i> |
| Eagle, White-tailed <i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i> | Phalarope, Red-necked <i>Phalaropus lobatus</i> | Turnstone <i>Arenaria interpres</i> |
| Eider <i>Somateria mollissima</i> | Pheasant <i>Phasianus colchicus</i> | Wagtail, White <i>Motacilla alba</i> |
| Falcon, Gyr <i>Falco rusticolus</i> | Pigeon, Rock <i>Columba livia</i> | Wagtail, Yellow <i>Motacilla flava</i> |
| Falcon, Peregrine <i>Falco peregrinus</i> | Pigeon, Wood (heard) <i>Columba palumbus</i> | Warbler, Arctic (heard) <i>Phylloscopus borealis</i> |
| Fieldfare <i>Turdus pilaris</i> | Pipit, Meadow <i>Anthus pratensis</i> | Warbler, Blyth's Reed <i>Acrocephalus dumetorum</i> |
| Flycatcher, Pied <i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i> | Pipit, Red-throated <i>Anthus cervinus</i> | Warbler, Sedge <i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i> |
| Flycatcher, Spotted <i>Muscicapa striata</i> | Pipit, Tree (heard) <i>Anthus trivialis</i> | Warbler, Willow <i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i> |
| Gannet <i>Morus bassanus</i> | Plover, Golden <i>Pluvialis apricaria</i> | Waxwing, Common <i>Bombycilla garrulus</i> |
| Goldeneye <i>Bucephala clangula</i> | Plover, Ringed <i>Charadrius hiaticula</i> | Wheatear <i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i> |
| Goosander <i>Mergus merganser</i> | Ptarmigan <i>Lagopus mutus</i> | Woodcock <i>Scolopax rusticola</i> |
| Goose, Bean <i>Anser fabalis</i> | Puffin <i>Fratelcula arctica</i> | Woodpecker, Black <i>Dryocopus martius</i> |
| Grebe, Great Crested <i>Podiceps cristatus</i> | Raven <i>Corvus corax</i> | Woodpecker, Great Spotted <i>Dendrocopos major</i> |
| Greenfinch <i>Carduelis chloris</i> | Razorbill <i>Alca torda</i> | Woodpecker, Lesser Spotted <i>Dendrocopos minor</i> |
| Greenshank <i>Tringa nebularia</i> | Redpoll <i>Carduelis flammea</i> | Woodpecker, Three-toed <i>Picoides tridactylus</i> |
| Grosbeak, Pine <i>Pinicola enucleator</i> | Redstart <i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i> | Yellowhammer <i>Emberiza citrinella</i> |
| Grouse, Black (heard) <i>Tetrao tetrix</i> | Ruff <i>Philomachus pugnax</i> | |

Sighting of Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis* at Gangapur Dam, Nashik District, Maharashtra, India.

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The Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis* is a rare winter visitor to western Maharashtra (Prasad 2004). Kazmierczak (2000) maps its distribution mainly from western India (Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan), Pakistan, the lower Himalaya ranges, Nepal, and the north-eastern regions of India.

Gangapur Dam (Nashik district, Maharashtra) is designated an Important Bird Area (Islam & Rahmani 2004) as it attracts a large number of migratory birds. Some of the important species for conservation, sighted here, include the 'Vulnerable' Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus*, Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni* and Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca*.

On 5.iii.2004 we saw four Black-necked Grebe at Gangapur Dam. They were gently bobbing up and down in the deep water. Identification was easy as Mr Claudio, our friend from Switzerland, had a spotting-scope.

Prasad (2004) states that Black-necked Grebes are rare winter visitors to western Maharashtra and very few sightings have been recorded from this region, the last one being at Mulshi, Pune district on 14.xi.1972 (Mahabal & Lamba 1987).

Again on 8.i.2005 along with Mr Bob Roberts (UK), we quickly identified 12 Black-necked Grebes. The birds were near the mainland. We even managed to get pictures. This shows that these birds might winter here more regularly than has been recorded up till now.

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Nidification and site fidelity of the Black-crowned Night-Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* in Chilika Lake, Orissa, India.

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Black-crowned Night-Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* is a common resident bird species in India. It is gregarious, crepuscular and nocturnal in habits (Ali and Ripley 1983). This colonial breeding bird was nesting in the Kalijai area in Chilika Lake (19°28'N-19°54'N and 85°05'E-85°38'E), Orissa, in September and October 2002. 195 nests were recorded in a densely vegetated area dominated by Banyan *Ficus benghalensis*, Peepal *F. religiosa* and Neem *Azadirachta indica*. In the same area they nested again during April-May 2003. 127 nests were recorded during this season. Fledglings were recorded in most of these nests around May. Within a period of six months, this colony of Black-crowned Night-Herons had successfully produced two broods in the same heronry. It seems that the species has a strong site-fidelity in spite of slight decrease in the number of

breeding pairs recorded in April-May 2003.

Ali and Ripley (1983) described the breeding season of the species as April-May in Kashmir valley; June-July to September in north India and December to February in south India. Most large birds and almost all non-passerines raise a single brood per season, because the incubation period and duration of parental care are generally longer in larger birds, leaving them little time, if any, for a second brood (Lack 1968). Even though we have records of Barn Owls (Bunn, et al 1982), Bronze-winged Jacanas (Toothe 1903) and Short-eared Owls (Witherby, et al 1952) rearing two broods, no such information exists for Black-crowned Night-Heron. This note records two successful broods for the species, in the months of September-October and April-May.

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Decline of vultures in Sriharikota, Nellore District, Andhra Pradesh, India

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Nine species of vultures including five *Gyps* species, Indian White-backed Vulture *Gyps bengalensis*, Long-billed Vulture *G. indicus*, Slender-billed Vulture *G. tenuirostris*, Himalayan Griffon *G. himalayensis* and Eurasian Griffon *G. fulvus* are found in India. The *Gyps* vultures, and especially the first three species, have faced severe population declines in the past decade. Prakash (1999) reported >95% decline in the population of Indian White-backed and Long-billed Vultures in Keoladeo National Park, (Bharatpur, Rajasthan), between 1988 and 1999. This was the first alarm call of the crisis in the country. Both these species were till the early 1980s common throughout the subcontinent (except in the southern-most states of India) without any apparent threats to their existence (Grub 1983; Grub *et al.* 1990). However, with the recent declines, the species along with the Slender-billed Vulture are now classified as "Critically Endangered" (BirdLife International 2001).

Prakash (1999) evaluated the possible causes for the vulture decline such as availability of food, nesting habitat, chemical contamination and disease, and concluded that disease and chemical contamination were the most likely causes (Prakash 1999; Prakash *et al.* 2003). However, recently, Diclofenac, the drug given to cattle, has been cited as the primary cause of vulture mortality in Pakistan (Oaks *et al.* 2003). In recent years, awareness of the vulture crisis has spread among wildlife researchers and birdwatchers in the country (Khalid *et al.* 2001; Sundar 2002). In this note we report on the decline of vultures in Sriharikota Island and its environs.

Sriharikota is a spindle shaped island (c181km²), situated largely in Nellore district of Andhra Pradesh, bounded on the east by the Bay of Bengal and on the west, north and south by Pulicat Lake. The Island is acknowledged to have one of the last remaining, largest and best-preserved, patch of Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest in India. Between 1969 and 1972, the Island was taken over by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) after evacuating the villagers, to set up India's spaceport. At present, other than the establishments and residential zones in the Satish Dhawan Space Centre, SHAR (SDSC, SHAR), most of the

area is under forest cover and well protected.

According to the BNHS (Rao 1998), there were around 75 to 100 Indian White-backed Vultures on the Island, and breeding was observed regularly in the early 1990s. Only the Indian White-backed Vulture is reported from Sriharikota (Rao 1998, this study), but a flock of 14 Long-billed Vultures were sighted at a carcass on the mainland near Sullurpet, 18km from Sriharikota in November 2001. When we set-up our field station to carry out an ISRO-funded project on the faunal diversity of the Island during the end of 2001, we used to occasionally see about 15 to 20 Indian White-backed Vultures in and around Sriharikota. We also located a nest in February 2002 on a 15m high Tamarind tree. The nest was found deserted during a visit in early March and a broken eggshell was found below the tree. We had seen a pair of Jungle Crows *Corvus macrorhynchos* disturbing the incubating vulture on an earlier visit. Sightings of vultures declined with the passing years and since the second half of 2003 we have not sighted any vultures in Sriharikota and around Sullurpet. Carcasses of cattle now lie largely uneaten, except by stray dogs. Thus, it is evident that a decline in the population of the Indian White-backed Vulture has also taken place in the Sriharikota area.

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Brood protection by Greater Painted-Snipe *Rostratula benghalensis*

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Udaipur, the city of lakes, has *nullahs* that drain the excess water of the lakes. Our house is situated near one such *nullah*, which drains the excess water of Pichola Lake and Fateh Sagar. Nowadays this *nullah* carries more sewage than water. I have been watching aquatic birds and waders in this *nullah* for several years.

On 13.ix.2003 I was watching a Greater Painted-Snipe *Rostratula benghalensis*

skulking at the edge of the water, using every bit of cover. Two chicks were following it in the same manner. It approached a small bush just near the water's edge when a feral pig waded towards it from the opposite bank. The adult froze. Both the young birds came towards its legs, one on the right side and another on the left. The parent opened its wings partially and sat on the ground, retracting them. It

then stood up slowly, lifting both the chicks under its wings and froze in that position. The dangling legs of the chicks were clearly visible through field glasses. The pig crossed the *nullah* and passed within four feet of the bush without noticing the snipe. When the pig had moved on, the snipe deposited both the chicks on the ground and moved towards the safety of dense bushes.

Pied Tit *Parus nuchalis* in Pali District, Rajasthan, India

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From 28.v.2004-5.vi.2004 we toured extensively in Pali District, Rajasthan. Most of our exploration was in Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary and adjacent areas. This is a semi-arid region and geological formations consist mostly of acidic volcanic rocks. The area is covered with thick thorny undergrowth and is strewn with huge boulders.

During this tour we spotted eight pairs

of the endemic and 'Vulnerable' Pied Tit *Parus nuchalis*. We were able to take photographs of some of the birds and also film them. Given its 'Vulnerable' status, we feel that every sighting should be recorded.

On 28.v.2004 one pair was observed near a waterhole at Maalgarh-ki-Chowki, which is near the famous Ranakpur temple.

On 31.v.2004, three pairs were observed from 10:00-11:45hrs near Jobha village. On 4.vi.2004, two pairs were observed from 10:30-14:00hrs at a waterhole constructed by the forest department near the Sumer Forest rest house. On 29.vi.2004 (11:30-12:00hrs), two pairs were observed at the waterhole near the temple at Sumer.

Fea's Thrush *Turdus feae* (Salvadori, 1887) at Lava, West Bengal, India.

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On 3.v.1999 I was birding in an area about 4km from Lava, West Bengal on the road that goes down to Kalimpong, at roughly 2,000m a.s.l. At this spot there is a semi-open area with two hairpin bends. Here there were many Striated Bulbuls *Pycnonotus striatus*, a White-throated Bulbul *Alophoixus flaveolus* and a Rufous-bellied Bulbul (Mountain Bulbul) *Ixos mccllellandii* (previously named *Hypsipetes mccllellandii*). Looking for more views of these species, whilst cutting through the shortcut path at the top hairpin through some bushes, I flushed some White-collared Blackbirds *Turdus albocinctus* feeding low down. Suddenly I also flushed another smaller thrush-sized bird, which flew to a low perch close by. I had enough time to get my binoculars on it and to see it was an unknown bird to me. Luckily when it flew, it was only to a tree about 25m away where it sat still long enough for me to have good views and to take notes and make a drawing

while it was right there.

The bird was judging by shape and jizz an obvious *Turdus*-like thrush. The markings except around the eye area were very simple. The upper-parts including the whole of the closed wing, the nape, ear coverts and upper-tail were a uniform olive-brown except the crown, which was slightly more reddish. The wings had no obvious wing bar. The under-parts including the flanks, chin and throat were a uniform light grey. Where these two colours met around the neck-sides they were blended with no strong contrast.

The facial pattern was however, striking. The lores were very dark, contrasting with a clear white full supercilium, which extended from the bill to the rear of the eye and curved down slightly around the ear coverts. Below the eye was a half-moon eye crescent, which continued unbroken in a line to the bill and so, enclosed the dark lores area with white.

The bill and legs were a nondescript

dull colour. Other features noted were the small size compared to White-collared Blackbird, a broad tail and a fairly pointed bill.

All these features were noted from the perched bird. I had poor flight views.

The bird was seen at about 15:30hrs in very changeable conditions: drizzle very quickly followed by sun, and a light breeze. Weather had been like this for at least a week. The habitat was deciduous. The area was surrounded with large trees but the bird was actually feeding in or beneath bushes, which were also on the edge of a clearing. This was right beside a steep ravine.

On returning to Lava to study Grimmett, et al. (1998) I could see that the distinctive head pattern around the dark lores was a feature of only two thrush species, Fea's Thrush *Turdus feae* and Eyebrowed Thrush *Turdus obscurus*. Very clear views of the light grey flanks were obtained, furthermore the uniform olive brown upper-parts with

the more reddish crown eliminate the possibility of Eyebrowed Thrush, confirming the identity of the Lava bird as a male Fea's Thrush. The white throat pattern and white central belly shown in the illustration by Harris in Grimmett, et al. (1998) was not noted in the Lava bird although the bird was seen only from the side-view.

Fea's Thrush is a globally threatened species classified as Vulnerable 'because it has a small, declining population as a result of deforestation in its breeding and wintering grounds,' (BirdLife International 2001). There are very few recent published records from India. This record is a first for West Bengal and represents an expansion of the wintering range westwards in the subcontinent. Lava is in my opinion fast becoming degraded, by excessive logging and by herdsmen with their cattle.

The updated note in Ali & Ripley (1996) mentions records from Nepal and Point Calimere and the Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu, south India but these are errors, I can find no reference for these records and there is no mention of them in Grimmett, et al. (1998) and Inskipp & Inskipp (1991).

Here should be the drawing but too file became too big to send, see separate photo and insert here.

Drawing of field-sketch of Fea's Thrush (Grey-sided Thrush), Lava, showing pattern around the eye.

Previous records from Indian subcontinent (extracts from BirdLife International 2001).

Assam Hemeo peak (sometimes misspelled "Hemes Peak"), North Cachar hills, pre-1873 [Godwin-Austen 1876, Hume 1888, specimen in Natural History Museum (BMNH)].

Meghalaya Mawiyngkhung (Mawryngkneng), Khasia hills, November 1951 [female in Field Museum of Natural History (FMNH)], December 1953 (male in FMNH); Shillong, October 1877 [Hume 1888, two specimens in BMNH (three listed by Whistler (Undated))]; Cherrapunji, undated (Hume 1888).

Nagaland regular in the Naga hills, winter 1872-1873, with one collected at 3,050 m on Japvo peak, January 1873 (Godwin-Austen 1874, Hume 1888).

Manipur eastern hills of Manipur, near the region of Phalel, three specimens listed from pre-1881 (Hume 1888), although no specimens traced.

There are unconfirmed reports from

Dumpep, Shillong, Cherrapunji and unspecified localities in the Khasia hills of Meghalaya, based upon 16 clutches taken in 1900-1930 that are stored in BMNH). Bakers (1894-1907) records from Assam at Hungrum (Hungroom), North Cachar, 1,900 m. are now considered suspect. Reports of breeding in India and Myanmar (Baker 1907, 1922-1930, Wickham 1929-1930) are also highly suspect.

Acknowledgment

Thanks to Krysz Kuzmierzczak for information on historic records of Fea's Thrush (Grey-sided Thrush) from the subcontinent.

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Nesting of Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* in Kerala

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The Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* is considered a rare bird in Kerala. Ali (1969) did not record the nesting of the Common Moorhen from Kerala. Fergusson and Bourdillon (1904) stated that it was uncommon in Travancore.

On 1.vi.2003, around 15:30hrs, I was birdwatching at Enamavu Kole wetlands in Thrissur District, Kerala. There I observed a nest of the Common Moorhen in a waterlogged, reed-covered part of the swamp. The nest was at least 10-15m away from the bund. It was a mass of aquatic plants placed on a small heap of mud and sodden aquatic vegetation a few inches above the water level.

A Common Moorhen was incubating on the nest when I approached the spot. Its

mate was always seen feeding and / or swimming quite near the nest. Sometimes the mate carried nesting material and just dumped it on the nesting site. The incubating bird always glanced behind when its mate deposited the nesting material.

Once the mate uttered a rather high pitched double call note, “kek-kek”.

On 8.vi.2003 (the monsoon had not commenced), I went to look for the nest. The bird in the nest was a close sitter. It left the nest only when I stood near it. After a few minutes the bird returned to the nest and resumed incubation. The bird always re-arranged all the eggs with its beak before sitting on them. Thus, I had a number of glimpses of the eggs through binoculars. The eggs were of a dull whitish or pale stone

colour, with small blotches of dark reddish-brown all over. The incubating bird frequently jerked its tail while it sat in the nest.

It seemed that both parents incubated. Once I saw the birds exchanging places to incubate.

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Recoveries from *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* – 5.

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I started this series on ‘Recoveries’ to give readers an idea about how and why the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* was started in December 1960, the type of articles initially received, the limited interest in birdwatching at the time, the dependence for articles on a few stalwarts, the mainstays being Salim Ali and S. K. Lavkumar. Joseph George, Capt. N. S. Tyabji and a few others, helped to give the initial push. Slowly, very slowly the circle widened.

It would help me to proceed with this series if readers would let me know whether the sort of reporting I have done – quoting from articles and comments chronologically is of interest, or is this progress too slow and boring to the modern well-informed reader. If so, I could leap frog over the years and reproduce only sections of the more noteworthy contributions.

It is interesting to note how seemingly minor items led to significant results in the study of bird migration. The two innovations which proved indispensable were the numbered aluminium rings with the legend “inform BNHS” supplied by Sweden, and the mist nets sent from Japan. In his autobiography (p. 65), Salim Ali says, “...after using them (mist nets) in the last few years, I am convinced that no field collecting can be regarded as thorough

where mist nets have not been employed to supplement shooting and visual observation. The unsuspected presence of many shy and skulking birds of dense shrubbery, specially of tropical jungle, as in the East Himalayan foothills, has revealed only when they fall into nest suitably deployed...” He continues to say that the lack of these earlier, “have somewhat shaken my confidence in the comprehensiveness of my collecting (e.g., Hyderabad Survey) before that time.”

For the June 1961 issue, Salim Ali wrote on Bird Migration Study in India. I quote him at some length because though some sporadic ringing of birds had been done in the past, the effort was too limited to come to any definite conclusions.

“...Organised bird ringing and the study of migration began for the first time about two years ago. The opportunity to do so came as an unexpected windfall. The discovery that the virus of the Kyasanur Forest Disease of Mysore was a member of a group of viruses whose known focus was in parts of the U.S.S.R., suggested that its presence in India may have something to do with the migratory birds coming from that area. Thus the W.H.O. became interested in investigating the problem, and made a monetary grant to the Bombay Natural

History Society for conducting the necessary fieldwork. The Virus Research Centre in Poona, maintained jointly by the Indian Council of Medical Research and the Rockefeller Foundation, which is directly interested in the KFD problem, was expected to cooperate in the project from the virological angle.

“The first field session, held in Kutch in autumn of 1955, was more in the nature of a training camp. Dr A. Schifferli, Director of the Swiss Bird Migration Centre at Sempach, was invited to...train local personnel in the use of Japanese mist nets and in the techniques employed in modern bird migration study. The VRC, Poona, deputed some of their technicians to work with the BNHS field party in order to collect ticks and other relevant data from the netted birds...”

“Since the session of September 1960, there have been three more field sessions in Kutch and Saurashtra, of 3 or 4 weeks’ duration each – in March 1960, September 1960, and March 1961. In these four sessions over 7,500 birds were caught and ringed, of which about 20% were migrant, the rest resident. From the viewpoint of the study of bird movements, the ringing of even the so-called ‘resident’ birds is not without importance. Many resident birds are subject

to seasonal movements involving hundreds of miles within the country, about which we know practically nothing. The ringing of these birds on a large scale should provide useful data concerning their local migrations, as well as about other facets of their biology which cannot be studied without individual recognition of the birds. The catches, moreover, provided the VRC investigators with opportunities of examining large samples of resident birds, in addition to the migrants, and of obtaining useful data on tick infestation and the problem of dissemination of arthropod-borne viruses through bird agency..."

The next piece, by K. S. Lavkumar, described a swallow roost (Common and Wire-tailed Swallows, Sand Martins) near Rajkot. Apparently here the mist nets were not too successful, and Lavkumar writes: "We tried using mist nets in what appeared to be a truly ingenious manner but caught

only six birds and even these almost got away. It was all very disappointing but we did learn the limitations of mist nets in trapping birds. The swallows are close roosters and do not fly off easily. They have to be almost shoved off their niches. We hope therefore, to try out a modified Butterfly Net Trap in scooping the sleeping birds up for ringing."

Justice S. G. Patwardhan and his wife reported seeing a massive migration of Rosy Pastors on the evening of 17 March 1961. The birds were coming from the East and going towards the West. They came in batches and the flow was intermittent. The procession was first noticed at 19:15hrs and continued for about half an hour. They were sure that the number exceeded several thousands.

In the 'Notes and comments' section there was a discussion about standardising Hindi and English names of birds. With

regard to the English names, the following was proposed:

1. When the name is a compound of two bird names, capitalise both with a hyphen between thus: Crow-Pheasant, Bustard-Quail, Hawk-Eagle and Tit-Babbler.
2. When the first half of the name is descriptive of the bird or its habits or habitat, capitalise both without the hyphen thus: Bush Quail, Rock Sparrow, Leaf Warbler, and House Crow.
3. Except where convention is established otherwise, thus: Junglefowl, Spurfowl, and Sandgrouse.

I see that the BNHS continues to follow this practice, but in other books there are other patterns. The recent practice of using the *lower case* for common names seems to be a convenient one if it is followed by the scientific name.

Reviews

Birds of Nashik. By: B. Raha, N. Bhure, and D. Ugaonkar. (Eds.) 2004. Nashik: Nature Conservation Society of Nashik. Paperback. (10.5 x 19.0cm, with illus. cover), pp. 1-24, 10 col. photos (cover by; Uddhav Thackeray. Others by; B. Raha), 1 map (fold., back endpapers). Price: Not mentioned.

Contents: Imprint (fold-out, front endpapers); Foreword (front endpapers, by; Asad R. Rahmani); About us (p. 1); Mission (p. 1); Ongoing activities (p. 2); Introduction (pp. 3-5); Checklist of the birds of Nashik (pp. 6-23); Bird observation notes (pp. 22-24).

A checklist of 325 species found in Nashik District, Maharashtra, India, with abbreviated annotations. The list is arranged in tabular format. Various columns give the following information: English, scientific, and Marathi names, size, frequency of sighting (e.g. common, rare, etc.), residential status, direction of possible sighting with Nashik town as centre (east of Nashik, etc.), habitat in which the species is found and plate numbers, from Grimmitt, Inskipp and Inskipp's *Pocket guide to the birds of the Indian subcontinent*, on which the species is depicted. Threatened and Near-threatened species are marked before their English names with a red or black asterisk respectively. Areas around Nashik, with different types of habitats like grasslands, waterbodies, forest, groves, are given in a table on p. 5.

Modern DNA-based studies are revealing new relationships among taxa and authors of new works would do well to keep themselves updated on these, for change is the order of the day and old sequences, names, relationships, etc., are in flux. A case in point is the entry "Lesser Spotted-Eagle *Aquila pomarina*" (p. 8). It is now widely known that this taxon has been split and the sedentary species in India is the Indian Spotted Eagle *Aquila hastata*. The authors have listed only those species that they have themselves seen on their birding trips (Raha, *pers. comm.*). No historical data is included, which could have resulted in at least some species being left out. The authors have got the sequence of the Sylviinae (p. 18) mixed up. These are minor blemishes that can be easily cleared in the next edition. The authors need to be complimented for creating and publishing this checklist, a database for future work. Compiling and publishing district checklists like the one under review should now be the priority for Indian birdwatchers.

—Aasheesh Pittie

A checklist of the birds of Gujarat. By: B. M. Parasharya, C. K. Borad, and D. N. Rank. (Eds.) 2004. 1st ed. Gujarat: Bird Conservation Society. Pbk. (28.5cm x 21.0cm), 2 pr. ll., pp. 1-27+1. Price: Rs 30/- (postage extra).

Contents: Title, imprint, contents (preliminary leaves); Preface (p. 1, by; B.M.

Parasharya, C.K. Borad and D.N. Rank, dated 16.ix.2004); Introduction (p. 2); checklist (pp. 3-25); References (p. 26).

This is a bare checklist of 526 taxa (species and sub-species) from the state of Gujarat, India. Gujarati names and abbreviated status of taxa are also given.

The following errors were noted: *Rallus aquaticus* is listed under Gruidae instead of Rallidae (p. 8); "Phalaropidae" should be 'Phalaropopidae' (p. 10); *Treron pompadora* is listed under Pteroclididae instead of Columbidae (p. 12); "Broadbills: Eurylaimidae" should read 'Pittas: Pittidae' (p. 15); several species under Sylviinae and Monarchinae are interchanged (p. 20); "*Sylvia blythi*" should read *Sylvia curruca* (p. 21); the family Paridae is missing though its members are listed under "Turridae" (p. 23). The inclusion of *Ardeola bacchus* (p. 3) seems to be an error, for most records from India are from the north-east.

For a checklist, the size of this publication is a bit odd for it cannot be taken out conveniently into the field. These glitches notwithstanding, the checklist is a valuable addition to the literature of the region.

—Aasheesh Pittie

Recent ornithological literature on South Asia and Tibet

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Correspondence

Berwala Bird Sanctuary: A response

Mr Suresh C. Sharma's observations [*Newsletter for Ornithologists* 1 (6): 95] on my article "Berwala Bird Safari" [*ibid.* 1 (5): 72-73] reminds me of a statement by Jim Corbett, "In Nature there is no finality." It would be 50 years when I read it but it surfaces to memory every time there is a bird sighting out of the usual. For instance, the Rufous-tailed Wheatear *Oenanthe xanthopyrmyna* has a well-defined wintering ground but then in 1912 A. E. Jones spotted one at Sairee, near Shimla, hundreds of miles father afield. Now Jones was an ornithologist of standing and so Salim Ali and Dillon Ripley especially mention this sight-record in their book. In 2003, 90 years later, I spotted one at Chandigarh. Not many would have believed it. I was singularly lucky to have photographed it and a scientist authenticated the physical features in the photograph and on the ground-site. The full account of it with the photograh will appear in a future issue of this journal.

I had been hearing the Blue Whistling-Thrush *Myophonus caeruleus* at the Zakir Rose Garden in Chandigarh in December-February between 1996-1999. I saw one at last in 2002. Would anyone believe me? Among the various books I looked through, Whistler recorded one sighting from as far

south as Rohtak, which at that time was part of the Thar Desert! Luckily in March 2004, I was able to photograph it in the Rose Garden and the corelation to ground-site was verified by Mr Jakati, the Chief Wildlife Warden of Haryana.

When Mr Jakati mentioned having sighted a Eurasian Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* on his lawn at Panchkula (adjoining Chandigarh), Mr S. C. Sharma looked in disbelief. Goldfinches have since been seen more than once in the winter of 2003-2004 near the Vulture Rehabilitation Centre at Pinjore, about 10km from Panchkula. Mr Gurdial Singh who in his earlier days had guidance from the late Lt Gen. Sir Harold Williams and B. B. Osmaston, has once seen on his lawn at Chandigarh a White-capped Redstart *Chaimarrornis leucocephalus*! In 2002, I sighted two Common Shelducks for the first time at the Sukhna Lake, Chandigarh. These are all chancy occurences and may or may not be experienced by all birdwatchers but that is no reason to doubt those who happen to be lucky in encountering such species.

Now coming specifically to my article: I have seen every bird mentioned in my text as surely as day follows night. Where cuckoos are concerned there is a typing error, i.e., "Hawk" was displaced by

"Lesser". And the next three lines wee altogether missed in the typing, which describe the sighting of one Lesser Cuckoo and also that such solitary records are shown by Kazmierczak and Grimmett, et al., in their books. The Indian Cuckoo is heard without fail even at Panchkula and Chandigarh, which are lower than Berwala. There is just no doubt about it.

Mr Jakati and I were returning from a walk in Berwala when we met Mr S. C. Sharma and his two companions near the "vertical mud cliff". That is when Mr Sharma showed us the two Wallcreepers *Tichodroma muraria* and all of us believed this to be the first sighting at Berwala even though it may well have been sighted regularly elsewhere in the Morni Hills. (The same would also be true of most other species figuring in the Berwala checklist.) We even discussed whether the presence of Wallcreepers would help in getting the Important Bird Area status for Berwala. Lastly, Mr Sharma had indeed provided a checklist of 154 species (not 140), but I stated 83 as the number observed by me.

The Berwala Bird Sanctuary was officially inaugurated in early 2002. Since then there have been several changes in the bureaucratic heirarchy. The Sanctuary is showing signs of grave neglect. Its gazette

notification remains unpublished. Mr S. C. Sharma and the Haryana-Delhi birdwatchers should join hands before neglect becomes a way of life.

The happy news is that several Nature Clubs visit the Sanctuary regularly. The Yadavindra Public School (Chandigarh) boys often camp there overnight and in March they hope to spend a whole week out there.

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Albino House Crow *Corvus splendens*

On 22.vi.2004 at 16:00hrs we found a juvenile albino House Crow *Corvus splendens* in Barpeta town, Assam. It had fallen from a mango *Mangifera indica* tree and was caught by some people. It died a half hour after we found it. Its death could have been the result of injury due to wrong handling by its captors. Interestingly, on 24.vi.1997, a similar bird was found in this locality.

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[Editors' note: The authors have sent us a photograph of the albino crow.]

Further Note on 'Evidence for an extension of the breeding period of Red-rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica* in India'.

With reference to my previous note on the breeding period of Red-rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica* in Goa (Prasad 2004), there have been some recent taxonomic developments, which are of relevance. The Sri Lanka race of Red-rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica* has now been awarded full species status, Ceylon Swallow *Hirundo hyperythra* (Rasmussen and Anderton, *in press*) and therefore the breeding dates of the different forms warrants closer scrutiny.

Before the recent split of the Sri Lanka form the nesting season of the Red-rumped Swallow within India i.e. *erythroptgia*, was recorded as April to August, varying locally (Ali and Ripley 1983). The Sri Lanka form *hyperythra*, which has very distinctive deep chestnut underparts, was stated to breed 'chiefly March to July, but occasionally in September and from November to July (Phillips),' (Ali and Ripley 1983).

The birds seen collecting building material in Goa in October were obviously of the Indian race, *H. d. erythroptgia* and therefore extend the known breeding period of Red-rumped Swallow within India by two

months from August to October, one month longer than stated previously (Prasad 2004).

References

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John Gould's Century

Lt Gen. Baljit Singh's review of Isabella Tree's *The Birdman – the extraordinary story of John Gould* (*Newsletter for Ornithologists* vol. 1 no. 6, Nov.-Dec. 2004) prompts me to write this letter. Isabella Tree refers to the Zoological Society of London, where Gould was working at the time, of having acquired in 1830, "an unprecedented collection of bird skins from the Himalayas," which led to Gould bringing out his *A century of birds from the Himalaya mountains*.

She says that no one knows who made this donation of bird skins to the Society. Two years later, in 1832, the Society received another collection of bird skins from Nepal belonging to, "a Mr B. H. Hodgson who was then serving in the British army in India."

Now, the all-too brief accounts I have seen of the history of Indian ornithology prior to A. O. Hume refer to the work of only Hodgson as far as birds of the Himalayan region are concerned. (Brian Houghton Hodgson was the British Resident in Nepal between 1820 and 1844.) Can any of your readers throw light on who had made these collections that preceded Hodgson and how they reached the Zoological Society of London in 1830?

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[Editors' note: The source of the paintings is still not clear. McAllan and Bruce (2002. Systematic notes on Asian birds. 27. On the dates of publication of John Gould's "A Century of Birds from the Himalaya Mountains". *Zoologische Verhandlungen, Leiden* 340: 161-178), simply state, "According to Vigors (1831), these specimens were apparently obtained during a recent expedition to India."]

Editorial

I suggest you ensure that the editorial does not become space for your own bird watching experiences as indeed the Vol. 1 No. 6 one has. The editorial should be reflecting our critical appraisal of the way things are going – policy, management, etc. Your birding should go as an article. In this way we would in fact have your company as a birdwatcher yet have you develop into a thoughtful leader of the movement.

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Yellow Bittern *Ixobrychus sinensis*

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