

NEWSLETTER

FOR ORNITHOLOGISTS

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READY-RECKONER

Bird conservation organisations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Saving Asia's threatened birds:

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

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

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Newsletter for Ornithologists

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

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Editorial

Vulture decline and public health concerns

Many of us look upon vultures as ugly birds, associated with filth and unhygienic conditions. The sudden and dramatic disappearance of these birds from our countryside is posing several questions and investigations are on to find out the exact reasons for their decline. Even as we discover the causes and take steps to prevent the extinction of the species in south Asia, we have to be aware of the unpleasant consequences of the decimation of their population in our countryside. A recent report in the *Guardian Weekly* (April 15-21, 2004) warns us of the possible public health hazards posed by the loss of vultures. Rotting carcasses of cattle in the countryside are likely to spread diseases such as anthrax, cause bacterial contamination of water, food poisoning and dysentery through flies and also rabies! At one carcass dump in Rajasthan it has been noticed that there was a twenty-fold increase in the dog population (from 60 to 1,200!) following the decline of vultures. The incidence of rabies is high in our country and dogs are most often (96%) associated with the spread of this scourge. Over 30,000 people in India die (81% of global deaths from rabies) every year from rabies. So what are we going to do to contain the increase in dog populations? We are beginning to realize, perhaps belatedly, the valuable role played by vultures in keeping our environment clean.

The value of checklists

The latest *Buceros* (Vol. 8 Nos. 2&3, May-December 2003), the journal of the Envis Center on avian ecology & inland wetlands at Bombay Natural History Society, is a model publication and the Society is to be congratulated for the publication. Anyone who is interested in serious birdwatching must take a look at the pains taken by Anand Prasad in putting together this "Annotated checklist of the birds of western Maharashtra". This publication, running to 174 printed pages, has detailed accounts of sightings, migration and breeding records from publications since the 1800's to the present (including several recent unverified Internet reports). From this, the author has interpreted changes in the status and populations of species and noted conservation concerns. We certainly could do with more of such exercises from other parts of the country. Keeping meticulous records and maintaining databases will certainly help monitor bird populations. Incidentally I was surprised that a few of my own records that I happened to share with Anand Prasad through emails based on my lists prepared during the Western Ghats Woodpecker Surveys in 1995-6 turned out to be the only or one of the few records of some species in the state. Had Prasad not contacted me these records would have remained in my diaries forever, gathering dust. So please share your notes/publish them so that they serve some useful purpose.

This issue contains an interesting article by C. Sashikumar on recent records of four species of *Aquila* eagles in Kerala. Eagles from this genus were not reported from the state until recent times and now in the last decade or so, four species have turned up in the state. Another interesting article from Mysore by Thejaswi and Shivaprakash reports the wintering of the Indian Blue Robin in a new habitat that is drier than those reported earlier by other observers. Do these observations reflect the ecological changes taking place or is it simply that there was no one earlier with the necessary expertise, out in the field? We have a good example of how regular, long-term monitoring of birds in an area can reveal changes in the composition of birdlife in relation to habitat changes and due to certain other factors. The Pondicherry University Campus has been studied for about 16 years now by Dr Priya Davidar and her students and the results are disturbing. Several species taken for granted as "Common" are declining or have disappeared and are replaced by habitat generalists in the campus. If this study is an indication of what is happening elsewhere in our country where natural habitats are being replaced by less diverse, artificial and built-up ones, it is time for us to sit up and take a second look at the species in the "Red Data Book". Reports of new heronries are always welcome and it is nice to know that Sudhakar Kurhade has been active in his role as Honorary Wildlife Warden and organising rescue and rehabilitation of the fallen chicks. Even as this issue reaches you the monsoon will be coming to an end. We hope the deficit in rainfall would be wiped off and the year will be a good one for our waterbirds and farmers. Here, in Rishi Valley and the surrounding region, the drought in the last four years has driven out our few waterbirds. The nearby heronries have been inactive and the nest trees forsaken by the birds. I hope I too can write something about the nesting Grey Herons in our neighbourhood soon.

V. Santharam

Changes in avifauna over a sixteen-year period in the Pondicherry University campus

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Introduction

In this study we present results of a long term monitoring programme of bird diversity in a degraded scrub forest in the Pondicherry University campus in Pondicherry in order to record changes in bird species richness over time and to identify species that have disappeared or colonized the campus. The 788 acre campus of Pondicherry University (13°4'N, 80°14'E) is spread along the East Coast Road (ECR) and is located about 12km north of Pondicherry town. Located between the wetlands of Kaliveli and the afforested lands of Auroville, this is an important area for birds. It supports many species of local and migratory birds because of its mosaic of habitats such as degraded scrub, grasslands, eroded canyons and plantations. Over the study period much of the degraded land and grasslands have been converted to monocultural plantations of *Eucalyptus* and *Acacia auriculiformis*. There has also been an increase of urbanization and the number of buildings in the past ten years. Annual rainfall is about 1,300mm and the rainy period is during the winter monsoon.

Methodology

Sampling of birds in the campus was carried out at weekly intervals during morning hours, using line transects laid across the campus. The sampling was from August to November as part of the M. S. (Ecology) course work at the Salim Ali School of Ecology and Environmental Sciences. A total of seven years of data were compiled. Data from these transects were used to construct bird lists. Casual observations were also included in this checklist. Each checklist could be considered as one sample. These checklists were compiled over a period of 16 years to look at changes in species richness during this period. Seasonal changes in species numbers due to migrants were noted down. Checklists were compared with the previous years' identified species to look for species that are no longer recorded on campus, and new additions. Some species were recorded sporadically. We noted the number of lists in which each species had been recorded. We also calculated the number of species recorded in each census. We then assessed which species were common and which had disappeared from the lists. Standard field guides were used for positive identification of the species (Ali 2000, Ali and Ripley 1983, Grimmett et al. 1999). We have used the recent nomenclature given in Manakandan and Pittie (2001) in this paper.

Results

A total of 92 species were recorded over a period of 16 years. Maximum number of species was recorded during the year 1988. This could be considered as the avian species richness prior to development of the campus (Santharam et al. 1988). There is a decrease in species richness in 2001-2003. Some birds have become locally extinct. The possible reason for this decline is the loss of habitat due to conversion to plantation and development of the campus. A lot of open grasslands and scrub thicket, which formed the original vegetation, have been lost to plantations. The ravine, a unique habitat, has partially silted up and has been destroyed.

However collection of non-timber forest produce has declined over time and there is less grazing pressure.

25 species are very common in the campus. These include birds like Shikra, Grey Francolin, Red-wattled Lapwing, Spotted Dove, Rose-ringed Parakeet and Brainfever Bird. The House Crow, Common Myna, Black Drongo and some other species are ubiquitous and have adapted to urbanization. They are ecological generalists. The Pied Crested Cuckoo, Forest Wagtail, Asian Paradise-Flycatcher and the Small Minivet appear to be seasonal visitors. Birds like the Stone-Curlew, Blue-tailed Bee-eater, Ashy Drongo, Eurasian Collared-Dove and the Common Cuckoo have not been recorded recently. 17 species have been sighted only once and are vagrants. This indicates there is a preponderance of very common species and vagrants on campus. Raptors were not documented fully due to their elusive character. The Booted Eagle, Eurasian Hobby, Montagu's Harrier are winter migrants and rare. The call of the Eurasian Eagle Owl could be heard along the ravine. Auroville, which is adjacent, has a healthy population of birds and could be a source of colonization of the campus.

Discussion

Long term monitoring of bird populations is essential since many species are declining in numbers due to loss of habitat and other reasons. Identifying endangered species will be easier if such monitoring is conducted in a systematic way all over the Indian subcontinent. The widespread involvement of volunteers in many schemes makes bird census and monitoring an extremely cost effective way of monitoring the overall health of the ecosystem (Furness and Greenwood 1993). In Kalapet campus, students in the M. S. (Ecology) programme were involved in recording bird species on campus every year. There was variability in observer quality between years, with certain years having students who were very good bird watchers and other years with lower expertise in bird watching. However, systematic and continuous sampling for many months reduced observer bias to an extent.

The study indicates that the Kalapet campus is in the process of degradation due to various anthropogenic factors. There has been a decline in the number of bird species in the campus. Some birds have become locally extinct. Certain birds have increased in numbers due to the change in landscape brought about by the urbanization of the campus. Conversion of the native vegetation – scrub jungle and grasslands to monocultural plantations is detrimental to bird diversity. Practices like planting of indigenous and flowering trees in the place of monocultures of acacia, cashew and eucalyptus, maintenance of habitat diversity and conservation of grasslands, ravines and other unique habitats are important for the conservation of biodiversity.

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S.No.	Species	English name	1988	1989	1991	1992	1998	2002	2003	Total
36.	<i>Merops orientalis</i>	Small Bee-eater	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	7
37.	<i>Merops philippinus</i>	Blue-tailed Bee-eater	+	-	-	+	+	-	-	3
38.	<i>Coracias benghalensis</i>	Indian Roller	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	7
39.	<i>Upupa epops</i>	Common Hoopoe	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	7
40.	<i>Megalaima haemacephala</i>	Coppersmith Barbet	+	-	+	+	+	-	+	5
41.	<i>Dinopium benghalense</i>	Lesser Golden-backed Woodpecker	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	5
42.	<i>Pitta brachyura</i>	Indian Pitta	+	-	-	-	+	-	+	3
43.	<i>Mirafra erythroptera</i>	Red-winged Bush-Lark	-	+	-	-	+	-	-	2
44.	<i>Mirafra affinis</i>	Jerdon's Bush-Lark	+	-	+	+	-	-	-	3
45.	<i>Eremopterix grisea</i>	Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark	+	+	-	+	+	-	-	4
46.	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	Common Swallow	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	6
47.	<i>Hirundo daurica</i>	Red-rumped Swallow	+	-	-	+	-	-	-	2
48.	<i>Dendronanthus indicus</i>	Forest Wagtail	+	+	-	-	-	-	+	3
49.	<i>Motacilla maderaspatensis</i>	Large Pied Wagtail	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	7
50.	<i>Anthus rufulus</i>	Paddyfield Pipit	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	6
51.	<i>Tephrodornis pondicerianus</i>	Common Wood shrike	+	+	+	+	+	-	-	5
52.	<i>Coracina melanoptera</i>	Black-headed Cuckoo-Shrike	+	+	-	+	+	-	-	4
53.	<i>Pericrocotus cinnamomeus</i>	Small Minivet	+	-	-	-	+	-	+	3
54.	<i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>	Red-vented Bulbul	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	7
55.	<i>Pycnonotus luteolus</i>	White-browed Bulbul	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	7
56.	<i>Aegithina tiphia</i>	Common Iora	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	6
57.	<i>Lanius cristatus</i>	Brown shrike	+	+	-	-	-	+	-	3
58.	<i>Lanius vittatus</i>	Bay-backed Shrike	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	2
59.	<i>Lanius schach</i>	Rufous-backed Shrike	-	+	+	-	+	-	+	4
60.	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>	Southern Grey Shrike	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	1
61.	<i>Copsychus saularis</i>	Oriental Magpie-robin	+	-	-	-	+	-	+	3
62.	<i>Saxicoloides fulicata</i>	Indian Robin	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	7
63.	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	Black Redstart	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
64.	<i>Turdoides affinis</i>	White-headed Babbler	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	7
65.	<i>Prinia hodgsonii</i>	Franklin's Prinia	-	-	-	+	+	-	-	2
66.	<i>Prinia socialis</i>	Ashy Prinia	-	-	+	-	+	-	+	3
67.	<i>Prinia inornata</i>	Plain Prinia	+	+	+	-	-	-	-	3
68.	<i>Acrocephalus dumetorum</i>	Blyth's Reed Warbler	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
69.	<i>Orthotomus sutorius</i>	Common Tailorbird	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	6
70.	<i>Phylloscopus trochiloides</i>	Greenish Leaf-Warbler	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	2
71.	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>	Common Lesser Whitethroat	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	2
72.	<i>Ficedula parva</i>	Red-throated Flycatcher	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	1
73.	<i>Terpsiphone paradisi</i>	Asian Paradise-Flycatcher	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	6
74.	<i>Dicaeum erythrorhynchos</i>	Tickell's Flowerpecker	+	-	+	-	+	+	+	5
75.	<i>Nectarinia zeylonica</i>	Purple-rumped Sunbird	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	7
76.	<i>Nectarinia asiatica</i>	Purple Sunbird	+	+	-	-	+	-	+	4
77.	<i>Nectarinia lotenia</i>	Loten's Sunbird	+	+	+	-	+	-	+	5
78.	<i>Lonchura malabarica</i>	White-throated Munia	+	-	+	-	-	-	+	3
79.	<i>Lonchura punctulata</i>	Spotted Munia	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
80.	<i>Petronia xanthocollis</i>	Yellow-throated Sparrow	+	-	+	-	-	-	-	2
81.	<i>Ploceus philippinus</i>	Baya Weaver	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	6
82.	<i>Sturnus pagodarum</i>	Brahminy Starling	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	7
83.	<i>Sturnus roseus</i>	Rosy Starling	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	1
84.	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	Common Myna	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	7
85.	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>	Eurasian Golden Oriole	+	+	-	-	+	-	+	4
86.	<i>Dicrurus macrocercus</i>	Black Drongo	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	7
87.	<i>Dicrurus leucophaeus</i>	Ashy Drongo	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
88.	<i>Dicrurus caerulescens</i>	White-bellied Drongo	-	+	-	-	-	+	+	3
89.	<i>Artamus fuscus</i>	Ashy Woodswallow	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	7
90.	<i>Dendrocitta vagabunda</i>	Indian Treepie	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	7
91.	<i>Corvus splendens</i>	House Crow	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	7
92.	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>	Jungle Crow	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	7
		Total	77	59	48	46	59	39	48	

Aquila eagles in Kerala, India

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Ali (1969), Neelakantan et al. (1993), or any other earlier ornithologists have not reported the presence of any species of *Aquila* eagles in Kerala, India. This note compiles the recent records and apparent status of four species of *Aquila* eagles in this State. After spending ten days at Keoladeo Ghana Bird Sanctuary, Bharatpur attending the Raptor Identification Workshop organized by Bombay Natural History Society and conducted by William S. Clarke and Dr Vibhu Prakash in November 1993, I became rather familiar with some species of the *Aquila* eagles. Since then, I had been on the look out for them in the wetlands of Kerala, especially Kattampally, Kannur District, where I have watched birds regularly since 1980.

Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga*

The first published record, of the Greater Spotted Eagle from Kerala, was by Srivastava et al. (1995), who reported a sighting at Periyar Tiger Reserve. The first sighting of this eagle at Kattampally was on the 11th of January 2001 (Sashikumar 2004). Subsequently, I found that *A. clanga* was a regular winter visitor in this area. Its earliest date of arrival was the 23rd of September and the last sighting before it left was the 21st of April. The maximum number seen was on 16 on 9.xii.2003. Most of these were immature birds. Only one or two adults were usually present. On 15.xii.2002, an immature Greater Spotted Eagle was observed at Ezhome, a wetland about 20km north of Kannur; one or two birds have been seen here occasionally since then (Rajeevan P. C. *pers. comm.*). On 29.i.2003, Jafer Palot saw one at Biyyam Kettu, part of the Kole wetland, Malappuram District.

At Kattampally a good number of waterfowl are usually present in winter. Apart from open and reed-covered water-spreads, a grassy swamp – mostly abandoned paddies - is also present here. While not soaring, the eagles were seen sitting on the grassy swamp or perched on coconut fronds. I have seen the eagles flying at ducks and teals occasionally, scattering the flocks; actual capture was never witnessed. I have also seen them chasing Western Marsh-Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* and White-bellied Sea-Eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster*, apparently instances of attempted kleptoparasitism.

In India this species winters widely, especially in the northern parts, but is rare in the peninsula (Grimmett et al. 1998, Kazmierczak 2000). There are a few records from Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Goa. There is one reliable recent report of it breeding in Rajasthan, India (Prakash 1988). “There is anecdotal evidence that this species’ small population is declining, at a rate likely to exceed 10% in three generations, which qualifies it as Vulnerable. It has suffered from extensive habitat loss and persistent persecution,” (BirdLife International 2003).

Indian Spotted Eagle *Aquila hastata*

Till recently considered as the Indian race *hastata* of Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina*, it is now regarded as an independent species, the Indian Spotted Eagle *Aquila hastata*, endemic to India (Parry et al. 2002). Though I had seen this eagle at Kattampally on several occasions since the winter of 2001, it was only on the 7th of November 2002 that I could positively identify an individual of

this species. This eagle was distinct: compared to the Greater Spotted Eagle, it was warmer brown in colour and had narrower wings and a longer tail. The spots on the upper wing were smaller appearing as a thin line. The darker flight feathers and pale under wing-coverts clinched the identification; the inner primaries were very pale in some individuals. On the upper parts, the white base of inner primaries was prominent, so was the U-shaped white upper tail coverts. On several occasions, it was possible to compare the soaring Indian Spotted Eagle with the Greater Spotted Eagle directly as both the eagles came within the same frame through the binoculars. 1-3 individuals, all immature birds, were usually present here from October to April in the last three winters.

On four occasions, I have seen the possible hunting of this eagle. It would soar high in circles above the swamp; once it gained a height of about 300 m, it would swoop vertically with folded wings into the grass. Greater Spotted Eagles, Western Marsh-Harriers and Black Kites *Milvus migrans* would immediately fly towards the eagle perched on the ground and mob it.

A rare resident in the Indian Subcontinent, the Indian Spotted Eagle appears to be a widespread species that has always been recorded at very low density throughout the lowlands of the northern half of the Indian subcontinent, occurring in Pakistan, Nepal, India and Bangladesh (Birdlife International 2003). Mysore (Karnataka) is the nearest place to Kannur District from where this eagle has been recently reported (Thejaswi *pres. comm.*).

Eastern Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca*

The Eastern Imperial Eagle has a large range, breeding mainly in the Palearctic from Central Europe east to the Russian Far East, and wintering in the African and Oriental regions. The species formerly nested in very small numbers in Pakistan and northern India. It is considered “uncommon” in India now (Kazmierczak 2000); the only recent records are from Nandur-Madhameshwar, Maharashtra, in December 1983 (Goenka et al. 1985) and Vedanthangal Sanctuary, Tamil Nadu, in January 1991 (Anon. 1991). Category: Vulnerable (BirdLife International 2003).

The only sighting of this eagle was that of an adult at Kattampally on the 4th of November 2003. I observed it for about one hour from 15:50 hours, in bright sunlight. Even as the eagle soared high, the buff-white patch at the back of its head and neck extending towards shoulder in contrast with its dark brown body was strikingly visible. The two-toned long tail with the distal 1/3 as a dark band was also clearly visible in flight. The wing pattern was different from that of the Greater Spotted Eagle – longer and broader with almost parallel edges. As the eagle alighted on a coconut frond nearby, the diagnostic, pure white scapular patches could be clearly seen. Rajeevan P. C. was also with me on that day.

When I mentioned about this sighting to, Dr Pramod P. of the Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON), he told me that he had seen an eagle soaring over a valley at Eravikulam National Park on 29.iii.1996, which he thought was an Eastern Imperial Eagle. E. Kunhikrishnan (University College, Thiruvananthapuram) was with him during that sighting. They could see the buffy-white patch on the head of the large dark brown eagle.

Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis*

Steppe Eagles are winter visitors to the Indian subcontinent. They seem to be the most numerous *Aquila* eagle at present, at least in most parts of northern India. With the decline in vulture population, Steppe Eagles can now be seen in large numbers at carcasses and garbage dumps. But in the peninsula, they are still rare.

The first sighting of the Steppe Eagle in Kerala was by K. V. Eldhose at a wetland near Eranakulam in December 2002 (Dr Sreekumar, *pers. comm.*). The photograph of the perched eagle he took clearly showed it was an immature bird. During the annual Vembanad Bird Survey, on 19.xi.2003, I identified an immature Steppe Eagle soaring above Kumarakom. There were some more sightings of this species at Kumarakom the same winter (Manoj P., *pers. comm.*). At Kattampally, on 28.ii.2004, I saw a Steppe Eagle. This was also an immature bird. During a bird survey at Kanniyakumari Forest Division, at Kunnimuthucholai, Mahendragiri Reserve Forest, on 6.ii.2004, I saw a large eagle perched on a tree at the edge of a shola. Two Booted Eagles *Hieraaetus pennatus* were incessantly mobbing it. When it took off, I instantly identified it as an immature Steppe Eagle. This could probably be the southernmost record of this species in India. Co-ordinates of this site are 08^o20.648'N, 77^o33.247'E, and altitude, 796m.

Status of *Aquila* eagles in Kerala

At Kattampally, the Greater Spotted Eagle and Indian Spotted Eagle appear to be regular winter visitors. The Eastern Imperial Eagle could be a straggler to our area. Is the Steppe Eagle extending its wintering range to the southern parts of the subcontinent? Observations in the coming years might give us an answer.

Identification problems

As is well known, identifying the *Aquila* eagles presents a real problem. During each visit to the Kattampally wetlands, I had to leave behind some eagles without identifying to the species level.

In the case of Spotted Eagles, many individuals show no contrast between under wing-covets and flight feathers; light conditions also can be tricky.

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Indian Blue Robin *Luscinia brunnea* winters at Chamundi Hill and Ranganathittu Bird Sanctuary, Mysore, South India

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This is a report on the occurrence of the Indian Blue Robin *Luscinia brunnea* as a winter visitor to two locations in and near Mysore, in thick dry deciduous hill scrub at Chamundi Hill, and in riparian bamboo vegetation at Ranganathittu Bird Sanctuary. The record at the former location assumes significance as the Indian Blue Robin is reported here to winter in a dry deciduous thorn scrub habitat.

Chamundi Hill

Chamundi Hill (12^o18'N, 76^o33'E) is an isolated hill running longitudinally in a north-south direction to the east of Mysore city (12^o18'N, 76^o39'E) in southern Karnataka. It covers an area of c.17km² with the highest point at 1,100m above MSL. The hill area is a typical tropical deciduous thorn scrub forest with large sections

of rather "evergreen" scrub at higher elevations (Rao and Razi 1981). This forest was designated as a reserve forest by the Karnataka state forest department in 2001. The hills are chiefly uninhabited but the hilltop is populated and a popular destination of religious importance.

A one thousand step stone stairway leads from the bottom of the hill on the eastern face to the temple at the top. Most of the stairway after the 200th step is bordered by evergreen scrub consisting chiefly of large thorny shrubs of *Canthium parviflorum*, *C. dicoccum*, and *Xeromphis spinosa* interrupted by thickets of *Lantana camara* and *Tecoma stans*, straggling lianas of *Plectospermum spinosum* and *Acacia coccinea* and trees of *Plectronia didyma*, *Gliricidia sepium* and *Ficus virens*. A bull ('Nandi') monolith of religious significance is located at the 700th

step. A derelict road is present behind this monolith and has excellent scrub habitat of a similar nature as mentioned above, but in addition, has shrubs of *Chomelia* sp., *Capparis grandis*, *Lantana camara*, *Ixora notoniana*, *Ardisia solanacea*, *Dichrostachys cinerea*, *Pterolobium hexapetalum*, and *Tecoma stans* interspersed by trees like *Ficus benghalensis*, *Schefflera venulosa*, *Grewia tiliaefolia*, *Atlantia monophylla*, *Pongamia pinnata* and others. A few open areas that occur along this road are clothed by clumps of the lemon grass, *Cymbopogon flexuosus*.

The common winter visitors encountered in these locations include Blue-headed Rock-Thrush *Monticola cinclorhynchus*, Blue Rock-Thrush *Monticola solitarius*, Eurasian Blackbird *Turdus merula*, Indian Pitta *Pitta brachyura* and several warblers including, occasionally the Large-billed Leaf-Warbler *Phylloscopus magnirostris*. The Black-naped Oriole *Oriolus chinensis* has also been recorded twice from this area.

The first sighting of the bird on Chamundi Hill in Mysore was on the 28th of October 2001, when a male was observed skulking in shade, in a thick clump of *Randia* sp., *Gmelina asiatica* and other shrubs, right next to the stairway, at around the 150th step. Even in the dark, the bright colours of the bird were distinctive, especially the conspicuous, brilliant white supercilium. The bird was resighted from the same location on subsequent years and would unfailingly be present in the vicinity of the bush or across the stairway in another tangle which included among other plants, the thorny *Plecosperrum* sp. Lianas (Table 1), despite the fact that hundreds and sometimes thousands of people use the stairway on a daily basis. Other sightings have been from similar 'dark' spots with plenty of bushes around, in the old road behind the Nandi monolith mentioned above. Incidentally, a location in this area where the bird was regularly seen is near a pipeline that leads from a pump house, where there is a permanent water leak that keeps the area moist. One male was observed to take a 'dip' at a small rain puddle on the Nandi road on 7.xii.2002 (Praveen Jayadevan, *pers. comm.*). Another locality is a large *Canthium-Zizyphus* snarl, festooned by creepers of *Cissampelos pariera* and *Pachygone ovata*, along a derelict stairway bordered by thick bushes and tangles, on the eastern face of the hill. Solitary males occupied all the locations. Females were sighted only twice, and both times it was observed that they were apparently more retiring than the males.

The males apparently remain throughout the winter season as indicated by the dates of observation (Table 1) and are very parochial to their favoured sites. All the three sites are shaded localities, with one being relatively moist. On the 12th of April 2003, tentatively among the latest dates by which the birds depart the area as they have not been sighted a week after on all years, the male by the main stairway was observed singing. The song was a melodious, 'tsee-tsee-tsee...', beginning with a low note but succeeded by notes with increasing pitch and finally followed and finished by a few fast and undecipherable notes. The song was repeated continuously for ten minutes. The birds observed were otherwise rather quiet, especially the females, except for the occasional loud 'chuck' or 'chack' when moving through the bushes.

Ranganathittu

The Indian Blue Robin was first observed at the Ranganathittu Bird Sanctuary, situated 17km northeast of Mysore, on the 25th of October 2002, hunting in a bamboo (*Dendrocalamus strictus*) clump on the banks of a stream inlet that emptied into the Kaveri River a few meters away. The bird was carefully observed and notes made by one of the observers (AA), and though it turned out to be a male, caution was required as the Tickell's Blue Flycatcher *Cyornis tickelliae* is an extremely common species at Ranganathittu, favouring bamboo growth for both foraging and nesting. [Future observers to Ranganathittu need to be aware of this fact, as there could remain a possibility of confusion despite both birds being distinct in details of colour and behaviour.] Visits subsequent to the first only rarely turned up the species, each time not far from the locality where first seen (Table 1). Habits of the bird did not differ in any detail as those noted for the Chamundi birds.

Discussion

The records of the Indian Blue Robin in the Chamundi Hills are important as they represent one of the two recorded instances of the birds wintering in a tropical scrub habitat. Ali and Ripley (1987) record that the species "In winter frequents almost exclusively evergreen forest: partial to *Rubus*, *Pandanus* and *Calamus* brakes along shady forest streams and dark ravines; also cardamom and coffee plantations." Prasad et al. (1995) mention the existence of "a small patch of evergreen forest with coffee plantations" on hill-top plateau of the Nandi Hills near Bangalore, and record the wintering of this species from coffee plantations, a horticultural nursery and at water's edge with the "evergreen patch", although they do not rigorously record the vegetation that can be encountered in the patch of "evergreen forest". Prasanna et al (1994) record the sighting of a male wintering between November and February 1992-93 from Valley School near Bangalore, as well as a female in December 1992. In a subsequent article (Prasanna et al 1997), the birds were described as uncommon winter visitors. Details of the habitat where the birds were seen was given (p. 76) and it indicated a thick scrub habitat with *Zizyphus oenopila*, *Toddalia asiatica*, *Canthium parviflorum* and *Cocculus hirsutus*, many trees like *Syzygium operculatum*, *F. benghalensis* and planted species like *F. religiosa*, *Tamarindus indica*, *Milletia ovalifolia*, *Delonix regia*, *Peltophorum pterocarpum*, *Mangifera indica* and *Pongamia pinnata*. This was probably the first record of the species wintering in a scrub habitat. The significant aspect of these observations as well as ours from Chamundi Hills in Mysore is the presence of the birds in scrub habitat during winter, in addition to previous observations from evergreen forests (Ali and Ripley 1987).

Our observations from Chamundi Hills and Ranganathittu indicate that the bird is a regular but local winter visitor, perhaps in small numbers to the Mysore area. Whether they have been so in the past is unclear, since we have no observations to this regard but at the same time, cannot dismiss it as the species is rather reserved in its habits and could have escaped notice.

Another aspect of our observations indicates that males are recorded far more often than females on the Chamundi Hills. There could be several reasons for this observation including the

possibilities of sampling errors, limited sample size, of the males and females wintering in different areas or elevations and the like. Although sampling error is distinctly possible, there is some apparent evidence to the latter possibility. Recent observations and bird ringing done in certain pockets of the Nilgiris have indicated that males far outnumber the females in the upper Nilgiris plateau above 2,000m (A. A. Zarri, *pers. comm.*). Khan (1980) claimed that the males and females wintered at different areas but the argument appears to be erroneous, as our observations, together with those by Prasanna et al. (1994) and Prasad et al. (1995) indicate the contrary. In fact, Prasad et al. (1995) mention as much in their short article (p. 269). But the more recent observations from the Nilgiris indicate that an elevation difference in wintering males and females remains plausible, albeit restricted to distinct pockets of the Western Ghats and is open to further observations. Otherwise, the fewer number of females sighted could simply be because they are dull coloured birds and appear to be more retiring and silent vis-à-vis males, thus keeping them away from the prying eyes of the birdwatcher!

Acknowledgements

We express our thanks to Praveen Jayadevan and Job K. Joseph, Bangalore, for details of their observations of the Indian Blue Robin in Chamundi Hill and to Ashfaq Ahmed Zarri, research scholar at

the Bombay Natural History Society, Mumbai, for invigorating discussions and information on the status of the species in the Nilgiris.

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Table 1. Sightings of *Luscinia brunnea* at Chamundi Hill, Mysore and Ranganathittu Bird Sanctuary

Date	Location	Habitat	Number of birds observed	Observers
28.10.2001	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub*	1M	TS, AS ¹
18.11.2002	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	1M	TS, YS
25.11.2002	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	1F	TS, AS, MKM
07.12.2002	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	2M	JP, JJ ²
09.12.2002	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	1M	TS, MKM
11.12.2002	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	1M	AS, GS
02.01.2003	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	1M	AS, GS, AST
16.01.2003	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	2M	TS
04.02.2003	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	1M	TS, AS
13.02.2003	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	1M, 1F	TS, MKM, KRK
06.03.2003	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	2M	TS, AS, KRK
12.04.2003	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	1M	TS, MKM
11.10.2003	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	1M	MKM
12.10.2003	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	2M	TS, MKM
01.02.2004	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	2M	TS, MKM
02.02.2004	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	2M	TS
25.10.2002	Ranganathittu	DD Scrub	1M	AA, AST ³
03.02.2002	Ranganathittu	Bamboo	1M	TS, YS, MKM
02.02.2004	Ranganathittu	Bamboo	1M	MKM, YS

Legend:

* = Dry Deciduous Thorn Scrub.

1 = Others present on the day included Deapesh Misra (DM), Yashaswi Shivanand (YS), M. Mohan Kumar (MKM), A. A. Chinmayi, Rohini Mehta, K. R. Kishan Das (KRK) and Girija Shivaprakash (GS).

2 = Praveen Jayadevan (JP) and Job K. Joseph (JJ).

3 = A. Abhilash (AA) and A. Sharath (AST).

Discovery of new nesting colonies of Grey Herons in Ahmednagar District, Maharashtra

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Very little has been published on the birds of Ahmednagar district, especially on the nesting sites of large waterbirds. In this note, the discovery of four heronries around Shirgonda (18°41'N, 74°04'E) town is reported. Shirgonda is a small town in Shirgonda taluk (Ahmednagar district). It lies on the Sarasvati, a tributary of Bhima River. The small reservoirs, minor irrigation and percolation dams surrounding the town provide an important habitat for waterbirds in Ahmednagar district. Awatewadi is famous for Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus ruber*, Painted Stork *Mycteria leucocephala* and Brahminy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*. Through this note, the details of these heronries around Shirgonda are presented for the first time.

During May 2002, four nesting colonies of Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* were recorded at Pedgaon (120 nests); Madhevadgaon (20 nests) on Neem *Azadirachta indica* and Tamarind *Tamarindus indius* trees; Shedgaon (50 nests) on Banyan *Ficus benghalensis* and Sisoo *Dalbergia sisoo* and at Bhambora (50 nests) on Sisoo trees. All these villages are approximately 10km from each other, on the banks of Bhima River. All of them, except Bhambora (Karjat taluk) are in Shirgonda taluk. At Pedgaon, a small village c. 12km north of Shirgonda, the Grey Herons were found to nest on 10 Babool *Acacia nilotica*, two Sisoo, three 'Banyan' and one Neem trees. These trees are located on the roadside, close to human habitation. The birds nest at these sites due to the availability of ample food in the surrounding wetlands.

At Pedgaon, about 60 Grey heron chicks fell from their nests in the first week of May 2002, and were found dead from sunstroke. The temperature was hovering between 42°C-43°C. Most of the chicks fell on the hot tar road from their nests 40-50 feet above the ground. About 30 of those young ones were released on the banks of Bhima River, after giving first aid by the locals. The site was visited again on May 10, 2002 and about 63 chicks were counted on the nests. Eight chicks that had fallen from the nests were brought

to the Ahmednagar forest office. On 4.vi.2002, all the chicks were ringed under the expert guidance and keen supervision of Dr Satish Pande (Pune) and released on the banks of Bhima River at Pedgaon. At Pedgaon, only the nests of Grey Heron were observed and this could be the largest single species heronry in Maharashtra. As the Pedgaon heronry is near human habitation, people have to bear the offensive smell that emanates from defecation and rotting of fish scraps falling from the nests.

Developmental activities like widening of roads are not in favour of these nesting birds. Unfortunately, some trees used by nesting birds have been cut down by the Public Works Department. Although, natural calamities like floods, cyclones, thunderstorms and drought are known to destroy heronries (Subramanya 1996), the chicks found dead at the Pedgaon heronry died of sunstroke and starvation, as the nearby feeding sites had dried up during summer.

As a number of heronries (pure and mixed) are being lost due to various reasons, the Pedgaon and nearby heronries need further protection. The NGOs and forest officials are making efforts to educate the local people to protect these nesting sites. If the nesting continues for years to come, this could be one of the largest ever 'pure' Grey heron heronries in Maharashtra.

Acknowledgements

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Recoveries from the Newsletter for Birdwatchers – 2

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In the February 1961 issue of the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* I again published several letters relating to this new venture from Calcutta. The skeptical P H Sykes wrote: I think it would be a very good thing for India to have an Indian Ornithological Society, but the question is whether the time is ripe for it to be launched... It has always seemed to me tragic that most people in India are quite unable to describe colours (a failing in the Indian language system?): and few have any idea of how to describe the points for recognition of a bird... Would it be possible for some simple form of bulletin with pictures, and very easily understood aids to recognition...?"

Several others were not so hesitant and in fact were quite enthusiastic about the proposed Society. Among them were people

who played an important part in the subsequent progress of the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*. Professor K. K. Neelakantan wanted to send his subscription immediately, Commander N. S. Tyabji (I. N.) thought that a "subscription of Rs.12/- would help to build up a modest capital". K. S. Lavkumar wrote, "To get this fledgeling to soar your enthusiasm will have to be matched by us the members...". Professor B. R. Sesachar of the University of Delhi said, "We will extend all our cooperation in the functioning of this Society". Several other letters left me in no doubt that the *Newsletter* would be well received.

The star item in this issue, I thought, was a poem by the internationally admired poet, Nissim Ezekiel, about the shooting of

a Paradise Flycatcher reported by me in my column in the Times of India. Subsequently this poem was published in several anthologies, here and abroad, but strangely Salim did not approve of a poem in our *Newsletter*. This is what the poet wrote:

Paradise Flycatcher

White streamers moving briskly on the green
 Casurina, rouse the sleepy watcher
 From his dream of rarest birds
 To this reality. A grating sound
 Is all his language, spelling death
 To flies and moths among the leaves
 Who go this way to Paradise.
 But he, in mask of black, with tints of green,
 Is legend come alive to the dreamer
 Whose eyes are fixed on him in glad surprise.

So many years ago, his predecessor
 Came—it was an afternoon like this—
 And clung with shaking streamers
 To the same casurina, catching flies:
 But Fate that day, and not the dreamer,
 Fixed his eyes on him and shot him down.
 He lay with red and red upon his white,
 Uncommon bird no longer, in the mud.
 The live one flashes at the watcher
 Chestnut wings: the dead is buried in his mind.

Coincidentally, Salim wrote about a Paradise Flycatcher in Kanheri National Park. His account will please the reader “While out with some visiting ornithologists the other day, we were fortunate enough to witness the charming sight of an adult, male, Paradise Flycatcher, white, with particularly long tail-ribbons-bathing at a forest stream. From a leafy shrub on the bank, the bird flew down obliquely to the water for about ten yards. As soon as he broke the surface he suddenly spun round with ruffled plumage creating a splash and wetting himself thoroughly. In the same action the bird faced right about and flew back to his perch where he shuffled his feathers and preened himself. He repeated this manoeuvre three times at about two minute intervals, as if for the special benefit of our visitors who were naturally in ecstasies Many birds, swallows, bee-eaters, drongos, and others, bathe on the wing in this manner. The deliberately rapid swing on touching the water to create the spray is an action very distinct from feeding or drinking from the surface as many such birds often do.

There was another note by Salim Ali in this issue about a meeting in the Indian Institute of Agricultural Research New Delhi to examine the problems of non-insect pests of agriculture (e.g., birds, flying foxes, squirrels, etc.) It was decided to take up research on the life histories of the various animals incriminated in order to be able to devise proper control measures “How we are going to find...the seven field ornithologists needed is the problem. Ornithology has been so completely neglected by our Universities that ready-made ones will be hard to come by”.

So we see that it was as late as 1961 that Ornithology was given some importance by Government beginning with the 3rd Five Year Plan.

House Crow *Corvus splendens* preying on live Common Iora *Aegithina tiphia*

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On the 25th of February 2003 I was leading a field survey for a research project of our organisation entitled, ‘Effects of pesticides on bird population in the mango orchards of Malda district, West Bengal.’ The selected orchard was situated in the Jadupur area in English Bazaar block, 6km south of Malda town, (Malda district, West Bengal). In the orchard I saw a group of men spraying pesticides directly into the mango trees *Mangifera indica*. This is a common practice in the mango orchards of Malda district, when mango blossoms open between January and March, to keep mango buds free from insects and fungus.

While I watched, I noticed many dead insects falling from the tree. The pesticide was lethal. Around 11:30hrs I saw a sparrow-sized bird suddenly drop to the ground from a branch of a mango tree c.25m from me. For a moment the bird was motionless. Through binoculars I identified it as a Common Iora *Aegithina tiphia*. It was alive and vigorously flapping its wings in an attempt to fly. It looked sick and hoping to help it I started moving closer. The

Common Iora is one of many bird species in Malda district, affected by the spraying of pesticide, either directly or as a result of consuming pesticide-coated insects. Before I could reach it, the bird was suddenly snatched up by a House Crow *Corvus splendens*. The House Crow flew with its prey to a mango tree c.30m from me. Through my binoculars I could see that the Common Iora was still alive. It was trying to free itself from the crow’s clutches, and uttering frantic squeaks, ‘cheee...cheee...cheee’. The crow held the iora under its feet and began plucking feathers from its body with its beak and started feeding on the iora. Soon the opportunistic House Crow was surrounded by a murder of its brethren. Disturbed, it clutched the iora in its feet and flew out of my sight, disappearing into the orchard.

The mortality of birds and insects due to the indiscriminate use of pesticides in our fruit orchards is a serious threat to our wild fauna and requires further study

Recently published

Compiled by Aasheesh Pittie

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.

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- DHADHAL, Jaydev. 2003. Comment on Northern Lapwing in Gujarat. 6: 26.
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REVIEWSOn "*The birds and mammals of Ladakh*"

Aasheesh Pittie

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Birds and mammals of Ladakh. By Otto Pfister. 2004. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. Hardbound. [18.0 x 24.3cm; with illustrated dust jacket (photo by; Otto Pfister)], pp. i-xxvii+1, 1-361, 444 colour photographs (402 of birds, 42 of mammals), 7 black and white photographs, 3 half-tone pictures. Price: Rs 795/-. (ISBN 0-19-5657144.)

Contents: Half-title (p. i); title (p. iii); Imprint (p. iv); Dedication (p. v); Foreword by Asad R. Rahmani (p. vii); Contents (p. ix); Acknowledgements (p. xi); Introduction (pp. xiii-xv); How to use this book (pp. xvi-xix); Regions and ecosystems (pp. xxi-xxvii); Section I: Birds (pp. 1-199); Section II: Mammals (pp. 200-234); Section III: Photos (pp. 237-325); Section IV: Glossary (pp. 329-331), Further reading (pp. 332-333), Useful addresses (pp. 334-335),

Checklist of birds and mammals in Ladakh [pp. 337-352 (Birds: pp. 337-350; Mammals: pp. 350-352)], Index of common and scientific names (pp. 353-361).

Birdwatching in Ladakh is like stepping into another realm. Literally. While almost the entire landmass of India is part of the tropical Indo-Malayan or Oriental Region, the vast cold plains and mighty mountains of Ladakh are an outpost on the southern boundary of the immense, continent-girdling Palaeartic Realm of the northern hemisphere. The harsh climatic conditions of this Buddhist land have not been encouraging for birdwatchers in the past. But those who braved the vagaries of its hostile climate and roamed its unforgiving landscape, returned with a different light in their eyes. For this land, lying in the rain shadow of the awesome

Himalaya, harbours not just unique human cultures, but also a fascinating biodiversity.

Pfister's book arrives at an opportune moment, when interest is straying from the general ornithological picture of the entire country to a concentrated one: that of a particular taxon or political/geographical area. That he includes the mammals of the region in this book is a bonus for the mountaineer naturalist in Ladakh. This review is limited to the bird section.

The book has a rather short introduction and gets to the main section quickly. The author follows the nomenclature of Inskipp, et al. (*Annotated checklist*, 1996). The section on birds has been divided into the following chapters: Galliformes; Geese and ducks; Woodpeckers, rollers, kingfishers, and bee-eaters; Cuckoos and swifts; Owls, nightjars, and pigeons; Cranes, crakes, and waders; Pratincoles, gulls, and terns; Raptors; Grebes, egrets, and storks; Shrikes and corvids; Thrushes, flycatchers, redstarts, and wheatears; Starlings, creepers, tits, and swallows; Warblers; Larks, wagtails, and finches. 313 species of birds are reported from Ladakh, of which 30 taxa have not been reported since 1960 and five are doubtful. Notes under each taxon include information like: English name, scientific name, local names, size, description, call, breeding, habitat and behaviour, status and distribution, typical areas of encounter, subspecies, and similar species. Reading through the text one comprehends the author's deep study of the avifauna of the region. The text is embellished with his succinct personal observations. He pays a lot of attention to the description of each species. Especially interesting are the notes on races. Of great use to the birder planning a holiday in Ladakh is the sub-section, "Typical areas of encounter," wherein the author gives specific locations of sightings. However, almost nothing is mentioned about the ornithological history of Ladakh. I feel that the book suffers from the lack of it. A map of the region is sorely missed and placing locations in perspective becomes difficult for plains folk. However I have it from the author (Pfister 2004) that a map was part of the book but it was 'forgotten to be copied' by the publisher!

Ladakh has a few ornithological oddities like the Ibisbill *Ibidorhyncha struthersii* and the Hume's Groundpecker *Pseudopodoces humilis*. The former is so unique that it does not share its family (Ibidorhynchidae) with any other taxon (however the author lists it under Charadriidae). It was named by Vigors in 1832, when he described the birds painted in John Gould's *Century of birds from the Himalaya Mountains* (1830-32), in the *Proceedings of the Zoological Society of London*. But Brian Hodgson, the polymathic British Resident in Nepal, seems to have described it at least two years before Vigors. He had apparently sent a description and a coloured drawing of the Ibisbill (which he called the "Red-billed Erolia") to the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1830, which was unfortunately mislaid and never published. An angry and hurt Hodgson wrote to the Asiatic Society in 1836 [*J. Asiatic Soc. Bengal* V (50) (February): 122-124], "The following description of a new species was originally sent to the Society six years ago, but it does not appear to have been published. It has since been described as new by the Zoological Society in 1832. With the description went a drawing, coloured, and large as nature. Owing to the tardy appearance of the Society's quarto volume, the papers that did appear there had been forestalled: thus red-billed Erolia, but also my *Circaetus Nipalensis*, take precedence, by two years, of Gould's *Ibidorhyncha Struthersii* and his *Hæmatornis Undulatus*, which are the same species under new names. Both birds are types of

new genera: see the *Journal of the Zoological Society* under date Dec. 27th, 1831, quoted, pp. 170 and 174. I described them both two years and some months previously: as the dates of the papers and the proceedings of your Society can prove," (Hodgson, p. 122). To this the Editors replied (footnote, p. 122), "We can offer no further explanation of the loss of the author's MS, than was before given (J.A.S. IV.) neither can we find the plate to which he alludes. But we take this opportunity of circulating a lithograph of the Erolia and bearded Vulture described in vol. IV, which may serve as a peace offering to the justly offended author." However it was too late for Hodgson, Vigors remains the author of the taxon to this day.

Hume's Groundpecker is so enigmatic, that till recently it was grouped along with crows (Corvidae). Now datasets of comparative osteology (James, et al. 2003) suggest that this taxon should be placed under Paridae (Tits).

The photographs are all collected together towards the end of the book and are cross-referenced clearly with the text. Most are of good quality but some (B6, B107) could have been substituted with better ones. Once again, the author states (Pfister 2004) that all photographs submitted to the publishers were of very high quality – even 'B6'. Apparently, in an instance of gross negligence, they used the low-resolution scans that the author (Pfister 2004) had submitted, for reference, in the book! I liked the two pictures of the Hume's Groundpecker (B148, pp. 277-278) the most. In the first photo (p. 277) a bird is striding through a field of golden-yellow Lousewort *Pedicularis longiflora* (var. *tubiformis*) ("Ten thousand saw I at a glance..." 'Daffodils': William Wordsworth). In the second (p. 278), an adult is feeding a fledgling, and both have shut their eyes during the process! I also liked the picture of the Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis* (B114), clearly showing its white under tail coverts. Some photographs depict birds in breeding plumage, while the text tells us that they do not breed in Ladakh (B76: Pheasant-tailed Jacana *Hydrophasianus chirurgus*; B95: Little Tern *Sterna albifrons*; B97: White-winged Black Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus*). The author recorded them in breeding plumage, on migration in June-July (Pfister 2004).

Though I wanted to restrict myself to birds, I cannot but mention the breathtaking picture of Pallas's Cat *Otocolobus manul* (M3), the epitome of motion and concentration. And for those interested in lagomorphs, Ladakh seems to be the place to pick a Pica (Ochotonidae)!

The content of the book would have been enhanced if some habitat shots had been included, of say the "Significant ecosystems" the author refers to in his introduction. A systematic checklist at the end includes German, French and Ladakhi names of birds and is cross-referenced by number with Ali & Ripley's *Handbook*. This table also gives the "rough status" of each taxon. For the ornithologist and mammalogist in general and for the student of high altitude fauna in particular, this book is a boon. "Om mani padme hum."

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Fowl obsession

Ragupathy Kannan

The big year: A tale of man, nature, and fowl obsession, by Mark Obmascik. 256 pp. Published by Free Press, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc., New York, 2004. Price: \$25.00.

Of all the quirky competitions humankind ever came up with, chasing birds must certainly rank high. Every year, scores of birdwatchers embark on a self-imposed task to see and identify the most number of species in a year. Most of them restrict themselves within the limits of their own county or state. But a handful chooses the ultimate: the entire North American continent.

They call it the Big Year.

Until now, this strange contest was mostly known within the limited coterie of the birders themselves. They were their own audience. Not any more.

Now, a delightfully readable and aptly named book, "*The big year: A tale of man, nature, and fowl obsession*," has finally exposed this incredibly gruelling pursuit to the public eye. Mark Obmascik, a recent birding convert himself, has penned a masterful treatise, in which he follows three fiercely competitive birders in their quest for the birding equivalent to winning the Boston Marathon. The three competitors are diverse in their backgrounds: A blunt talking industrial contractor, a retired executive of a multi-million dollar company, and a software engineer who manages to pose a stiff challenge while working full-time at a nuclear plant. One of them would eventually set a staggering record of 745 species, a tally that, Obmascik convincingly argues, may never be beaten.

Birdwatchers could not have dreamed of a better writer to publicize this contest. Obmascik was a lead writer responsible for the *Denver Post's* winning the Pulitzer Prize in 2000, and he was the winner of the 2003 National Press Club award for environmental journalism. Clearly, his flair for writing shows in this book. He lucidly weaves the saga of the three birders zigzagging their way across the continent. The book joins the elite ranks of the few birdwatching books that have been gripping page-turners for the lay public. The reader easily connects with the three musketeers: their passions and paranoia; their zealous and obsessive focus on their goal; and their occasional obnoxiousness and magnanimity. All the while, the reader inadvertently becomes bird savvy as the book packs a plethora of information on the birds themselves and the far-flung habitats they live in.

Birding can be easy enough to be done by the more sedentary casual birders, or can be so tough as to test the limits of the most hardened. The book covers both the easiness and the "holy grails" of the avocation. The reader not only experiences the sheer joy and exhilaration of finding rare birds in comfortable urban locales (like the Gray Partridge in Boise, Idaho), but also gets to feel the thrills of hard-core birdwatching as these birders go through their 4,42,475km transcontinental odyssey. They embark on stomach-churning helicopter rides in the Ruby Mountains of Nevada to catch a glimpse of the Himalayan Snowcock; go on choppy sea expeditions, despite many episodes of seasickness, in pursuit of oceanic birds; stake out a smelly dump in the fetid humidity of Brownsville, Texas, to see the elusive Tamaulipas Crow; wander

under congested freeway overpasses in Vancouver to spot the Crested Myna; or stay for weeks in such remote and desolate places as Attu Island, way out west in the Aleutian chain just 322km from Siberia, to see wind blown Asiatic vagrants. Or even brave a face-to-face encounter with a Mountain Lion in the 21.72km hike for the Colima Warbler in Big Bend National Park, Texas.

From the Florida Keys to the Aleutians, from San Diego to the seas off Newfoundland, they dash about the continent chasing exotics and rarities. They sweat it out in southwest deserts, freeze in subzero Alaskan winds, and endure saw grass-filled bug-infested Florida swamps. And on the way they barely manage to settle the suspicions of law-enforcement authorities (you are out here at 4 a.m. looking for *what?*).

And to what extent do they go to achieve their goals? When strapped for cash, a Big Year birder subsisted on cold canned soup with a liberal sprinkling of cat food (yes, cat food!) and lived under bridges and highway overpasses. Another competitor, with four maxed out credit cards, borrowed thousands from his father ("Bank of Dad"), and lived off pretzels and peanut butter. They stay in the sleaziest of motels, often bargaining with the clerks in the wee hours of the night for discounts to make their dollars stretch. The more affluent ones spend lavishly. One competitor spent about \$10,000 per month during his Big Year. Their birding zeal is indefatigable. They often bird until the very last moment before boarding planes, at times plowing past ticket counters and security stations and walking in with squishy sneakers. Obmascik narrates a hilarious episode in which one of them, after having overslept after a long night, boards a plane when the last call is out, horrifying co-passengers as he enters panting, with "half moons under the armpits and a smear the size of Jupiter on the chest."

In a contest built almost exclusively around trust, their integrity is phenomenal. They don't cut corners or exaggerate. Their attention to detail, to clinch the identifications of the hundreds of birds, is remarkable. They try to find witnesses or document their sightings with photographs or recordings. To them, as Obmascik puts it, "credibility is like virginity—it could be lost only once." They want their record to withstand tough scrutiny, and challenge and inspire birders for years into the future.

The author spices the entire narration with humor. The reader is never bored by avian details, yet gleans a lot of information on the unique pastime of birdwatching, including its history from the time of the legendary John James Audubon, whose peregrinations in 1820 in search of birds to paint served as the nucleus for the idea of the Big Year. And so engaging is the author's writing style and wry wit that even one who cannot tell a myna from a magpie could chuckle away through the book in just few sittings. The Big Year is truly an extraordinary book, and a must read for anyone with any interest in wildlife, competitions, or just plain human nature.

Ragupathy Kannan, an avid birder, is an Associate Professor of Biology at the University of Arkansas at Fort Smith.

CORRESPONDENCE

Further sightings of Lesser Kestrels *Falco naumanni* at Rollapadu Sanctuary, Andhra Pradesh

I read with interest Suhel Quader's short paper published in *Newsletter for Ornithologists* Vol. 1 No. 3, about his sightings of Lesser Kestrels *Falco naumanni* at Rollapadu Sanctuary, Andhra Pradesh in October 2003. He suggests that visitors to the sanctuary in winter may wish to check for this species during their visit. With this in mind the following observation may therefore be of interest.

I visited the Rollapadu Sanctuary with a group of American birders on 9 January 2002. We found a flock of 15 Lesser Kestrels frequenting the area. The birds were in the grassland approximately 2km north-north-west of the nature education centre and were observed for over half an hour both in flight and perched, down to ranges of less than 25m through binoculars and a 38x telescope. The males were identified on the basis of the unspotted chestnut-red back, the plain grey cheeks lacking a dark moustachial stripe and the blue-grey panel in the wing. All birds in the flock had similar structural features, with birds appearing elegant and with some individuals showing the elongated central tail feathers often shown by this species. On at least one of the females it was possible to discern the pale claws whilst perched at close range. The birds were all in a relatively small area and were in a loose flock, behaviour that is typical of the species. I have extensive previous experience of the species from Europe and Central Asia.

This observation confirms Quader's suggestion that it would be worth searching for this species at Rollapadu during the winter months. It may indeed be regular at the site.

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Siberian Crane range states strategize in Moscow

The Fifth Meeting of Signatory States to the Convention for Migratory Species (CMS) Siberian Crane Memorandum of Understanding concluded successfully on 29 April 2004 in Moscow with the adoption of revised Conservation Plans for the Western, Central and Eastern populations of this endangered species.

Representatives of ten of the eleven Range States, together with specialists from numerous scientific institutes and non-governmental organizations, attended the meeting, which was hosted by the Russian Ministry of Natural Resources and organized by the International Crane Foundation (ICF) on behalf of CMS.

The Meeting agreed on the establishment of a network of sites critical for Siberian Cranes of the Western and Central Flyways, which will promote training, capacity-building, exchange programmes, education and public awareness, site monitoring, and information exchange. The site network will be coordinated with related initiatives including the Central Asian Flyway project, the North East Asia Crane Site Network, the African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement GEF Project, and the GEF Econet project.

It was recognized that the survival of both the Western and Central populations, which have collapsed over the past two decades, depends on reducing high hunting pressure. The meeting identified strategies for more effective enforcement of hunting regulations and techniques for educating hunters. Efforts in these flyways will also focus on innovative reintroduction methods that will be applied after controlling the problem of hunting. Taking a

cue from successful efforts by Operation Migration and other partners to reintroduce Whooping cranes in North America, by training young birds to follow ultra light aircraft, researchers in Russia plan to adapt the methodology for use with hang-giders in coming years.

The meeting heard some positive news from Western and Central Asian States. A captive-reared Siberian Crane was successfully released for the first time on the wintering grounds in Iran. Satellite telemetry followed the bird's migration to Dagestan where the signal stopped. Important new migration sites have been recently identified in both of these countries. At the meeting, colleagues from Afghanistan, Iran and Turkmenistan agreed to develop a coordinated survey to identify potential alternate wintering sites along their border areas. Laws against crane hunting have been adopted by some Range States, and there is considerable effort by other States to undertake similar initiatives. Crane Working Groups have been initiated in most of the Range States to undertake many of the responsibilities, including an active role in conducting awareness programmes, and the other States will initiate such Groups soon.

Participants gave enthusiastic accounts of a variety of creative programmes to increase awareness and involve local communities. Highly successful and inspiring Crane Day celebrations were held in several countries in 2002-2003, and will now be conducted in all the Range States.

The remaining Eastern population in China is far more numerous, with recent mid-winter counts at Poyang Lake suggesting that the population may number as many as 4,000 birds. Under the UNEP-GEF wetland project, protection has expanded to 15 reserves around the greater Poyang Lake Basin. A team of hydrologists plans to tackle water management issues at migration resting areas in northeast China at the Zhalong and Xiangha National Nature Reserves.

During the meeting of Signatory States, the representative of Mongolia signed the Memorandum of Understanding on behalf of his Government, and two nongovernmental organisations – the Cracid and Crane Breeding and Conservation Centre (CBCC, Belgium) and Wetlands International (Malaysia) – were invited to join the MoU as cooperating partners.

The CMS Secretariat will circulate the report of the present meeting to interested parties after it has been finalised by ICF in the coming months. Tentative plans were made to review progress again in mid-2006, with Kazakhstan and Pakistan suggested as possible meeting venues.

Note: The Siberian Crane Memorandum of Understanding provided the impetus for the development of a multi-country UNEP-GEF wetland and waterbird conservation project valued at nearly USD 23 million, which is now being implemented in China, Iran and Russia, with Kazakhstan to participate shortly. [Source: Douglas Hykle (Senior CMS Advisor); Claire Mirande (International Crane Foundation).]

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Evidence for an extension of the breeding period of Red-rumped Swallows *Hirundo daurica* in the Indian Subcontinent

I spent 10 weeks sea-watching from the Goa coast, mostly at the base of Fort Aguada, Bardez, in the late monsoon 2003. Sea-watching time was always from 06.30hrs-10.00hrs. On 4.x.2003 I turned around, to check out the chirping calls I had been hearing for the previous two or three days and had assumed the calls to be from Red-rumped Swallows *Hirundo daurica* but due to the concentration required in sea-watching and the added difficulty of turning my neck around due to a bad-back, I had not looked carefully at their behaviour. I saw that a pair were collecting mud from a puddle and flying towards the Taj Hotel, where they were obviously building a nest. Similar behaviour was noted on every subsequent day up until at least 10.x.2003, when I also tried to gain access to the hotel to find the nest for future investigation. Access was denied but I intended to try again later in the season, when the young had hatched. But I had to return to the U.K. urgently and so I did not have the opportunity.

The nesting season within the Indian subcontinent was given as April to August (Ali 1955) and more recently March to September (Grimmett et al. 1998), varying locally. The above observations give strong evidence for the breeding season extending throughout October. The rump of these birds was a deep orange.

References

- Ali, Salim. 1955. *The book of Indian Birds*. 5th edition. Bombay: Bombay Natural History Society.
Grimmett, R., T. Inskipp, & C. Inskipp. 1998. *Birds of the Indian*

Subcontinent. London: Christopher Helm.

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Newsletter for Ornithologists

I was away on a field assignment and returned to find the excellent second issue of the NLO at WPSI. The ready reckoner is very useful especially for the discussion groups and websites. Since my near-term future may see some intensive travelling and changes in postal addresses without a house of my own in which to store literature, I will not be able to subscribe, but will read the copies of the various others who I have ensured subscribed, and keep myself abreast...

I don't really know what basis you have used to list the bird conservation organisations because some in it do not qualify to be under that title and some that do are missing. I guess you will work to increase this as comments come in.

Your recommended abbreviation "*New. Ornis.*" is not standard and may not find acceptance in journals that still do not have abbreviations for the words "Newsletter" and "Ornithology" and use the full words for citation. It may however work to have the shortform as "NLO" since many newsletters do get abbreviated as standard forms; like the older NLBW.

The sketches by Sachin are simply outstanding!

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Photo: Harkirat S. Sangha



Hume's Groundpecker *Pseudopodoces humilis*

Photos: Rishad Naoroji



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