

NEWSLETTER

FOR ORNITHOLOGISTS

Vol. 1 No. 3

May-June 2004



READY-RECKONER

Bird conservation organisations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Saving Asia's threatened birds:

http://www.birdlife.net/action/science/species/asia_strategy/pdfs.html/

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Editor Emeritus: Zafar Futehally
2205 Oakwood Apartment,
Jakkasandra Layout, Koramangala,
3rd Block, 8th Main,
Bangalore 560034, India.
Email: zafar123@vsnl.net

Editor: Aasheesh Pittie
P.O. Box # 2, Banjara Hills,
Hyderabad 500034, India.
Email: aasheesh@vsnl.in

Associate Editor: Dr V. Santharam
Institute of Bird Studies & Natural History,
Rishi Valley 517352, Chittoor District,
Andhra Pradesh, India.
Email: birds@rishivalley.org

Newsletter for Ornithologists

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

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Editor, Newsletter for Ornithologists,
P.O. Box # 2, Banjara Hills,
Hyderabad 500034, India.
Email: aasheesh@vsnl.in

Editorial

Monitoring bird populations

We all keep field notes of our observations. We add to them regularly. Sometimes, when we hit a jackpot, we endeavour to send them to a newsletter or journal, for a wider readership. This however, does not contribute much to our understanding of the larger tapestry that weaves together the pattern of contemporary bird life?

We cannot monitor bird populations in this way. Not for the entire country. Just like your individual line transect or point count, we need thousands of point counts (tens of thousands some day!) on *one* appointed day, or two, annually, over several years, to reveal the ebb and flow pattern of avian populations. Such an exercise has succeeded in the West, with telling effect. The advocacy of the data is so powerful that it moulds government policy. A concerted effort in this direction is absolutely imperative in India. In the years to come, it will become the litmus test for our environment.

The blueprint for such a project should be minimalist to succeed. The Bombay Natural History Society (B.N.H.S.) already coordinates two countrywide censuses. The Salim Ali Bird Count in November and the Asian Waterbird Census in January. The potential of the former is enormous and should be tapped with adequate and timely publicity. The latter is a great success.

Besides indicating the rise and fall of bird populations, our notes also record their distribution over the land. We can easily collate this data on computer using L. Shyamal's versatile software, "Birdspot"¹ [CD-ROM, Rs. 200/-, email: necindia@vsnl.net]. Periodically, if your data is sent to Shyamal, he could enter it all in a single computer and publish an annual report on the distribution of India's birds. Rarities are recorded and highlighted on the Internet's mailing groups and in the print media. But the spread or disappearance of commoner birds is subtle and might be easily overlooked. *Birdspot* might be the tool to gather this data.

This issue and the Internet

Kiran Srivastava tells us of his visit to Corbett National Park with raptorophile Rishad Naoroji. As we go to press, a Hooded Pitta *Pitta sordida*, has been found breeding (for the first time) in this wonderful park (Narayan V. Raman's email of 6.vi.2004, on nathistory-india mailing list). William Selover writes about his trip to Keoladeo National Park and updates us on the problems that it faces. S. Subramanya, the heronries-man, has two other pet projects: the status of the Yellow-throated Bulbul *Pycnonotus xantholaemus* and the White-naped Tit *Parus nuchalis*. Here he queries whether the former is found in Orissa. Baljit Singh continues his succinct observations of bird life. Praveen and friends report the sighting of Yellow-breasted Babblers *Macronous gularis* in south India. Suhel Quader's note reminds us that common species need a close look every time we watch them. Repetition tends to dull the senses. Constant alertness is imperative for correct identification.

The Internet is a godsend at times, making life so much easier. On our website, <http://www.geocities.com/ashpittie/nlo.html/>, we have uploaded photographs and text, which form part of different articles, notes or announcements, in this issue. Some of the photographs are not top-quality, but have been used nonetheless as they illustrate / prove a point.

The rules of the game

We recommend the standardization of criteria terminology used to identify and categorize threatened species. Readers would do well to refer to "Islam, M. Z. and A. R. Rahmani, 2002. Threatened birds of India. *Buceros*. 7(1&2): 1-102" (write to Director, B.N.H.S., for a copy), before using terms like, "Critically endangered", "Vulnerable", etc., in their manuscripts. Similarly, status criteria like "Common", "Rare", etc., are relative terms. Authors should try and quantify them by devising a framework for their use, e.g., a species could be denoted as "Common" if it were spotted on 60 visits out of 80 to an area, etc.

The first issue has been greeted with great enthusiasm from Indian and foreign birdwatchers. Such encouragement motivates us tremendously. Let us enjoy our birds, while simultaneously attempting to find a connection between the meanest detail and the grand design.

Aasheesh Pittie

¹ The Editors have no commercial interest in this product.

Raptor-watching in Corbett National Park and beyond

Kiran Srivastava

17-C, Tower A, Viceroy Park, Thakur Village, Off Western Express Highway, Kandivali (East), Mumbai 400101. Email: kiranjo@vsnl.net

Going to Corbett National Park in Uttaranchal for me means pulling out the legendary Jim Corbett's books from the bookshelf and transporting myself to those very hills that he walked endlessly in search of man-eaters.

In March this year, my journey started from Delhi where I joined Rishad Naoroji, who has studied raptors in Corbett for seven years. Our drive to Dhikala took longer than expected as the road after the Moradabad by-pass got gradually worse. By the time we reached Dhangadi Gate, it was 15:00 hours. The gate closes at 16:30 hours sharp. Timings are strictly enforced and no visitors permitted to proceed to Dhikala if they arrive even 5 minutes late. Within the Park no driving is allowed between 12:00 noon and 14:30 hours and all vehicles must return to Dhikala by 18:00 hours. Sometimes it is frustrating when one has to rush back from wherever one is in order not get a fine levied. In Corbett, it is mandatory to take a guide whenever a tour of the Park is taken. The charges are Rs. 125/- per ride.

The final approach to Dhikala is a beautiful drive through a gigantic cathedral of Sal trees. It is worth stopping here for a while to soak in that jungle atmosphere. Late one morning we stopped here on hearing alarm calls of chital *Axis axis*. Was a tiger *Panthera tigris* abroad? Suddenly, a breeze brewed up and the Sal leaves started falling. When it intensified, I closed my eyes momentarily and could have sworn I heard rain. What a magical moment!

At the picturesque complex of Dhikala, we had a room in the old two-storey rest house where Jim Corbett once stayed. Sitting in its balcony, listening to the 'chaunk, chaunk' of the Large-tailed Nightjar *Caprimulgus macrurus* and the contact calls of elephants down by the river, was like a promise of good things to come.

Corbett is great for watching raptors and since I was with a raptorophile like Rishad, identification was swift. It was interesting to see various plumage phases of Steppe Eagles *Aquila nipalensis*, and differentiating those of the various adult and sub-adult vulture species.

Raptor-watching and sightings of vultures were our main objectives and we drove twice to see them, towards a place called Ringora across the Ramganga River. Along the route we usually saw a pair of Ospreys *Pandion haliaetus*, a soaring Oriental Honey-Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus*, a couple of Black-shouldered Kites *Elanus caeruleus*, on smaller trees, getting ready for breakfast. Calls of Pallas's Fish-Eagle *Haliaeetus leucoryphus* and the almost-human crying sounds of the Lesser Fish-Eagle *Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus* rent the air. Craning our necks upwards, we zoomed in on a couple of Egyptian Vultures *Neophron percnopterus*, Slender-billed Vultures *Gyps tenuirostris*, Himalayan Griffons *Gyps himalayensis*, Cinereous Vultures *Aegypius monachus*, and the Red-headed Vulture *Sarcogyps calvus*. These vultures have a sepulchral aura about them. Standing on the ground, from a distance, they could pass off as squatting men wrapped in shawls. Crested Serpent Eagles *Spilornis cheela* were rather common and courtship displays had begun. We also

spotted pairs of Shikras *Accipiter badius*. A Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus* and a Eurasian Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* too. We picked out Steppe Eagles and the fearsome, crested, Changeable Hawk Eagle *Spizaetus cirrhatu*s. Even more fantastic was the sighting of two large eagles standing on the riverbank in the distance. With fully white tails, they turned out to be White-tailed Eagles *Haliaeetus albicilla*. We were informed that these birds should have gone back to their breeding grounds by now. We found the nests of Crested Serpent Eagle and Changeable Hawk-eagle on Sambhar Road. The nests were within 100 metres of each other. Later we saw a Langur *Presbytis entellus* on the nest of the Crested Serpent Eagle.

The Chauras (open grassy areas) were sprinkled with Common Stonechat *Saxicola torquata* but revealed that Pied Bushchats *Saxicola caprata* were ubiquitous. We even spotted and photographed the much talked about Hodgson's Bushchat *Saxicola insignis* 200-odd metres from Dhikala. This bird has a white throat and is larger than the Common Stonechat. This was a high point of our trip. I had also seen the Rufous Sibia *Heterophasia capistrata* and later, after talking to Manoj Sharma, (he has prepared an excellent checklist of birds) learnt that this species is very rarely seen in Corbett.

Our next destination was Haldu Parao, which lies in the Sonanadi Sanctuary, a part of the Kalagarh Tiger Reserve, Division Landsdowne. It has neither electricity nor canteen services. We took provisions and a cook from Dhikala. We reached Haldu Parao after a leisurely 4-hour drive via Kanda. Once inside the main gate the road to the Forest Rest House (FRH) runs parallel to the Palain River flowing in a small gorge. Quite picturesque! We forded the river to reach the FRH. Built in 1892 the FRH is well maintained with two bedrooms on either side of the dining room. There is an electric fence running on solar power all around the compound to prevent elephants straying in. I was shown a very large tin truck (used for storage of food grains) with holes made by elephants. The smaller elephants were able to break down the door and enter the rooms. Life is tough for forest personnel here. Water has to be fetched from the river below.

For two evenings, we observed a pair of Large-tailed Nightjars *Caprimulgus macrurus* in what seemed to be a pre-mating ritual in the open space around the FRH.

At around 18:45 hours the nightjars would start their usual 'chaunk, chaunk' calls. One of them would sit on a wooden pole and call with both wings drooping. The other would then land on the open ground, lie flat and make guttural sounds with its pure white throat puffed up. Ali and Ripley, *Handbook of the birds of India and Pakistan*: Vol. 4, (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1983), compare this second call to the croaking of bullfrogs. This bird (the female) would then shuffle around at the same spot with its tail and wings spread out.

Every now and then, she would upend her posterior at an angle of approximately 70 degrees and her croaking calls would increase in intensity whilst she was on the ground. She would fly a little, land in another spot, and repeat these actions. The male uttering

his 'chaunk, chaunk' calls would fly down and very briefly land on her as if for mating. This behavior was repeated a number of times.

Another highpoint for me was seeing Great Slaty Woodpeckers *Mulleripicus pulverulentus*. I had not seen them on the second morning; barely had I put my shoes I rushed outside hearing loud birds calls. Lo and behold! Five Great Slaty Woodpeckers working close together on a tree trunk. Their calls are as distinct as they are loud. We had one more occasion to hear and observe them. We decided then and there that if we ever located a nest we would endeavour to set up a hide and study their breeding habits.

Four kilometers from the FRH at Kakri Dang Chaur, we counted 30 vultures. In this motley bunch, we saw one White-backed Vulture *Gyps bengalensis* and two Slender-billed Vultures. An Egyptian Vulture was harassing an immature Griffon Vulture.

Although we did not actually stop to check birds other than raptors and vultures, I did notice that male Peafowl *Pavo cristatus* were displaying and calling throughout the day and well into the evening. Indian Grey Hornbills *Ocyrceros birostris* were everywhere. Every now and then, we heard a commotion of 'demented laughter' from White-crested Laughing Thrushes *Garrulax leucolophus*. More than a dozen Black Storks *Ciconia nigra* were seen floating on thermals in Haldu Parao. A large hawk (*Accipiter* sp.), with a whitish underside and a lot of barring and streaks, was probably a Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*. The Himalayan or Blue Whistling Thrush *Myophonus caeruleus* was very common and seen everywhere. They are more conspicuous along the roads up in the hills.

Having completed the first part of our trip, we headed further up into the hills. Our destination was Ranikhet and Pangot, near Nainital, to observe vultures at slaughterhouses and garbage dumps.

From Haldu Parao we drove via Domunda (at the confluence of Ramganga and Kosi Rivers) to Mohan. A little after Mohan we stopped at Kwality Inn (famous with visiting birdwatchers) for a late lunch of *pakor*s and tea. Rishad pointed out the nest of Pallas's Fish Eagle high up in a bare tree close to Kwality Inn. One chick was seen sitting up at the nest. A Black Eagle *Ictinaetus malayensis* seen from the road. We reached Ranikhet late in the evening.

We drove to Chowbattia the highest point where the oak forest is still good. Chowbattia is now under the Army's control. A soldier accompanied us. We were returning after two years to see whether Common Kestrels *Falco tinnunculus* still nested in Kautilya Hall. They did! Kautilya Hall, built in 1910, was originally a church but is now used by the local army division for conferences.

Sadly, we did not see a single vulture either at the abattoir or at the garbage dumping ground. However, a good number of Steppe Eagles were seen. These eagles are more scavengers than hunters. Even the locals living in the vicinity were acutely aware that vultures disappeared 3 years ago.

Two days later, at Nainital, we had a quick look at the garbage-dump on the hillside, but found only Steppe Eagles and Large-billed Crows *Corvus macrorhynchos*. Rishad told me that these crows are now soaring and circling overhead as if imitating vultures and their fiercer cousins, the eagles. Not wanting to stop we drove straight through the town of Nainital for Pangot, 15 kms away. The trees were thicker above the town but some patches were getting bare. Perhaps, a sign of demand for firewood?

We took a short detour to the oak and deodar forest of Kilbury at 7,200 feet. There is a nice FRH but the interiors are not

maintained. We could see Cheena Peak, the highest point at 8,500 feet. Mohan, the forest guard kindly gave us tea that we had with cheese and crackers. Another frugal lunch! The wind was up and the air a bit chilly!

After telling ourselves that this was an exciting area for birds we headed for our last destination, Pangot, where we were booked to stay at Mohit Aggarwal and Pawan Puri's "Jungle Lore Birding Lodge". It is indeed a well-managed property with extremely nice and cozy cottages. Birders are welcomed with open arms. As already remarked in the visitors' book by previous visitors the cook does an admirable job in serving good, wholesome meals.

The next morning Lokesh, the young hotel guide, beckoned us outside, pointing to female Maroon Orioles *Oriolus traillii*, Black-throated Tits *Aegithalos concinnus* and a host of Himalayan birds that came regularly to feed on the bird table and the trees in front of the hotel. Mornings were spent with toast in one hand and binoculars in the other. I noticed one almost bare tree with small clustered leaves. Each leaf had a red centre. Fresh leaves were sprouting from ends of branches. Warblers and Tits were among its branches picking insects all day and every bird we saw visited this 'buffet spread' throughout the day. The local gardener told us the local name - "dharmouli". Across the valley, we could see a large patch of bird-droppings on a hillside. We learnt later that that was a regular nest site of the Bearded Vulture *Gypaetus barbatus*.

At Vinayak, which is beyond Pangot, the enthusiastic Lokesh pointed out several lifers. A silent pair of Mistle Thrushes *Turdus viscivorus*, Rufous Sibia *Heterophasia capistrata*, Grey-winged Blackbird *Turdus bouboul*, and Rufous-bellied Woodpecker *Dendrocopos hyperythrus*. Rufous Sibilas are very common in these parts. We were lucky to spot two Goral- mountain goats.

On our way back through Nainital, we once again passed the garbage-dumping area. No Vultures. Nothing. Just the usual Steppe Eagles and the acrobatic large-billed Crows.

During the entire trip that we traversed by road, only one White-backed Vulture was seen in Kakri Dang Chaur, Kalagarh Reserve Forest.

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The Birds of Bharatpur

William C. Selover*

1257 Union Street, San Francisco, CA 94109, U.S.A. Email: WSelover@ix.netcom.com

Our late afternoon arrival at the Keoladeo National Park in Bharatpur coincided with the beginning of the hot season and greeted us with the dry breezes of an impending dust storm. Our hosts warned us that this fine sandy dust conveyed by an arid wind would be the first of the season on this eastern Rajasthan frontier. This was my initial visit to Bharatpur's world-renowned preserve, locally known as Ghana (meaning "dense"), but I had long known about these remarkable 29 square kilometers of wildlife paradise that regularly hosts more than 375 bird species. Having met and visited with Dr. Salim Ali in the early 1960s, I was well aware of his pioneering work in establishing this sanctuary as a national park and as a Ramsar site in 1981 and later as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1985. I was also aware that during his lifetime Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had personally promised to support the establishment of a research center at Bharatpur in Dr. Ali's name.

By the time we arrived at the park's Prince of Wales Gate, entered the grounds and ventured southward by car as far as motorized vehicles were allowed, the wind gusts had dissipated, and the threatened dust storm fortuitously held off. It was about 17:00 in the afternoon when we transferred to bicycle rickshaws and were treated to a rich tapestry of sights and sounds as we wended our way through dense forest, grass and wetlands along the brick and dirt pathways.

We were first greeted by flocks of Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* and Jungle Crows *Corvus macrorhynchos*. Small herds of Blue Bull *Boselaphus tragocamelus* (India's largest antelope) and Spotted Deer *Axis axis* grazed opposite us in the dry grassland near the desiccated, cracked shoreline of shrunken ponds on both sides of our trail. We could hear the occasional cries of invisible jackals.

The variety and diversity of parkland birdlife soon blanketed our field of vision – one blessing of this park being that wildlife are accessible from very close up, and binoculars are needed to distinguish only the subtlest of markings and colorings. Immediately we caught sight of Brainfever Birds *Hierococyx varius*, Common Cuckoos, Greater Coucals *Centropus sinensis*, Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*, White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus*, Oriental White Ibis *Threskiornis melanocephalus*, and a variety of storks: White-necked *Ciconia episcopus*, Black-necked *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus*, Painted *Mycteria leucocephala* and Asian Openbill *Anastomus oscitans*.

Then there was a Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus*, with elegant markings, an Oriental Magpie-Robin *Copsychus saularis* and small flocks of Median Egrets *Mesophoyx intermedia*. There were Common Cranes *Grus grus*, Oriental Honey-Buzzards *Pernis ptilorhynchus*, and Plain Prinia *Prinia inornata*, all punctuated by the striking blue and brown coloring of Indian Rollers *Coracias benghalensis*. There were Little Cormorants *Phalacrocorax niger*, Greater Spotted Eagles *Aquila clanga*, Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*, Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*, Wood Sandpipers *Tringa glareola*, Spot-billed Ducks *Anas poecilorhyncha* and Little Egrets *Egretta garzetta*. Nearby, Jungle

Babblers *Turdoides striatus* lived up to their reputation for chattering and rummaging in groups of a half-dozen or more (giving them the popular appellation, "Seven Sisters").

In the gathering twilight, we could make out several Cattle Egrets *Bubulcus ibis* in the near distance feeding alongside the numerous feral cows that populate the park and travel in herds to forage for food. Also in the farther distance we caught the impressive sight of a pair of Sarus Cranes *Grus antigone*, the largest birds in the Park, sometimes gaining a height of up to 165 cm. We were simultaneously treated to the signature sight of a several Darters *Anhinga melanogaster*, some swimming for fish with their long necks appearing to travel like a snake just above water (hence its common name), others spreading their wings in branches of trees to dry them out in the warm, early evening air.

As the heat moderated slightly and dusk began to settle over the preserve, roosting time arrived and trees along our path filled with birds. Waddling along the side of the trail, the Common Hoopoe *Upupa epops* treated us to its soft call, hoo-po, hoo-po-po. Our guide's sharp eyes spotted a rare Collared Scops-Owl *Otus bakkamoena* rousing itself from sleep high in the fronds of a date palm ready to resume its nocturnal schedule of feeding on beetles and other insects and on mice and lizards. At the same time, we saw a Spotted Owlet *Athene brama*, a Purple Moorhen *Porphyrrio porphyrio* and several Asian Pied Starlings *Sturnus contra*.

As the light faded and we turned toward the park entrance, we paused and observed a gathering of assorted ducks and teal, including a pair of Brahminy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*, but it would not be until the next day, on a different path, when we would encounter more of these visitors – as well as a greater gathering of the four famous resident ducks.

Next morning, the 4:45 a.m. wakeup call from the front desk of our hotel (a converted former hunting lodge belonging to the Maharaja of Bharatpur whose family had used the park for hunting for more than 100 years) seemed unnecessarily early, but by 6 a.m. we were clear-eyed and back at the park, and the early hour sacrifice was to be rewarded many fold. It was a dry, clear morning, with a touch of coolness still in the air. The earlier threat of a dust storm had disappeared entirely over night. This time our trek was on foot, westward from the main trail and past the forest headquarters toward the village of Mallab, lying just outside the two-meter-high stone, concrete and barbed wire wall that surrounds the park, protected from intruders by chards of broken glass embedded in the top of the wall.

A lively gathering of Red-vented Bulbuls *Pycnonotus cafer* greeted us as we moved onto the pathway beyond the modest World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) offices, their clear calls reaching us even before we had made them out in the light scrub jungle among the acacia trees. Then in rapid succession we spotted an Ashy Drongo *Dicrurus leucophaeus* with its deeply forked tail, a Eurasian Collared-Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*, several Brahminy Starlings *Sturnus pagodarum*, and a pair of Indian Treepies *Dendrocitta vagabunda*. Suddenly across our line of sight a brilliant turquoise-winged White-breasted Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis* glided with

wings outstretched from a nearby acacia across the algae-laden green pond water and alighted in another more distant tree.

We encountered several Little Cormorants, Indian Pond-Herons *Ardeola grayii*, an Asian Pied Starling, a Little Brown Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis* and a number of feeding Eurasian Spoonbills *Platalea leucorodia* moving their flat, spatulate bills back and forth across the surface of the water as they pushed forward on their tall, black legs. Then a handsomely marked Bronze-winged Jacana *Metopidius indicus* appeared, its elongated, widely spread toes allowing it to move with ease over floating tangles of vegetation.

Again we observed darters perched on tree branches drying their wings in the thin morning sunshine.

We spotted some Rose-ringed Parakeets *Psittacula krameri* and an assortment of Eurasian Spoonbills, Oriental White Ibis, Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*, resident Rufous-backed Shrikes *Lanius schach* and all kinds of egrets. We saw Bar-headed Geese *Anser indicus*, Northern Shovellers *Anas clypeata*, Little Grebes *Tachybaptus ruficollis*, Lesser Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna javanica*, which is one of the park's four resident ducks, the others being Cotton Teal *Nettapus coromandelianus*, Comb Duck *Sarkidiornis melanotos* and Spot-billed Duck.

We did catch sight of the elusive and beautiful Red-throated Flycatcher *Ficedula parva*.

But there were some disappointments:

- Learning that the famous Siberian Crane *Grus leucogeranus* has not been sighted here for two years was a serious regret – since Bharatpur has remained the endangered crane's only migration site in India for the last 30 years. Some authorities say the rare cranes have likely been hunted to extinction for their coveted meat as they traveled to and from Siberia on their 6,000 km migratory flight through tribal areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Some blame their absence on the drought of the past two years. Others contend that the growth of amphibious grasses (mostly *Paspalum destichum*) in the park's waterways has complicated feeding in these wetlands and discouraged the cranes' reappearance. Based on a combination of these factors, some close observers speculate that the Siberian Crane may never again be seen at this site as part of a natural migration.
- Another disappointment was learning that none of the usual visiting pelicans appeared at the park this season – not the Great White *Pelecanus onocrotalus*, the Spot-billed *Pelecanus philippensis*, or the Dalmatian *Pelecanus crispus*. It was reportedly not a good year for fish eaters of any kind at Keoladeo, and the combination of drought and low waters, the intrusion of unwanted grasses in the wetlands, and the inadequate stocking of fish have apparently conspired to keep away the 1,000 or so pelicans that annually visit for two or three days at a time at different intervals. Although water allocation from the Ajan Dam is controlled and released to the park through sluice gates throughout the year and the wildlife park is theoretically a priority, there are realistically two sides to this story, and the needs of the surrounding villagers tend to compete with the needs of the park. In the end, pragmatic (or political) considerations may tend to be delimiting factors in final water allocation decisions.
- Although we missed seeing the park's famed pythons sunning themselves in the branches of the trees, it was not because

they had vacated the park. It was just that in the heat they remained hidden in their cool, underground lairs as we searched for them in the northern, forested part of the park. Fortunately, they remain on site and appear regularly.

Our return path took us directly past the newly completed, but now temporarily abandoned, Wildlife Interpretation Center, built by the WWF. The Centre was funded by the Austrian manufacturer of binoculars, Swarovski Optik. With construction of this substantial two-story building completed except for the landscaping (see photo), this solitary site tucked into the woods off a main pathway appears to symbolize the consequences of unresolved conservation policy and forest management practices – and suggests that not all is harmonious in this idyllic setting.

The story is well known in conservation circles, but, suffice it to say, while the state Forest Department had approved the WWF undertaking apparently in good faith, not everyone agreed that the Interpretation Center situated in this location was a good idea. At the time of our visit, the Centre's opening had been stayed by the courts on grounds that its location inside the preserve represented too great a challenge to the park's natural setting and ecosystem. The park's honorary warden initiated the legal action, and he reportedly wants the building torn down. For similar reasons, his allies take issue with the paving and asphaltting of the park's paths, an undertaking that has also been stopped for the time being.

Clearly there remain sharply differing views of park management that that need to be taken into account in any appraisal of the park's current status. A distinct philosophical contrast may be drawn between those who view park management, on the one hand, as a law-enforcement, security task, and those, on the other hand, who seek to accommodate traditional community practices in managing the park – taking into account various long-respected grazing, gathering and religious practices. In fact, existing national public policy, laws and international conventions tend to favor the former. According to this view, it would be dereliction of duty to ignore the rules and regulations of national parks, including the requirements of India's "Wildlife Protection Act," which in Section 35, for example, provides: "No grazing of any livestock shall be permitted in a National Park, and no livestock shall be allowed to enter therein..."

By enforcing such laws, authorities rendered illegal ancient practices followed by thousands of villagers over time and instantly labeled them "criminals" for continuing practices that more or less had preserved and renewed the resources of the region over many generations.

When the management of the park began to build the wall around the property in 1981 to enforce the various laws and regulations, it effectively restricted worshippers from visiting an important temple dedicated to Lord Shiva (or Keoladeo, after whom the park is named) located in the center of the park and revered by the surrounding populace. These restrictions instilled deep bitterness among the devout. In addition, after the wall went up villagers who attempted to continue using the resources of the park – as they had for centuries – clashed with authorities and several villagers were tragically shot and killed. No one had consulted them before the wall went up.

Thus, a key unresolved issue clearly involved improved community relations, with a need for the park management to build better relations with the 15,000 inhabitants of the approximately 20 villages that surround the park – the closest being Mallab,

Ramnagar, Aghapur, Barpura, Darpura, Babnera and Jatoli.

Efforts to improve relations were accelerated after the fatal clash between villagers and the authorities. Various informal and formal steps were undertaken to accommodate the park's neighbors, while at the same time retaining the integrity of the park and enforcing the laws and regulations that govern its management. For one thing, villagers were gradually hired as guards, caretakers, guides, and as other paid staff of the park, giving them a stake in the park's success.

In the meantime, the Bombay Natural History Society (B.N.H.S.) and others conducted extensive studies on the park, in part to determine the effects on the ecosystem of the prohibition against cattle grazing.

Following a 10-year study (sponsored in part by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service), the B.N.H.S. issued a report in 1991 concluding that the prohibition against water buffalo in the park had a perverse effect. Just as suspected, this prohibition allowed the pond grasses that buffalo typically feed on to grow unchecked, clogging the waterways and limiting access to the waters by birds that depend on that access for their livelihoods or even survival – possibly even including the Siberian Crane.

The B.N.H.S. report summarized the villagers' views:

- “Buffaloes are the main source of income for a few families. The major cooking fuel for the villagers is dung cake. The absence of buffaloes leads to collection of wood for fuel, which would further strain the Park's system. In general the people in all the villages surveyed are for conservation of the Park, but strongly plead for permission to graze their buffaloes inside the Park.”
- And: “The traditional major primary consumers of the wetland of the Park, the buffaloes, should be brought back to control the unchecked growth of *Paspalum distichum*.”
- Finally: “The spread and colonisation of *Vetiveria zizanioides* (*khus* grass) and *Desmostachya bipinnanta* should be controlled by adopting the traditional method of allowing villagers to collect them under the supervision of Park authorities.”

The B.N.H.S. proposal called for the admission of 500 buffalo into the park's waters for a test period to see if they could control the growth of these grasses without otherwise damaging the environment. This plan apparently turned out to be too difficult to implement.

Subsequently, the WWF stepped in to sponsor a confidence-building process within the community designed to bring together the various contending viewpoints, including those of the villagers. They used a Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) model to conduct a local workshop. The WWF organized this workshop on the invitation of the Department of Forests, Government of Rajasthan, which is responsible for managing the parks. The director and staff members of the park, representatives of the B.N.H.S., and managers of other Ramsar sites were also members of the 16-member team.

The WWF report, published in 1996, clearly supported “accommodation” rather than a strict “legalistic” approach to park management. It noted:

- The rules, regulations and acts of conservation at a national level may not always contribute to the conservation of National Parks.
- Grazing inside KNP [Keoladeo National Park] by buffaloes

is needed as part of the ecosystem management.

- Immediate actions such as extending the grass cutting times and days, recognizing the rights to pray inside temples in the Park, allowing children to collect forest fruits etc. may be the starting point.

In an appraisal several years later, the WWF concluded that, while dialog had been opened between the management and the villagers, few of the specific recommendations had been implemented.

This 1999 WWF report again underscored its accommodationist approach:

“World Heritage listings, etc. are useful tools in conserving wetlands. But, such international declarations have to take into consideration the local realities. The traditional rights of the people have to be respected. They need to be consulted before such international, national declarations. If they are not consulted, people find ways to violate the law. No acts, walls, fences, watch-towers, guns, penalties etc. can ‘protect’ the wetlands except such measures have been accepted as part of the process accepted by the people during the consultations.”

Today, the WWF and B.N.H.S. proposals remain in largely limbo, although some ameliorating steps apparently have been taken.

For example, every year now when the pond grasses get too long, villagers appear on scene to cut back and harvest the overgrowth, making for the villagers a useful and profitable enterprise. Whether this arrangement is formal, based on the granting of temporary permits, or informal, is unclear, but it is apparently done openly and, in the end, it tends partially to serve the purpose of clearing clogged waterways.

Other concerns:

- We could not tell for certain if the stream of villagers we witnessed trekking in single file across the grasslands carrying freshly harvested lumber on their shoulders was a formal arrangement or not. But it clearly looked like firewood harvesting to us.
- The appearance of herds of feral and domestic cattle roaming the parklands was unexpected given the various regulations regarding such practices (and the well-enforced prohibition against the grazing of water buffalo). Reports have it that villagers continue to breach fences to dispose of old or sick cattle and to set their own cattle loose in the reserve for fodder.
- On our second day of visiting the park we traversed a stretch of ground near the temporary WWF offices that had suffered from wildfire, decimating several acres of natural setting. There remains some speculation that this fire may have resulted from arson.

The Keoladeo National Park at Bharatpur is a remarkable treasure and a rich natural resource for India and for the world's ecological well-being. Balancing the numerous conflicting forces at play cannot make managing it an easy task. Patience under such circumstances must be granted to those responsible. But one wonders if it is a best use of scarce time, money and other resources to make contending over the opening of a Wildlife Interpretation Center a top priority when there may be larger issues at work here that need to be addressed more urgently. Then, again, perhaps the Center, as a WWF project, has become a contentious symbol, representing unacceptable accommodationist philosophy to those committed to a strict law-and-order approach to managing the site.

One is also tempted to wonder if the Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology & Natural History had been established here, as promised (rather than in Anaikatty, Coimbatore), some of these

larger issues involving the park's health and longevity might have remained more clearly in focus – simply as a benefit of its proximity.

* *The writer is a former special assistant to the administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)*

Does the Yellow-throated Bulbul *Pycnonotus xantholaemus* occur in Orissa?

S. Subramanya

PHT Scheme, 'J' Block, GKVK Campus, University of Agricultural Sciences, Bangalore 560 065. Email: subbus@vsnl.com
(With one figure.)

The Yellow-throated Bulbul *Pycnonotus xantholaemus* (YTB) is endemic to peninsular India and is known to occur in southern Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu with a few records from Kerala. Although, Ali and Ripley (1987) indicate its occurrence in South India with the range extending, possibly till Orissa, hitherto no record of its occurrence in Orissa is available. For that matter, no effort has been made to evaluate Salim Ali's suspicion of its occurrence in Orissa. It is also not known on what basis Salim Ali suspected the possible occurrence of the species in Orissa.

Since 1990, after an accidental sighting of the species at Hampi, a World Heritage Centre in Karnataka, over 25 sites in South India have been visited by my colleagues, J.N. Prasad, S. Karthikeyan and myself in search of the bulbul. Further, based on a thorough review of literature and personal communications with other birdwatchers, in all, the species has now been recorded at nearly 75 localities spread across the three South Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala (Subramanya *et al.* in press; Fig. 1). Our surveys indicate that the species typically occurs in boulder-strewn hillocks covered with vegetation ranging from open scrub to moist deciduous forest, although scrub vegetation appears to be predominant in most YTB habitats. Thus, the species occurs on most inland hills of south India covering the Eastern Ghats, inland hills of southern Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka and on the drier eastern hill slopes of Western Ghats, from where the species has been sighted at a couple of localities (Subramanya *et al.* in press).

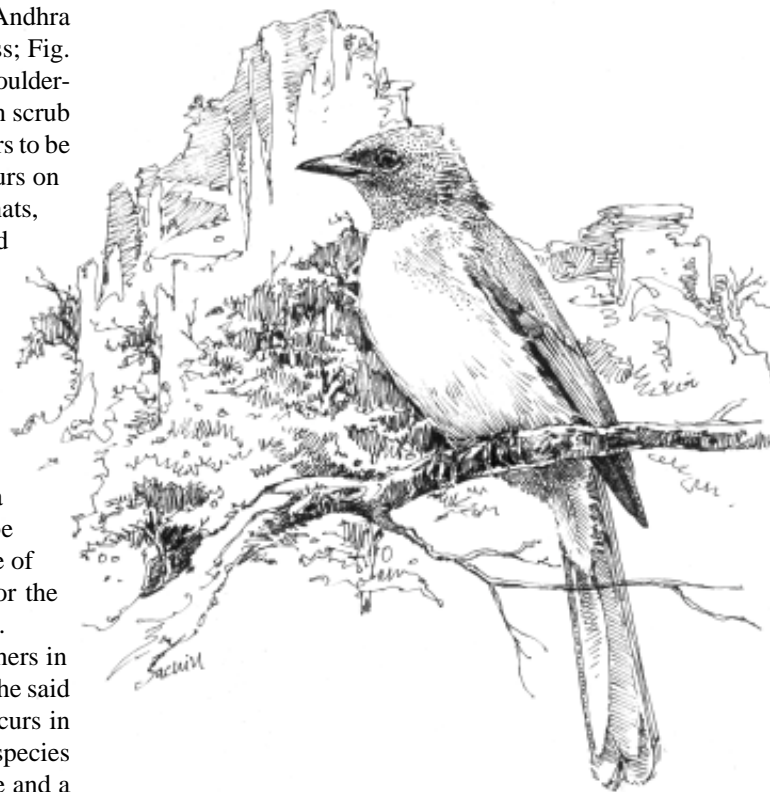
In October 1998, while travelling from Kharagpur to Madras by train, I found some hills in Orissa that looked very much like those inhabited by YTB in South India. These hills were nearly a kilometer to the west of the railway tracks between Kaluga (or Raluga?) and Gangadharapura (found along and west of Chilka Lake). It could well be possible that Salim Ali may have suspected the occurrence of the species based on the occurrence of suitable habitat for the species that he might have seen during his forays in Orissa.

Through this note, I am appealing to all the birdwatchers in Orissa or those who may have a chance to be in the field in the said area to initiate surveys to find out if the species really occurs in Orissa and thus validate Salim Ali's circumspection. If the species is found in this region, it will be a new record for the state and a definite range extension for the species. Once this is done, more

detailed surveys can be organised to understand its status and distribution within the state.

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Yellow-throated Bulbul *Pycnonotus xantholaemus*

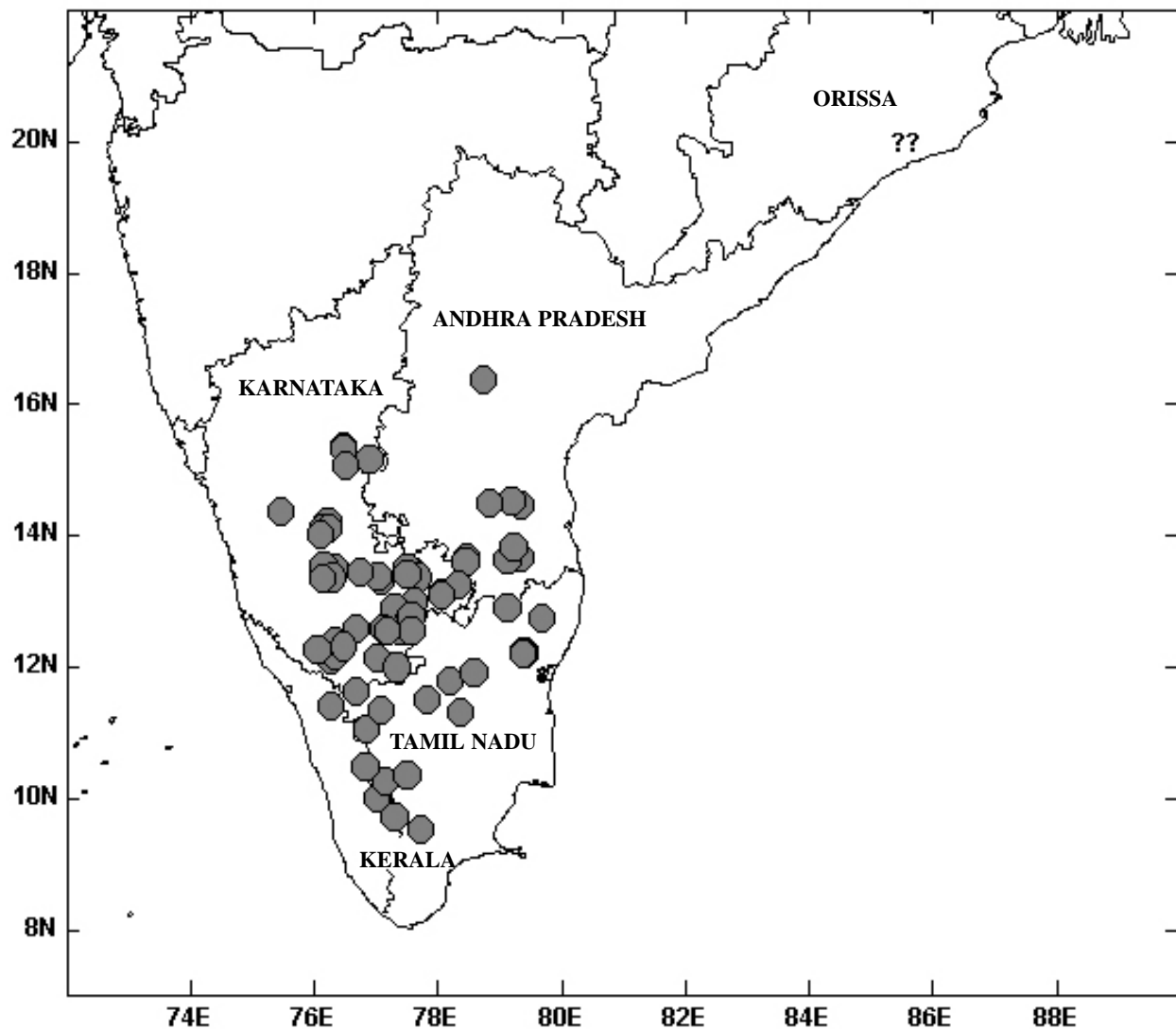


Figure 1. Distribution of Yellow-throated Bulbul localities in India (as per Subramanya *et al.* in press).

Barn Owls *Tyto alba*, Black-shouldered Kites *Elanus caeruleus*, Jirds and Gerbils

Lt. General Baljit Singh

House 219, Sector 16-A, Chandigarh 160015

The charms of being an amateur naturalist lie in the fact that the process of gathering Natural History knowledge outlasts the man. And excitement comes every now and then when the amateur is able to relate an outdoors occurrence to a law of Natural History. Tara Gandhi's most interesting article (*Newsletter for Birdwatchers* Vol. 43, No. 6, November-December 2003) and her observations that "The population of many species of birds of prey...tends to follow the population uprise-decline by Lemmings and...other rodents..." reminded me of a similar interface between the presence of Barn Owls *Tyto alba* and Black-shouldered Kites *Elanus caeruleus* on the one hand and Indian Desert Jirds *Meriones hurrianae*, on the other, which I chanced to witness once.

In 1984, I was stationed at a place that was the boast of the

Indian Army as the largest and the first planned cantonment in Asia. It had been in the making since 1972. A 900-acre patch earmarked for future needs had, by the inter-play of forces of Nature, over 12 years, become a pristine habitat of the semi-desert flora and fauna. Located within a military security area, there was no trespass or poaching and so grasses, bushes, trees, birds, mammals, rodents and reptiles that inhabit the Thar Desert region flourished here in great abundance.

There was one very large copse of "Babul" trees, *Acacia nilotica*, spread over nearly ten acres and after a gap of about two kilometers, there were "Khejri" trees, *Prosopis cineraria*, in an equally extensive cluster. The space between was scattered mostly with bushes of "Aak", *Calotropis procera*, "Kaer", *Capparis*

aphylla, “Ber” *Zizyphus mauritiana* and grasses of the arid semi-desert covered almost the entire floor space. The Babul trees were the favoured perch and roost of the Black-shouldered kites; they were so numerous that I shied from enumeration. The Barn owls, fewer in numbers (45+) perched exclusively on the Khejri trees. They were most supportive of my attempts at hand-held, snapshot bird photography. Being nocturnal, they hated to move or fly by day [unless harassed by crows (Corvidae) and Common Mynas *Acridotheres tristis*] so they shut their eyelids and pretended they had not seen me wielding the camera! The Black-shouldered kites allowed me no such indulgence.

One flank of this wilderness-niche rested on an irrigation channel, brick-lined inside and compressed mud on the outer side. There was one 3km stretch of the channel, which I found extensively honeycombed with burrows of the Indian desert jird. As they are diurnal, they were encountered in large numbers always and anytime of the day. Mischievous and playful though the Desert jirds were, they were always on high alert against the Black-shouldered kites, their fierce predators.

This aroused my curiosity about the Barn owl’s prey. One moonlit night I saw them fly over and beyond the irrigation channel towards cropped fields. A few days later, I found considerable rodent burrows in the sandy fallow fields and telltale signs of the presence of more gerbils. As they did not show up by day, I presumed that they were the kindred species (Family Muridae), the Indian Gerbil *Tatera indica*, which being nocturnal, would be the natural prey of the Barn owl.

Then came the summer rains. Unfortunately, for the gerbils, there

was one spell almost round the clock for five days; constant drizzle interspersed with sessions of heavy downpour. When the skies cleared at last, there was not a single gerbil to be seen anywhere. Their burrows had been flooded and damaged. When I did not see any Black-shouldered kites either, I made haste to the perches of Barn owls. They too had cleared out to the last bird. The unusually excessive rainfall had evidently triggered the survival instinct among gerbils to move out to higher ground (sand dunes). There was just no evidence of any of them having perished through predation or any other calamity. Likewise, the Barn owls and the Black-shouldered kites having lost their prey-base must have felt obliged to look for pastures anew. I missed their presence but was happy to have witnessed at first hand a law of Natural History operating at such a fundamental level. Not just, that, I was also able to see for myself the fascinating architecture of gerbil burrows. As is believed, the burrow of the male was a straightforward tunnel with one entrance and one exit. However, the burrows of females had several interconnected chambers each leading to a separate exit. As the female gives birth to four or more at a time, she needs larger space and more than one exit for a quick get-away by her progeny in an emergency. So here was another elementary survival strategy on display. Today, much of this habitat of the gerbils has already been encroached upon by the unsatisfied demands of urbanization and the Green Revolution. Just as Tara Gandhi opines that the prey-predator dynamics could very well have inspired “the fables and stories of mysterious mass suicide by Lemmings” so also the life history of the gerbils in India may become a mere story or a fable soon.

Recoveries from the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*

Zafar Futehally

2205 Oakwood Apartment, Jakkasandra Layout, Koramangala, 3rd Block, 8th Main, Bangalore 560034. Email: zafar123@vsnl.net

Towards the end of 1960, during an evening walk, Salim Ali suggested that we form a Birdwatcher’s Field Club of India. “It will encourage members to observe wild birds in the field, and make notes carefully, on the spot about their activities.” He said that a great deal of work had been done on the taxonomy of birds. “We have enough specimens in the collections of the Bombay Natural History Society, the British Museum of Natural History and the Indian Museum in Calcutta. The time has now come to study the life histories of our living birds about which we know so little. We do not even know the incubation periods of some of our common birds like the bulbuls.”

There was silence for some time and I broke in to say, “What about the theory that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush?” I am glad he did not flare up at this misguided bit of humour.

Our walk and our talk continued. I said that in the *Journal* of the Bombay Natural History Society (B.N.H.S.), in its ‘Miscellaneous’ section, the majority of notes related to birds. “Was it necessary to have a new organisation?” He was insistent that a separate Society, specifically devoted to birds, was necessary to make progress in ornithology and particularly, to get a large number of people involved in this fascinating and useful hobby. He said he was surprised at the response to the *Book of Indian birds* since its publication in 1941.

At that time, I wrote a monthly column, called “Birdwatcher’s Diary” in the *Times of India*, Bombay. I was also giving regular broadcasts on birds, which in fact resulted from one of the officials of A.I.R. Bombay, noticing my column in the *Times*. I was thereby, beginning to acquire a modicum of knowledge of our birds.

At a later meeting, Salim suggested that I start a “Newsletter for Birdwatchers” which would be the medium of the proposed Birdwatcher’s Field Club of India. In the end, the Field Club remained an idea. The “Newsletter” became a more tangible product and, I believe, succeeded in Salim Ali’s objective of creating a greater interest in birds.

I might mention here, that when the members of the Executive Committee of the B.N.H.S. heard about the proposed “Newsletter”, they were very upset and said that the B.N.H.S. itself was woefully short of members. A new organisation would result in further depletion. In one of the A.G.M.s of the period, there were only six members present and so their fears were justified. On the other hand, both Salim and I felt that if the “Newsletter” succeeded in kindling an interest among amateurs they might later decide to join the B.N.H.S. I cannot quote figures, but it is my impression that several young people, who first became subscribers of the “Newsletter” at Rs. 5/- per annum, later joined the B.N.H.S.

Producing a newsletter in those days, without computers, involved hard labour. The typist in Dynacraft (the organisation for which I worked) stayed close by and on a couple of days in the week he agreed to come at 07:00 hours to the office where I dictated the matter for publication. Fortunately, D'Cunha was an excellent typist and knew where to put the prepositions (unlike some of the typists I had to deal with later). After the material was typed, the problem was to transfer it on to stencils and then process it through the 'Gestetner' cyclostyling machine. I must here pay tribute to J. S. Serrao, the senior stenographer of the B.N.H.S., at the time. He agreed to do the stenciling at my house in Andheri. This involved a one-hour sweating journey in a crowded suburban train, and over a mile's walk from the station to our house. Serrao was almost as excited about the "Newsletter" as I was, and without his help and his deep interest in the subject, the "Newsletter" may have failed to take off.

Now let us proceed with describing the issues commencing from December 1960 onwards. It is a shame that I do not have the first issue, and I cannot remember at all what it contained. It must have been an interesting one judging from the comments I received and which I published in the January 1961 number.

"Thank you for the first Newsletter...I feel that we should start making members and collecting fees now," K.S. Shivraj Kumar of Jasdan, Saurashtra.

"I have read the copy with great interest. I am all for such a group," N.L. Khanolkar, Pune (Mr. Khanolkar was a well-known educationist).

"I have seen the first of your ornithology bulletins and I must say it reaches a very high standard. I shall look forward to seeing further copies. Will you please ask Salim to pay my subscription to this service?" Loke Wan Tho, Singapore.

As many of our readers know, Loke was one of the most generous, as well as the most competent of people, we have known. He financed many of Salim Ali's expeditions. Once when Salim complained about his troublesome old vehicle, Loke wired back, "Buy a new jeep immediately. Why the hell am I earning so much?"

Loke's secretary, Ann Talbot Smith, set an example by sending the subscriptions before the last day of every year.

"Thanks awfully for your letter of the 6th and for the bulletins for birdwatchers. I am afraid that these arrived after most of our team of birdwatchers had gone for the N.C.C. camp. I am however keeping them and will distribute them next term," Jim Gibson, Ajmer.

J. T. M. Gibson was the Principal of Mayo College, and perhaps the only Englishman who received both the Padmashri from the Government of India, and the Order of the British Empire (O.B.E.) from the Government of Great Britain.

Finally let me quote from someone who is still present and in Bangalore, "I am sure the News Letter can be developed into a first rate journal on ornithology. I shall be glad to give whatever help I can..." Joseph George, Dehra Dun.

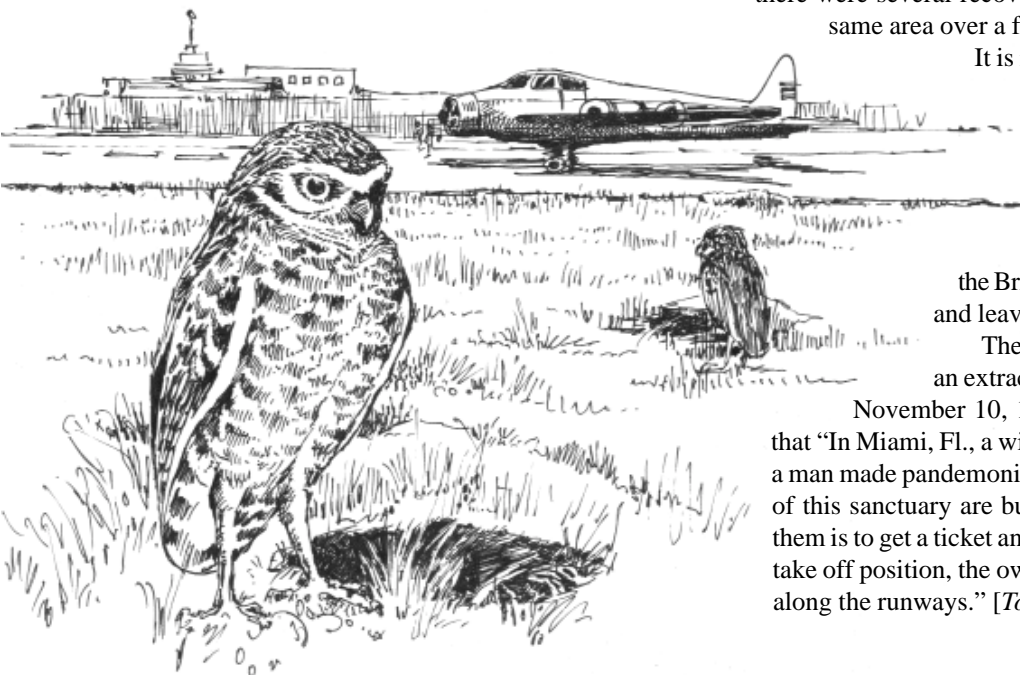
Joseph George indeed lived up to his word, proof reading the *Newsletter* manuscripts after it started to be printed by S. Sridhar in Bangalore, from 1988 onwards.

In the first issue of the *Newsletter*, apart from these comments, there was a note on bird ringing in India by Shivraj Kumar. "To study the pattern of migration Dr Salim Ali asked me to continue netting independently on a small scale in Jasdan. Nets were put up on 10th/11th and 20th/21st October 1960, and yielded 360 birds of which 263 were migrants...For both the amateur bird lover and the serious student, bird netting and ringing can be of great educational value. It is also exciting. One never knows what will next turn up in a mist net during the migration period."

It was a tragedy for ornithology and for his friends that Shivraj Kumar died so early. I remember operating with him during the netting sessions in Jasdan and the excitement of recovering previously ringed birds in the same area. A couple of species which I enjoyed handling at the mist nets in company with Shivraj Kumar were Orphean Warbler *Sylvia hortensis* and Greater Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*. Warblers, such lovely innocent creatures even in the hand, unlike several others who used their beaks and claws to good effect, seemed to love the Hingolghadh environment. The thorn forest and scrub was their ideal habitat in the 1960s and there were several recoveries of these two species in almost the same area over a few years

It is interesting to note that in this *Newsletter* I reproduced an item from "Current topics" in *Times of India* of 17 December 1960. The note referred to the "...shame but true, that we had done little in the last 10 years to add to the knowledge passed on to us by the British about the migratory birds which enter and leave this country every year."

The final item in this *Newsletter* (No. 2) was an extract from the *Christian Science Monitor* of November 10, 1960. It recorded the extraordinary fact that "In Miami, Fl., a wildlife sanctuary is located in the heart of a man made pandemonium of noise and activity. The inhabitants of this sanctuary are burrowing owls, and the only way to see them is to get a ticket and get on a plane. As the plane taxis out to take off position, the owls are clearly visible on the grassy areas along the runways." [To be continued.]



Sighting of Yellow-breasted Babbler *Macronous gularis* in South India

Praveen, J.¹, Job K. Joseph², Nick Lethaby³

¹14/779(2), Ambadi, Kunnathurmedu P O, Palakkad, Kerala 678013. Email: praveenj@chequemail.com

²Thottacherry House, Vazhappally West, Changanacherry, Kerala 686103. Email: job.joseph@wipro.com

³6807 Sweetwater Way, Goleta, CA 93117, U.S.A. Email: nlethaby@ti.com

Yellow-breasted Babbler *Macronous gularis* is considered as one of the rarest birds in South India. This report describes the sightings (with photographic evidence) of this bird near Vazhathottam, about 14km outside the Mudumalai Sanctuary, Nilgiris District, Tamil Nadu.

Location: All the sightings are from a place near Vazhathottam, 8km from Masinagudi (c.900m) on the Theppakadu-Ooty Road.

Habitat: Almost drying river/stream bed (flowing west to east) with lots of bamboo clumps on both sides of the stream. Dry deciduous jungles extend further south of the bamboo clumps while dry thorny jungles adjoin the bamboo clumps on the north side of the stream.

Sighting 1: Date: 18-4-2004. Time: 08:45 hours. Two birds. While we (NL and PJ) were birding in these bamboo clumps, checking for Grey-headed Bulbuls, NL saw one Striped Tit-Babbler high up on a bamboo calling a rapidly repeated 'Chouk' note. Before NL could get really good views, an elephant alarm call sounded fairly nearby and we had to hurry back. While hurrying back NL noticed another individual calling in a different clump of bamboo. This time the bird was much lower down and hence was able to clearly confirm the rufous cap and olive upper parts, along with the yellowish under parts with fine dark streaking on the breast.

Sighting 2: Date: 25-4-2004. Time: 06:45 hours. One bird. After having made an unsuccessful attempt to see the babbler on the previous day (24-4-2004, 14:45-17:00hrs.), we (PJ and JKJ) made an early morning foray into the bamboo jungle. Just as we descended into the jungle stream, we could hear the loud "chonk-chonk-chonk" calls of the bird. The monotonous call was made 5-6 times followed by a short silence. We could record the calls, but the bird escaped (!) unnoticed and disappeared into some thicket (or stopped calling). Though, this was not a direct sighting, we could get some evidence for the presence of this babbler from this particular patch of forest.

Sighting 3: Date: 25-4-2004. Time: 08:00 hours. One bird. This time we (PJ and JKJ) tried a different track to reach the same thicket and the next few minutes proved to be the most exciting moments of the trip as the Tit-Babbler started calling quite near by. With some attempt, we could spot the bird and soon it came out into the open. The identification was easy: a small babbler of the size of Black-headed Babbler *Rhopocichla atriceps*, breast with a yellowish wash and thin dark streaking on the breast, rufous cap, yellow supercilium which gives an impression of a dark stripe through the eye. The bird was quite vocal, not shy, but kept to the

upper foliage of the bamboo clumps, always kept 20-25 feet above the ground, and the call notes were always the same "chonk-chonk-chonk-chonk-chonk" (i.e. 5 or 6 times). This went on for about 15 minutes. After sometime, the bird caught a smallish caterpillar and was seen softening its prey by hitting it on the bamboo stem and finally devouring it.

The only known record of this Babbler from South India is by Salim Ali, who mentions having collected four specimens (three males and one female) from Antarsante and Manchgowdanhalli in 1939. The Yellow-breasted Babbler was met with in a small patch, of ½ Mile Square of deciduous bamboo jungle on the bank of the Kabini River. This area lies somewhere in the boundary of Nagarhole and Wynad (pers comm. L Shyamal). The nearest contiguous distribution range for this bird is in Vizag hills. This is a 'rediscovery' after a period of 65 years!

Another interesting point to be noted is that *Macronous gularis* is considered a lowland species in the Indian subcontinent 'usually below 600m (up to 900m in the Peninsula)' (Ali and Ripley 1987, p. 439). The present sighting at an elevation slightly above 900m indicates that the altitudinal distribution of this species in South India requires an additional re-look. Though all the sightings are of just one or two individuals, the birds might certainly be around; present in better profusion somewhere in the neighborhood and these individuals could have been a few occasional strays from their favourite grounds. It will be an interesting study to find more about the distribution range of this species in South India, the bird seemingly is very partial to bamboo clumps which are a natural habitat in Bandipur, Mudumalai, Nagarhole and parts of Wynad. People visiting these areas should look out for this bird, more importantly the calls, the call could be overlooked for a Tailor Bird *Orthotomus sutorius* but once familiarized, there is no confusion.

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A sight record of the Black Stork *Ciconia nigra* from the Kandukur Tank, Chittoor District, Andhra Pradesh

V. Santharam

Institute of Bird Studies & Natural History, Rishi Valley 517352, Chittoor District, Andhra Pradesh. Email: birds@rishivalley.org

On the 20th of January, 2002, a team of seven Class IX Environment Science students of Rishi Valley School accompanied by myself and another colleague, Aruna Reddy, visited three major water bodies in the vicinity of our campus as a part of the wetland survey for the SACON project on wetland prioritization.

We arrived at the Kandukur Tank, some 10 kms from the Peddatippa Samudram Tank close to Karnataka state border around noon. The tank was located amidst an arid and poorly inhabited zone. It was also picturesque, having rocky hillocks in the backdrop and huge rocks partially submerged in it. All these submerged rocks were covered with white droppings and had several birds perched on them – Cormorants (Phalacrocoracidae), Egrets (Ardeidae) and White-necked Storks *Ciconia episcopus*. In the water, we could see Northern Shovellers *Anas clypeata* and a few Common Coots *Fulica atra* lazily swimming about.

As I scanned, I noticed three White-necked Storks on the rocks closest to the shore and amongst them in the water was another bird a little larger than them. I looked closer and realized I was seeing the Black Stork *Ciconia nigra*, a bird not too common in southern India. Approaching it slowly, I went fairly closer and was able to see it well enough and record all the characteristics to confirm its identity. I also was lucky to be able to click a few pictures with my 400mm lens.

The bird had blackish colouration above including the head and neck and the upper breast. The lower breast and belly was white but in the overhead lighting was not too conspicuous. When

the bird flew as I had approached, I could make out a little amount of white under the wings (the axillaries). The bill and legs looked dark from a distance but from a closer range I could make out the red colouration. Compared to the Whitenecked Storks, the Black Stork appeared to have a thinner bill.

This bird has been reported as uncommon or rare in southern India and recorded in recent years in all the four southern states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, in small numbers. The earlier records for Andhra Pradesh are from Nandikotkur near Rollapadu in the Kurnool district (Manakadan 1987), the vicinity of Hyderabad (Kanniah and Ganesh 1990), and four different sites in the East Godavari District (Rao et. al. 2000). This sighting indicates that this bird is likely to be seen in other wetlands in the state and elsewhere in southern India in small numbers from time to time.

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Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni* at Rollapadu Sanctuary, Andhra Pradesh

Suhel Quader

Department of Zoology, University of Cambridge, Downing Street, Cambridge CB2 3EJ, UK. Email: sq210@cam.ac.uk

On the 22nd of October 2003, at c.10:00h, Mr Adisheshaiah (a forest guard {and expert naturalist}), Kavita Isvaran, and I were conducting a count of Blackbuck *Antelope cervicapra* in and around Rollapadu Sanctuary (18km south-east of Nandikotkur town, 15°52'N, 78°18'E), Kurnool District, Andhra Pradesh, when we stopped to take a closer look at a kestrel perched on a concrete electricity pole. The previous day we had casually recorded three kestrels (2 males, 1 female) in the same area, a newly acquired piece of land called Cherukuchellipalam, c.2km southwest of the main sanctuary. These we identified without second thought as Common Kestrels *Falco tinnunculus*. A careful look on the 22nd, however, revealed a male kestrel with a curiously unspotted

chestnut-red back, and with a blue-grey edge to the folded wing. This suggested that the bird was a Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni*, rather than a Common Kestrel, which has a back heavily marked with black, and no grey on the wing. These two distinguishing features were the most prominent from video footage and photographs taken at the time, although other features separating males of the two species also exist (Ali and Ripley 1987, Grimmett, et al. 1999, Kazmierczak 2000). We saw two other kestrels in the same area that morning, but these were too far away to identify.

Lesser Kestrels seen in India are thought to be passage migrants between their breeding grounds in China and Mongolia and their main wintering grounds in Africa (Ali and Ripley 1987). There

are scattered records almost throughout India, and these have been collated in the Asian Red Data Book (BirdLife International 2001). There have been several records since 1950 from States neighbouring Andhra Pradesh (Orissa, 2 records; Madhya Pradesh, 1 record; Maharashtra, 5-6 records; Karnataka, 1 record; see also Grimmett et al. 1999, Kazmierczak 2000). In addition, there are two (apparently hitherto overlooked) records from coastal Andhra Pradesh (Rajahmundry and Vishakhapatnam; Kumar 1984).

As a species, the Lesser Kestrel is classified as Vulnerable, having suffered declines in western Europe of about 46% in each decade since 1950, and on its wintering grounds in South Africa of about 25% in each decade since 1971 (BirdLife International 2001). These declines are thought to be caused mainly by habitat change, loss of roost sites, and an increase in the use of pesticides.

Because the two kestrels are easily confused with one another, the number of Lesser Kestrels reported from the Indian subcontinent may be a serious underestimate. If birdwatchers looked more closely at every kestrel they saw, we may be able to form an accurate picture of the abundance of Lesser Kestrels in the region, and of change in their numbers over time.

The Lesser Kestrel we saw, and those seen the previous day, spent most of their time perched on any one of a series of bare concrete poles (c.5 m high) running alongside the jeep track, with

an occasional brief flight away. Visitors to Rollapadu in the winter may wish to spend some time watching these (very distinctive) poles to check whether Lesser Kestrels are regular visitors to the area.

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[**Editors' Note:** A picture of the Lesser Kestrel, taken by the author, can be seen on the *New. Ornis.* website. For URL see inside front cover.]

Abnormal nest of the Black-breasted Weaver *Ploceus benghalensis*

Neeraj Mishra

106/238 Bhoot Niwas, Gandhi Nagar, Kanpur 208012. Email: mishran@sancharnet.in. Website: www.indianwildlifeimages.com

On a Sunday morning in July 1997, a photographer colleague and I planned to go on the Shobhan road (outer area of Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh), in search of birds. We chose this area because an irrigation sub-canal from the Ganges passes through it, making the area rich in vegetation and attracting a variety of birds.

This was the season for nesting so we rode our scooter, searching for birds and their nests. Birds usually drop anchor at the time of nesting, and so they are easily approachable. Luckily we found a warbler's nest containing three eggs. We planned to shoot it after a week, after they had hatched. Further ahead, we saw a boy, staring at the spectacle of two strangers searching for something in bushes; this aroused his curiosity. We rode up to him and inquired whether he had seen any birds' nests nearby, recently? He told us that there were some Baya's nests near the canal, and on

our request he took us to the spot.

On the opposite bank were nests of Black-breasted Weavers *Ploceus benghalensis*. They had amazingly long entrance tubes. It was difficult to get closer to the hanging nests as they stood in water. As soon as the birds saw us, they flew away in a flock, to our great disappointment. We discussed the unusual size and shape of the nests, which we had never seen before. The entrance tube was about a meter in length. This prompted us to wonder as to what could be the reason behind making such long entrance. Perhaps the birds make long entrance tubes to prevent enemies like snakes from entering the nests. We took some shots and moved on.

[**Editors' Note:** A picture of the Lesser Kestrel, taken by the author, can be seen on the *New. Ornis.* website. For URL see inside front cover.]

Recently published

This column contains citations of ornithological publications from around the world, for the political areas of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Tibet.

PAPERS

FLAMINGO

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Correspondence

A generous welcome!

This is an excellent idea. You will soon get my cheque and I will get you some more subscribers including an institutional subscription from WTI. My best wishes and do please let me know if I can help in any way.

Aniruddha Mookerjee.

Great idea Aasheesh to encourage budding bird watchers and to provide another opportunity for people to communicate with each other. Hats off to you, Zafar and your colleagues.

Dave Ferguson.

Nice to hear about Newsletter for Ornithologists. I checked the website, the idea of putting the newsletter on the site is a good one. You have put quite an effort and the contents are well written. My best wishes with you and Zafar sahab.

Ameen Ahmed, Toronto, Canada.

I have downloaded and looked through your Newsletter. EXCELLENT. I particularly like the list of recent publications (could you extend this to include trip reports etc posted on the internet I wonder?) I would like to take out a three-year subscription...

Steve Lister.

I was very happy to see the first, excellent, very comprehensive and novel issue of the NLO. My heartiest congratulations. Every thing from the very nice painting on the cover, the contents, the excellent idea of giving all the recent Indian Ornithological publications, enlisting the new books, reviews, correspondence and the crisp photos on the back cover by Clement are of highest standard. I appreciate that a lot of effort has gone into this publication. I pay my tribute to you, Dr Santharam and Mr Zafar Futehally, editor emeritus. I am sure that the NLO will be greeted with equal appreciation by others. I shall be sending to you my three years membership by post.

Satish Pande.

Congratulation for a great beginning of "Newsletter for Ornithologists" in the field of Indian and subcontinent Ornithology. It is really an essential need of today. I will be happy to join this great journey. Is there any provision for life-membership? Otherwise I will send my individual subscription for three year by post.

Anil Kumar Chhangani.

The first *New. Ornis.* has arrived, very many thanks. Congratulations on a fine first issue. One very minor point: in your "Ready Reckoner" it might be more useful for people to be told how to actually join the email groups. The addresses you give are only useful if you are already a member. In any case, since EGroups was taken over, the OrientalBirding address is no longer orientalbirding@egroups.com but rather orientalbirding@yahoo-groups.com.

Krys Kazmierczak.

Sighting of Black-necked Crane *Grus nigricollis* in west Sikkim

Kecheoparli Lake is a favourite pilgrimage destination for Sikkimese Buddhists in west Sikkim. It nests in a forested bowl at an altitude of 2,000m (27°20.889''N, 88°11.665''E; Brg-320).

An adult Black-necked Crane *Grus nigricollis* Przevalski, 1876, was sighted at Kecheoparli Lake, up in west Sikkim on the 14th of April 2004 at 06:00 hours by six Swedish birders and myself. We observed the crane for about two hours and Roger photographed it. The crane did not move around much but stood at one place, cleaning and trumpeting occasionally. After two hours the crane flew off, disturbed by a religious ceremony, in which people burst firecrackers. It flew towards Nepal. I wonder whether there might be more cranes at high altitude lakes in west Sikkim, or was this just a passage halt? Here we also say and photographed Elwes's Crake *Porzana bicolor* (Walden, 1872).

I was here in February 2004 with a group of American and British birdwatchers, but we did not see any cranes.

Peter Lobo

Lobo House, Near Gurudongma House, Hill Top, Kalimpong-734301, West Bengal, India. Email: gurutt@sancharnet.in

Announcements

International Conference on Bird & Environment 21-24 November 2004, Haridwar, India

An international Conference on Bird & Environment is being organized by the Department of Zoology & Environmental sciences, Gurukula Kangri University, Haridwar, under the auspices of Ornithological Society of India. The conference intends to bring together scientists, conservationists, naturalists & managers to discuss the impact of environmental changes / factors on bird's life. For details visit: www.geocities.com/birdenv, or contact: Dr. Dinesh Bhatt, Organizing Secretary, Intl. Conf. On Bird & Environment, Dept. of Zoology & Env. Sci., Gurukula Kangri University, Haridwar, India. Phone: 91-01334-244835/245049. Email: dd_bhatt@yahoo.com.

Fourth International Hornbill Conference Mabula Game Lodge, South Africa 7-9 November 2005

The Ground Hornbill Research and Conservation Project and Three Cities Game Lodges, South Africa, and the Hornbill Research Foundation, Thailand, will host the Fourth International Hornbill Conference at Mabula Game Lodge, South Africa, during the period 7-9 November 2005. The scientific programme will cover two days, followed by a one-day workshop for the World Hornbill Specialist Group of IUCN and Birdlife

International. The scientific programme will be coordinated by Dr Alan Kemp (ex Transvaal Museum, South Africa), Prof Pilai Poonswad (Mahidol University, Thailand) and Dr Christine Sheppard (Bronx Zoo, New York).

The conference organizers are hoping to raise sponsorship to invite keynote speakers and also to assist delegates from other hornbill-occupied countries and local communities to attend the Conference.

The main goal of this conference is to provide all people studying or interested in hornbills with an opportunity to share their ideas. The proceedings of the conference results will be made available within six months of the meeting in CD-ROM format.

Theme for the Conference

The principal theme of the conference is "The Active Management of Hornbills and their Habitats for Conservation". This will include sessions on capture and marking, genetic analysis, provision of nest boxes, supplementation of food, captive breeding and husbandry, reintroduction and translocation, comparison with sympatric species, and habitat analysis and alteration. However, there will also be a general session to report on new information for other aspects of hornbill biology. A separate one-day workshop by the IUCN and Birdlife Hornbill Specialist Group will focus on population status and viability analysis, to identify problems and priorities for conservation action. **[Editors' note:** For the entire 'first announcement,' please visit www.geocities.com/ashpittie/nlo.html]

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

Birds and Mammals of Ladakh

Otto Pfister

This book is the first comprehensive field-guide on ornithology and mammal life in the Ladakh region.

0195657144 2004 Rs 795
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Petronia

Fifty Years of Post-Independence Ornithology in India

A Centenary Dedication to Dr Salim Ali 1896–1996

J.C. Daniel & Gayatri W. Ugra (eds)

A commemorative volume brought out by the BNHS, comprising articles on ornithology by Salim Ali's friends, colleagues, and students, this book is a centenary tribute to Dr Salim Ali (1896–1996).

0195666534 2003 Rs 400



Birds of Delhi

Ranjit Lal

This delightful book introduces the reader to various birding areas in and around Delhi, and highlights the birdlife found there.

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