

# NEWSLETTER

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FOR ORNITHOLOGISTS

Vol. 1 No. 5

September-October 2004



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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

### Spectacular vernacular

Indian ornithology is on the verge of a huge boom. The engine that will propel its expansion is now being forged. The path-breaking field guide by Grimmett and the Inskipps has been split into two parts, one on the birds of north India and the other on those of south India. These are being translated under the aegis of the Indian Bird Conservation Network of the Bombay Natural History Society, into eight vernacular languages: Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu. The potential reach of these volumes and their ultimate effect on a population largely starved of such a powerful tool is both exciting and mind-boggling. Within a few years we should have a new army of birdwatchers. How should we organise ourselves to direct their enthusiasm so that Indian ornithology lives, grows and flourishes?

I have long had a dream to collaborate with a popular vernacular newspaper in conducting bird surveys. To use their science page with sketches of easily identifiable species, so that the reader is not confused. These should be chosen to represent various habitats. Say a Spot-billed Pelican, an Oriental White Ibis, a Great Indian Bustard, a Hoopoe, and a Eurasian Golden Oriole. Ask readers to report the presence of these taxa in their areas. This will start a widespread survey on distribution of these species. Gradually, a census could be attempted or, a survey of heronries. From a newspaper readership numbering in lakhs, if we receive even 1,000-5,000 replies, it would be a great beginning. With field guides available in vernacular languages, such projects could become the backbone of meaningful Indian ornithological.

Sri Lavkumar Khacher has long been an advocate of the regional-oriented publication. He and some of his colleagues have started a Gujarati newsletter called *Vihang*. In the few months of its existence it has grown in leaps and bounds. Correspondence pours in from all corners of Gujarat. The reach of the vernacular is truly spectacular. In the future, to garner that reach, to synthesize its inputs, to distill its data and to publish its findings in English, will be the unique challenge of English-language-based local birding organisations. Rapid change of land use and habitat begs a massive and widespread network of intelligent and reliable birdwatchers alive and sensitive to the environmental requirements of our nation. Given the levels and types of Indian education this is possible only in the vernacular medium. Emulatory examples exist in Karnataka (a handful of Kannada books already exist), Kerala [Prof. Neelakantan's *Keralathile Pakshikal* (1958), sparked the interest that was instrumental in local resistance to the destruction of Silent Valley and other environmental issues], Maharashtra (Pakshi Mitra Sammelan), and Gujarat (*Vihang*). There might be more that I am unaware of.

With the vernacular translations of this book, we will have the tools. Let us begin to hone our skills. Working at local levels would be best. Studying the bird life of the local wetland, the neighbouring forest or wilderness area, the surrounding fields, the immediate urban / suburban / rural vicinity. This is what is required. Science, unlike art, builds itself on data. So does ornithology. Focussed, assiduous, localised, regular, repetitive, accurate data collection is what is required. To seek 'new' species in distant places as the only remedy for bored birdwatching speaks of an incomprehensible blindness to the immediate. There are worlds enough in our surroundings to satisfy our greatest curiosity.

– Aasheesh Pittie

# Status, distribution, ecology and behaviour of White-tailed Stonechat *Saxicola leucura* in Nepal with reference to Indian subcontinent

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## Introduction

White-tailed Stonechat *Saxicola leucura* was first described to science in 1847 by Blyth from a specimen collected from upper Scinde (=Sind) (Blyth 1847). It is near endemic to the Indian subcontinent (Ripley 1982, Roberts 1992) where, it is recorded in the three major river systems Indus, Ganges and Brahmaputra (Ali and Ripley 1987). Four countries within our region; Pakistan, India, Nepal and Bangladesh have White-tailed Stonechat. Although not yet recorded in Bhutan, this is likely to occur along larger river courses. Outside our region, White-tailed is found also along the Irrawaddy River systems in Myanmar (Robson 2000, Urquhart and Bowley 2002).

Although a locally common species at various places in our region, status of this bird is poorly known. In this paper I try to find out the current status and distribution of the species in Nepal with a reference to the Indian subcontinent.

## Field Characters

Adult male is very similar to Common Stonechat *Saxicola torquata* but with darker head, back and wings. The inner webs of all but central tail feathers are largely white; as a result shows much white on tail in flight and also when alighted on perch, although this feature is not usually apparent when at rest. The rusty patch on the breast is limited to upper part and usually does not flow to the belly and flanks. Adult female is similar to female Common Stonechat but much greyer body in general (Common Stonechat has rufous wash). Juvenile birds are similar to female but with scales/barring on the breast, wing, back and on head. Juvenile birds have feathers with broad buff fringes therefore giving them mottled effect. They look darker and slightly more rufous than adult females.

No subspecific variations are known to occur at present. However Grimmett et al. (1998) mention birds from Manipur are darker and may resemble a different subspecies. Similarly, Roberts (1992) writes in Pakistan specimens rufous area on the breast is almost a blood red. Further work is needed on this field to find out the extent of variation and presence of any subspecific status.

## Distribution and status

In the Indian subcontinent, White-tailed is resident, subject to local movements, found west from Indus River system in Pakistan, and in Ganges River system from Punjab, India, east through the Nepal terai to Assam and Manipur in the Brahmaputra River systems as well as south to N Orissa (Ali and Ripley 1987, Roberts 1992, Grimmett et al. 1998, Urquhart and Bowley 2002). It is described as 'very restricted and scarce in Pakistan' (Roberts 1992). In India, it is locally fairly common in the terai (Grimmett et al. 1998). Based on some previous notes and widespread loss of grassland habitat, this species may have significantly declined in India. For example I quote Jerdon (1863): "Found it far from rare at Thyet-myo in Upper Burmah, frequenting grassy churrs on the Irrawaddy, but never in the low jungles that lined the banks. Somewhat to my surprise I found it most abundant in the Gangetic valley, from

Rajmehal (=Rajmahal) to Monghyr (=Munger, Bihar, India), frequenting fields and long grasses. It is a permanent resident, and breeds here; for I found the young birds just flown in April, but did not succeed in procuring the nest. On referring to Buchanan Hamilton's MSS. notes I find that he has confounded it with the last, for writing of *rubicola*, he says that he has found them breeding in the Bhagulpore (=Bhagalpur) and Gya (=Gaya) districts, making their nests among thick tufts of grass, but whether attached to the grass, or on the ground, he does not state. He gives the native name as *Kat-pidda*."

Rajmahal, Munger, Bhagalpur and Gaya may not have any White-tailed Stonechat habitat left. Jerdon (1863) compares the status of the bird in Upper Myanmar (Burma) compared to that of Gangetic plains and writes how abundant the birds were in the latter localities. This is not true anymore as grassland habitat is converted to agriculture field or has been developed to build other physical structures in these areas.

In Nepal, it is regularly recorded at Koshi Tappu, Koshi Barrage, Chitwan, Bardia and Sukila Phanta (Inskipp and Inskipp 1991, Baral 2001). It has once been recorded at Pokhara at 915m, which is unusually high altitude record for the species (Choudhary 1996). More than 90% of current population in Nepal is found in protected areas. This means that outside the protected areas, its habitat is lost. The loss of grassland habitat in the country has made the species as nationally threatened (Baral and Inskipp in prep.).

The current status of this bird in Bangladesh is not clearly known. Formerly it was found to be resident (Ali and Ripley 1987). Grimmett et al. (1998) mention White-tailed possibly a vagrant to the country.

Outside our region, it is described as locally fairly common resident in N (south-east), E, S Myanmar (Robson 2000). Although described as locally fairly common looking at the widespread loss of habitat elsewhere, this species must have suffered population decline also in Myanmar. Future surveys in Myanmar are urgently needed to establish status of this and several other species.

## Habitat

Although similar in appearance and habit as to the Common Stonechat, it is distinctly segregated from the latter in terms of habitat utilization. White-tailed Stonechat is an obligate grassland bird found mostly in and around *Saccharum spontaneum* grassland (Baral 2001). In Koshi Tappu and Chitwan, it is also noted in *Saccharum spontaneum* and *Typha elephantine* grasslands. Roberts (1992) gives similar account for the species' habitat in Pakistan. In Nepal, it is highly restricted to riverine or large phantas of grasslands and is found in grasslands along large rivers such as Narayani, Karnali, Rapti, Mahakali, and Koshi. This is not found in overgrazed grasslands. The average sward height of grasses needed to be at least half a meter preferably over a meter for the species to occur. In phantas at Chitwan and Sukila Phanta, it showed preference for grasslands with considerable open patches. This confirms with observations made by W. G. Harvey near Delhi (cited as W. G.

Harvey in litt 2001 in Urquhart and Bowley 2002). In Sukila Phanta, more birds were located after cutting and burning of the main phanta. Whether this is what birds really like or there was better detectability when the grasses were thin- is not clearly understood.

### Ecology

It performs only very local movements probably for breeding. In summer, in many places this is found in close proximity with Pied Bush Chat *Saxicola caprata*, although for the latter a habitat with more woody species and shrubs are required. In winter, I have witnessed White-tailed Stonechat with other 5 species of *Saxicola* nearby. The other five species being Common Stonechat, Pied Bushchat, Grey Bushchat *Saxicola ferrea*, Hodgson's Bushchat *Saxicola insignis* and Jerdon's Bushchat *Saxicola jerdoni*. Of all these species, in terms of habitat ecology White-tailed is most closely associated with Hodgson's Bushchat followed by Common Stonechat.

White-tailed is mostly found in loose pairs, singles are rarer. Its behaviour is similar to that of Common Stonechat and Hodgson's Bushchat. Adult males along the river courses are found spaced apart at least by 200 meters. The densest concentration of White-tailed may be in the proper Sukila Phanta where more than 100 birds could easily be found.

### Breeding

It has been found breeding in grasslands of Koshi (including Koshi Tappu), Chitwan and Sukila Phanta. It possibly breeds also in Royal Bardia National Park but confirmation is desirable. Nests have been found at Sukila Phanta in both December and May, which may indicate two breeding seasons or possibly that it has a single, more extended breeding season than elsewhere. Ali and Ripley (1987) suspected double broods in a year. Further work is needed to confirm this.

### Conservation Outlook

As White-tailed Stonechat is near endemic to the Indian subcontinent, it is our responsibility to keep a close watch on the status and ecology of this species. This will enable us to understand the species better and if needed to alert the like-minded organizations and individuals for its conservation. Due to loss of tall riverine grasslands, which is the exclusive habitat for this species, White-tailed population has declined in Nepal (Baral 2001). As a result, the species has been included in the national red data book on birds (Baral and Inskipp in prep.). Elsewhere in its range, at least in Bangladesh and Pakistan, it is considered rare and vagrant (Roberts 1992, Grimmett et al. 1998). A true assessment of its status in India and Myanmar will be priority work for species conservation. It is likely these countries may hold most of the global population of White-tailed Stonechat.

### Acknowledgements

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# Scorpions and molluscs: Some new dietary records for Spotted Owlet *Athene brama* in India

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## Introduction

Spotted Owlet *Athene brama* is a common resident raptor found all over India. Of the races *A. brama brama*, *A. b. indica* and *A. b. ultra*, the nominate form is known to occur south of 20°N latitude (Ali and Ripley 1969). These owlets are largely crepuscular and nocturnal in habits and generally keep in pairs or family parties of three to four birds. They are known to feed chiefly on beetles, moths, locusts and other insects, as also on earthworms, lizards, mice and small birds (Ali and Ripley 1969). Not much work has been done on feeding behaviour of Spotted Owlets. Kumar (1985) studied their ecology, and Jain and Advani (1983) and, Jadhav and Parasharya (2003) their food habits. This paper records some new items in the dietary of the Spotted Owlet.

We studied a breeding pair of this owlet at Saswad (18°20'09"N, 74°00'73"E), in Pune district, Maharashtra, from 15 January to 28 February 2004. This semi-arid area receives very low rainfall. It has agricultural cropland of black soil. Severe drought has been prevalent in the region for the past two years.

## Observations

The nest of our study pair was in a hole between the roof and wall of an abandoned building on the bank of the perennially dry Karha River. Its entrance was 6 inches wide and it was located 4m above the ground. A few dry twigs, feathers of birds like Asian Koel *Eudynamis scolopacea*, Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis* and House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*, and some loose soil were seen in the nest. In the non-breeding season the birds used this nest as one of their roosting sites besides the adjacent banyan *Ficus bengalensis* and mango *Mangifera indica* trees. The owlets were seen hawking winged insects for two hours from twilight, under an electric lamp outside the adjacent Siddheshwar temple. They were also seen dropping to the ground and taking prey, the identity of which was not ascertained.

Spotted owlets are known to regurgitate undigested food in the form of pellets. Such pellets were collected from beneath the study nest. 65 pellets were collected. 12 of these were completely intact and were measured in the field with a Vernier Calipers (0.01mm sensitivity). The average size of these intact pellets was 13.9mm x 9.7mm. These were then sterilized in a dry oven at 72°C for 24 hours and subsequently broken with gloved fingers for further analysis. Hard chitinous insect parts, hair and bones were separated. Since crushed segments and partial appendages are the only residual parts of insects found in the pellets, identification of invertebrates beyond the Order level is usually not possible.

## Results and discussion

Different types of food items are reported in the diet of Spotted Owlets (Table 1). They seem to feed on a variety of animals ranging from earthworms to birds and mice; but prefer a diet of beetles (Coleoptera). The pellets we collected contained remains of mammals (Insectivora and Rodentia) (Table 1). They also had

remnants of insects, which were identified by one of the authors (PPK) as those of Orthoptera (crickets, grasshoppers, acridids, etc.), Hymenoptera (wasps, ants, bees, etc.) and Coleoptera (Table 1).

A few molluscan gastropod shells [Mollusca: Mesogastropoda and Stylommatophora (land snails, slugs, etc.)] were also identified among the pellet contents and we report for the first time, that these form a part of the dietary of Spotted Owlets in India (Table 1). It is likely that the owlets are ingesting the molluscs to aid the grinding of meat in the stomach. Hard root fragments of plants, seeds and grit were also present in the pellets and may have been consumed for the same purpose. *Eucalyptus* sp. seeds, small pebbles and lime particles are found in the fecal pellets of *Athene brama indica* (Jain and Advani 1983).

We would also like to record, for the first time, the presence of scorpion (Order: Scorpionida, Family: Buthidae) body parts as a constituent of the diet of the Spotted Owlet in India. Twentyfour entire scorpion stings along with 10 patellae<sup>1</sup> of pedipalps<sup>2</sup> were identified in the pellets. Two species, *Mesobuthus tamulus tamulus* (Fabr.) (5 entire stings and 2 palps) and *Mesobuthus pachyurus* (Pocock) (19 entire stings and 9 palps) were identified by one of the authors (DBB). The latter species is an inhabitant of the black cropland soil of the region. Two other species of scorpions also reported from this area are, *Orthochirus bicolor* (Pocock) (Family: Buthidae) and *Heterometrus xanthopus* (Pocock) (Family: Scorpionidae) (Tikader and Bastawade 1983). Parts of the latter were not found in the pellets. The poisonous parts of the arachnid, the scorpion sting exuvia<sup>3</sup>, were intact in all the pellets. A few patellae of pedipalps and some partly digested tail segments were also found.

Swallowing prey with pointed appendages is known to cause injury to owls. Duncan (2003) records the death of an Eastern Screech Owl *Otus asio* chick, while swallowing a dead Red-breasted Nuthatch *Sitta canadensis*. The short pointed beak of the nuthatch pierced the owl's brain, through the roof of its mouth. In our observation, the owlets ingested the scorpions along with their pointed, hard stings. The stings were later expelled in the pellets and were not allowed to pass distally from the gizzard into the small intestine. Therefore, it is clear that these owlets swallow whole scorpions and de-sting them in their gizzard. The owlets seem to have evolved this unique method of safety, as a physiological adaptation against sharp and poisonous scorpion stings. This is in contrast with the behavior of shrikes (Laniidae) living in certain desert habitats, that de-sting scorpions with their beak, prior to eating (Paul and Gwinner 1967). Roadrunners *Geococcyx* sp. (Cuculidae) are also reported to attack venomous tail spikes of arachnids, rendering them defenseless, before swallowing the scorpions (Bent 1940). Scorpions are reported in the diet of some owls, but these reports are not from India (Cook 1997). Kumar (1985) has reported arachnids of Family: Scorpionidae as a chance food (less than 1% frequency) of the spotted owlets in Hyderabad, but has not specified the species.

Kumar (1985), and Jadhav and Parasharya (2003), report amphibians, for the first time, particularly toads (Bufonidae), in the diet of the Spotted Owlet. It is said that the presence of poison glands on the toad's skin help to distract predators, however it seems that the same is not effective against Spotted Owlet (Jadhav and Parasharya 2003).

Lizards, geckos, snakes (Reptilia) and bats (Mammalia) were also recorded (Kumar 1985; Jadhav 2003) in the diet of Spotted Owlets. Thus, these spotted owlets seem to be resorting to euryphagy<sup>4</sup> (Cook 1997) with a significant intake of scorpions as well. This may be an adaptive response to the perennial drought-like situation in this arid scrub habitat where no single prey species is plentiful at any given time.

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**Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Patella = Kneecap.
- <sup>2</sup> Pedipalp = One of the second pair of appendages near the mouth of a spider or other arachnid that are modified for various reproductive, predatory, or sensory functions.
- <sup>3</sup> Exuviae = The cast-off skins or coverings of various organisms, such as the shells of crabs or the external coverings of the larvae and nymphs of insects.
- <sup>4</sup> Euryphagous = feeding on a wide variety of foods.

Table 1.

Food Item	Ali & Ripley	Jain & Advani	Jadhav & Parasharya	Authors
Invertebrata				
ANNELIDA				
Earthworms	R	-	-	-
MOLLUSCA				
Ord: Megagastropoda				
Fam: Thiaridae				
<i>Thiara scabra</i> (Muller)	-	-	-	First Report
Ord: Stylommatophora				
Subulinidae				
<i>Lamellaxis gracilis</i> (Hutton)	-	-	-	First Report
ARTHROPODA				
Class: Arachnida				
Ord: Scorpionida				
Fam: Buthidae				
<i>Mesobuthos tamulus tamulus</i> (Fabr.)	-	-	-	First Report
<i>Mesobuthos pachyurus</i> (Pocock)	-	-	-	First Report
Fam: Solifugae				
<i>Galeodes indicus</i> (Pocock)	-	-	-	First Report
INSECTA				
Ord: Coleoptera: Beetles	R	-	-	-
Fam: Meloidae: Blister Beetle	-	-	-	R
Fam: Coccinellidae: Ladybird Beetle	-	-	-	R
Fam: Elateridae:				

Click Beetle <i>Drasterius</i> sp.	-	-	R	R
Fam: Cerambycidae	-	-	-	R
Fam: Carabidae: Ground Beetle	-	R	-	R
Fam: Scarabaeidae:				
Dung Roller Beetle	R	R	-	R
Rhino Beetle <i>Heliocopris bucephalus</i>	-	-	R	-
Melanothidae:				
White Grub Beetle <i>Holotrichae</i> sp.	-	-	R	-
Fam: Tenebrionidae	-	R	-	-
Ord: Orthoptera				
Fam: Acrididae: Grasshopper	R	-	-	R
Ord: Mantodea: Mantid				
Ord: Hymenoptera	-	R	-	-
Fam: Formicidae: Ants	-	-	-	R
Ord: Hemiptera	-	R	-	-
Ord: Odonata:				
Dragonfly <i>Agrionine</i> sp.	-	-	R	-
Ord: Lepidoptera: Butterfly, Moth	R	-	R	-
Fam: Sphingidae: Moth				
Ord: Dictyoptera:				
Cockroach <i>Periplaneta americana</i>	-	-	R	-
Vertebrata				
AMPHIBIA				
Ord: Anura				
Fam: Bufonidae:				
Marbled Toad <i>Bufo stomaticus</i>	-	-	R	-
REPTILIA				
Brahminy Worm Snake				
<i>Ramphotyphlops braminus</i>	-	-	R	-
Lacertilia: Lizard	R	-	-	-
AVES: Small birds	R	-	-	-
MAMMALIA				
Ord: Insectivora				
Fam: Soricidae				
SubFam: Crocidurinae				
<i>Suncus etruscus</i> (Savi)	-	-	-	First Report
<i>Suncus stoliczkanus</i> (Anderson)	-	-	-	First Report
<i>Suncus</i> Sp.	-	-	-	First Report
Ord: Rodentia	-	R	-	-
Fam: Muridae				
SubFam: Gerbillinae				
<i>Tatera indica</i> (Hardwicke)	-	-	-	R
SubFam: Murinae				
<i>Mus musculus</i> (Linnaeus)	-	-	R	R
House mouse				
<i>Golunda ellioti</i> (Gray)	-	-	-	R
<i>Mus</i> sp., <i>Rattus</i> sp.	-	-	-	R
Mice	R	-	-	-
Ord: Microchiroptera: Bats	-	-	R	-
Plant Matter				
Eucalyptus seeds	-	R	-	R
Plant rootlets	-	-	-	R
Pebbles	-	R	-	R
Lime particles				

Key to abbreviations: Ord=Order, Fam=Family, R=Reported earlier.



# Geophagy by three species of crows near carcass dumping ground at Jodhpur, Rajasthan

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Survival and reproduction of each species depend on its ability to locate and eat sufficient food to meet their nutritional needs. Timings and selection of food synchronized to meet the requirements of proteins, carbohydrates, fats, vitamins, water and minerals, etc (Chhangani, 2000). The feeding behaviour of some birds is extremely complex. The complexity further increased by the type of food, feeding site, inter and intra-specific relationship and reproductive status of particular species. Birds in general consume a wide variety of food items that are very specific. The choice of particular food item depends on the nutrients value, energy value, which helps in digestion or balancing toxins in the diet, etc.

Geophagy, the deliberate act of eating soil, is widespread in vertebrates (Beyer, et. al., 1994). Many birds have been reported eating soil (Izawa, 1993; Diamond, et. al., 1999). Geophagy has also been reported in mammals and reptiles (Weir, 1969; Kreuten & Jager, 1984; Kreuten, 1985; Chhangani, 2000).

The present observations of sand eating by House crow (*Corvus splendens*), Large-billed crow (*Corvus macrorhynchos*) and Common raven (*Corvus corax*) were made at Municipal Corporation Dumping Ground (MCDG) at Jodhpur. All the species of crows were observed feeding with the seven species of vultures along with other birds at (MCDG) Jodhpur (Chhangani, 2002b). Jodhpur is situated on the eastern fringe of the Great Indian Desert (26°19'N, 73°08'E). There are about 158 species of birds belonging to 44 families were recorded in and around Jodhpur (Chhangani, 2002a). During the regular feeding and demographic observations and annual censuses of vultures from 1996 to 2002, sand eating by all the crow's species was observed 43 times. Of which 6% of observations were made on House crow, 35% were made on Jungle crow and 59% were made on ravens. All the species were observed eating sand after a regular feeding of 8 to 25 minutes on the dead carcasses. Sand eating was observed two times in a day in the morning it was observed between 10.00 to 12.00 am and in the evening between 3.00 to 5.00 pm. In most of the observations the sand was eating from the surface of the ground and some time from the opening of the dogs den. House crow used to eat small particles of sand where as Large-billed crow and ravens observed pickup larger pieces of sand then of House crow (about 1.5 cm). Timing of sand eating varies from .5 minute to 1.5 minutes.

The information presented here will form the basis for future studies, looking at the significance and use of geophagy in birds. The function of geophagy may vary from species to species, and within one species may serve different functions at different times (Davies & Baillie, 1988; Kreuten, 1985).

The simple explanation for geophagy in birds is to grind food in the gizzards because birds lack teeth (Diamond, 1999). But crows here preferred very fine soil so it is not useful in the grit and crows have no need for grit because they have large, strong and sharp bills.

This geophagy behaviour might have played a role in the neutralization or adsorption of toxins. Or this solid is a source of important supplement nutrients of the diet or the geophagy

improves the food intake through modification of conditions in the digestive track, such as PH, buffering capacity, osmotic pressure and dilution rate of food. Other potential benefits related to the protective effects of soil consumption against poisoning; the cation exchange capacity of clay minerals is associated with adsorption of dietary toxins (Kreuten, 1985).

A regular diet of routine and infected carcasses might contain alkaloids and other toxins, which are harmful or lethal for the crows, and the chemical elements present in sand are an extremely diverse group of nutrients that have many essential functions. Minerals present in the sand could play its role in the detoxification of toxic or poisonous elements (Chhangani, 2000). Deficiencies and imbalance of minerals are well recognized as important determinants of animal's physiology, fertility, productivity and mortality (Robbins, 1983). So, the "Soil Adsorption of Toxins" might be the reasonable explanation for the consumption of sand in birds. It is also important to investigate that is the soil eaten by crows are effective against the toxins in the diet or pathogens because it contains important ingredients which are effective and allow other chemicals to bond with them or lose their reactivity. More specific and further investigations and detail chemical study of sand eaten by crows of different species and other birds is needed. It is also possible that this soil is an important component of the diet for supplement nutrients like calcium, sodium, potassium, zinc, manganese, copper magnesium, etc.. All these possibilities need to be studied further to understand the geophagy in avian species.

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## Berwala Bird Safari

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The name of this wildlife sanctuary is perhaps unusual. But then it came to be created in rather unusual circumstances. In May 2001, Haryana's Chief Minister announced that he wanted to make the Morni area in the Shivalik Hills the finest tourist destination in north India; a Lion Safari laid over 1,000ha was to be the centre-piece of this utility. I was horrified as Morni is one of the few areas in the Shivaliks, which will qualify as a nature heritage site. I reasoned with the C. M. that he should instead create a Bird Safari that will require next to no infrastructure, no disturbance to the existing rich floral and faunal diversity and absolutely no relocation of villages. I learnt later that bureaucrats, without exception, were not happy with the idea of a Lion Safari but they did not wish to voice their opinion. So everyone backed my letter to the C.M. and the idea of a Bird Safari was accepted! For all intents and purposes it is a bird sanctuary but the word "Safari" has come to stay, for the present any way.

Berwala (30°41'N, 76°41'E; 300m a.s.l.) is a mere 16km from Chandigarh on the road to Morni. Situated at the junction of Shivaliks with the plains it is a bustling transit area in the back-and-forth movement of birds, butterflies and some mammals between the Himalaya and the plains, synchronous with the cycles of seasons the year long. It comprises the 260ha space in-between and over the last two major ridges of the Shivalik Hills range before they tumble down and eventually flatten out at the Ghagar River, merging with the plains of north India. At the widest the valley is about 2km and a mere 800m at the narrowest. There are three active springs that cater to the needs of birds and animals adequately. The valley, the numerous ravines and the slopes of the ridges are densely wooded with the dry deciduous flora typical of the Shivaliks. The predominant tree species are *Chaal* (*Anogeissus latifolia*), *Jhingan* (*Lannea grandis*), *Dhakk* (*Butea monosperma*), *Khair* (*Acacia catechu*), *Gular* (*Ficus glomerata*), *Ber* (*Zizyphus nummlaria*), and the climber *Bauhinia vahlii*. Some slopes support rich growth of *Bhabbar* grass (*Eulaliopsis binata*).

In keeping with the geology of the Shivaliks, Berwala has several bare and near vertical mud cliffs. The largest is almost in the centre of the sanctuary. It is approximately 40m at the base and narrows to about 30m as it rises dramatically for nearly 50m from the floor of the valley. In the month of May I found the Green Bee-eaters *Merops orientalis* covering the face of this cliff like a swarm of bees. About 20m above there were over 180 nest-tunnels so well placed that Shikras *Accipiter badius* and Common Kestrels *Falco tinnunculus* could not even get a toe-hold let alone prey upon the nestlings. And on 16.xi.2003, two Wallcreepers *Tichodroma muraria*

were sighted on this cliff face; I mention the date because this bird is a very rare vagrant from the Himalaya and it may well be the first record for this area.

So far 83 species of birds (resident, passage, vagrants and local migrants) have been sighted. Over a period of time, this list will surely cross the 200 mark. Occasionally encountered are the Great Barbet *Megalaima virens*, Blue-bearded Bee-eater *Nyctornis athertoni*, Yellow-billed Blue Magpie *Urocissa flavirostris*, Grey Treepie *Dendrocitta formosae*, Crested Bunting *Melophus lathamii*, Verditer Flycatcher *Eumyias thalassina*, Asian Paradise-Flycatcher *Terpsiphone paradisi*, Blue Whistling-Thrush *Myophonus caeruleus*, White-throated Fantail-Flycatcher *Rhipidura albicollis* and, Black Bulbul *Hypsipetes leucocephalus*. In the month of May, I sighted two male Crimson Sunbirds *Aethopya siparaja*. Surely they could not be nesting at such a low altitude? Those that delight your heart always and every time are the Red-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer*, Himalayan Bulbul *Pycnonotus leucogenys*, Oriental White-eye *Zosterops palpebrosus*, Great Tit *Parus major*, Rufous Treepie *Dendrocitta vagabunda*, Scarlet Minivet *Pericrocotus flammeus*, Oriental Magpie-Robin *Copsychus saularis*, Grey Bushchat *Saxicola ferrea*, Black Drongo *Dicrurus leucophaeus*, Jungle Babbler *Turdoides striatus*, Indian Peafowl *Pavo cristatus*, Red Junglefowl *Gallus gallus* and, Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus*.

When summer is at its hottest and driest, the magic of this little sanctuary is hard to rival. The narrow valley reverberates with the incessant calls of the Lesser Cuckoo *Cuculus poliocephalus*, the Indian Cuckoo *Cuculus micropterus* and the Koel *Eudynamis scolopacea*. When rains are in sight, the Pied Crested Cuckoo *Clamator jacobinus* joins the chorus. Once the rains are well established, the Indian Pittas *Pitta brachyura* arrive in good numbers both to add colour and enliven the bird song. There is strong vocal evidence of the presence of Laughingthrushes (*Garrulax* spp.) as well but none have been seen nor identified from their calls so far.

There is one game trail in the sanctuary, which from the floor of the valley ascends to the top of the ridge and after a long traverse over the entire crest line again descends to the valley floor. The crest provides a total view of the entire sanctuary and a grand panorama of the Shivalik Range as far and wide as eyes can reach out. My first walk on the trail on 23.xi.2003 was very memorable. There were the tracks of a big Sambar *Cervus unicolor* with a fawn in tow, several heaps of droppings of the Barking Deer *Muntiacus muntjak*, spent quills of Indian Porcupines *Hystrix indica* and

feathered remains of a peacock suggestive of a meal made possibly by a Leopard *Panthera pardus*. Thrice I put up Himalayan Goral *Naemorhedus goral*, five in all, who gave remarkable displays of glissading down the cliff face and down the knife-edge of a spur at lightning speeds. A sounder of four Wild Boar *Sus scrofa*, when surprised, stood blocking my path and then in a sudden right turn disappeared inside the *bhabbar* grass, grunting their disapproving anger all the while. And one Bonelli's Eagle *Hieraeetus fasciatus* exhibited the power and grace of his steep glide-dive from far above down to its prey in the valley in the flash of an eyelid. One solitary Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* was seen atop a

tree that was rooted in a cliff-face in sheer defiance of gravity. And quite unpredictably, every now and then a variety of butterflies – Grass Yellow *Eurema hecabe*, Great Orange Tip *Hebomoia glaucippe*, Indian Cabbage White *Pieris canidia*, Peacock Pansy *Junonia almana*, Common Mormon *Papilio polytes*, and others unknown to me – added to the charms of this two-hour walk.

Having sampled this fraction of Nature's riches of the Shivalik inside the Berwala Bird Safari, I wondered what the Shivalik Development Board (Haryana) mean by "developing" the area to make it more "attractive." They will no doubt spend crores but who has ever enhanced Nature's attractions?

## Nesting of Western Reef-Egret *Egretta gularis* in the saltpans of G.H.C.L., Dholera

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The Gujarat Heavy Chemical Ltd. (GHCL) saltpans, located on the western coast of the Gulf of Khambhat, near Dholera (22°15'N, 72°15'E) are well-known foraging site for both the species of Flamingos (Phoenicopteridae) during the non-breeding season (Jadhav and Parasharya 2004). Various sizes of salt works, spread over a vast area (c.40km<sup>2</sup>) support a large number of waterbirds throughout the year. During winter this place becomes a heaven for birdwatchers. A large number of Great White Pelicans *Pelecanus onocrotalus*, Eurasian Spoonbills *Platalea leucorodia*, Painted Stork *Mycteria leucocephala*, waders and Gulls and Terns (Laridae) have been recorded here during winter. The Western Reef-Egret *Egretta gularis* is one of the common birds inhabiting the saltpans and the coastal mudflats. During our visit on 8.vi.2004, we found Western Reef-Egret nesting on mangroves within the saltpans.

The Western Reef-Egrets were found nesting on the top of dried mangroves *Avicennia marina* standing within the saltpans. The saltpans were filled with water up to a depth of 15-20cm. The height of the mangrove plants varied from 0.6-1.5m above the water surface. Hence, the nests were very close to water surface. The platform nests were constructed using the thin dried sticks of mangroves. The nests were built on the forked vertical branches. In all, 24 nests were observed on 20 plants (Table-1). One nest was found on a 1.5m mangrove and was close to the road. There were three light sky blue eggs in it. No chick was present in any of the

nests. Both forms (Grey and White) of the Reef-Egret were present in this heronry, however the proportion of nesting birds showed dominance of grey forms (22) compared to two white forms. Along with Reef-Egrets, two nests of Little Cormorant *Phalacrocorax niger* were also recorded on the same vegetation of which one was along with nests of Reef-Egrets.

The Western Reef-Egrets are generally recorded nesting at the height of 5 to 15m or some time even at the height of about 2m from the ground, on forked vertical branches of trees. *Avicennia* is one of the plants used for building their nests in the coastal region (Parasharya & Naik, 1988, Hancock & Kushlan 1984). However, nesting at such a low height is recorded for the first time. Unlike other heronries on large trees, (Parasharya and Naik 1988) the mangroves supported less number of nests (1-4 nests per plant) due to their small canopy size.

The entire area was dominated by the mangroves *Avicennia marina* and Seepweed *Suaeda nudiflora*. No other tall plants were present in the surrounding area; hence the mangroves were the only plants available as nesting substratum. As the nests were built within the inundated saltpans, they were not approachable by any terrestrial predator. The saltpans having the heronry were close to the seacoast. Hence a large numbers of mudskippers (*Boleophthalmus* sp.) were found in the mudflats, which formed the staple food of nesting Reef-Egrets (Ali and Ripley 1983). The

Table 1. Nests of Western Reef-Egret on the *Avicennia*, in GHCL Saltpans

No.	<i>Avicennia</i>		Nests of Western Reef-Egret / <i>Avicennia</i> Plant								Other bird nesting	
	Height (m)	No.	Single		Two		Three		Four		Species	No. of nests
			G	W	G	W	G	W	G	W		
1	0.6-0.7	17	14	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
2	1.18	2	0	0	0	0	2	1	4	0	Little Cormorant	1
3	1.5	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total		20	24								2	

G = Grey form of Western Reef-Egret occupying the nest. W = White form of Western Reef-Egret occupying the nest.

Western Reef-Egret might have taken up the advantage of these factors and made the nests on the mangroves in the Salt pans at such a low height. This heronry is an addition to the known nesting sites of the Indian Western Reef-Egret (Naik and Parasharya 1988; Subramanya 1996).

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## A sight record of the Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus* near Mysore, Karnataka, India

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On 20.i.2002 while on a visit to the Krishnarajasagar Reservoir (12°24'N, 76°26'E) to conduct waterfowl census, a Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus* was observed at 11:00hrs near Basavapatna village close to the banks of the Lakshmanathirtha River. The Krishnarajasagar Reservoir covers an area of 125km<sup>2</sup> at full level and is situated 18km north of Mysore city. It is strategically located at the confluence of three rivers, the Kaveri, the Hemavathi and the Lakshmanathirtha and across the Mysore and Mandya districts of southern Karnataka.

The bird had a large wingspan, completely dark body and underwing when it was first observed in flight, and was quite distinct from the other common but smaller species of vultures that occur in the area. The White-backed Vulture *Gyps benghalensis* and the Long-billed Vulture *Gyps indicus* have contrasting flight feathers and coverts in the wing, more strikingly so in *G. benghalensis*. The King Vulture *Sarcogyps calvus* is much smaller and has a dark underwing but white on breast and on thighs along with white line on the underwing differentiates it from the larger *Aegypius monachus*.

After a while, the bird settled on a tall *Albizia lebbek* tree at a height of about six meters. I could then discern a completely dark brown body. Head appeared somewhat triangular, dark with pinkish naked areas on the forehead and behind the ear. A black 'ruff' was clearly visible as mentioned in the *Handbook* (Ali and Ripley 1987). The beak was slaty grey generously tipped black and feet were white in colour. The bird was thus a Cinereous Vulture, possibly a juvenile. Ali and Ripley (1987) do not give a description of the juvenile of the species but only of the immature phase whereas the description in Grimmett et al. (1998) suffices for confirming that the bird observed to be a juvenile Cinereous Vulture. The surrounding area was open, dry stony country with some dryland cultivation and a few scattered trees.

The Cinereous Vulture is recorded as a "Rare and sparse winter visitor to Sind, NW and northern India (including Nepal), Kutch,

N. Gujarat and central India, south to about the latitude of Dhulia in Khandesh (c.21°N)," (Ali and Ripley 1987). Recent reports of the birds in south India are from Andhra Pradesh (Choudhury 1990), Kerala (Kumar 1991) and Tamil Nadu (Perennou and Santharam 1990). Subramanya (2001) reports this bird from Karnataka for the first time from Harangi Dam in the Coorg district. This sighting is the second from Karnataka and the location is close to that reported for the bird by Subramanya (2001).

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- [Editors' Note: Perennou & Santharam (1990) reported the bird from the Nelapattu Bird Sanctuary in southern Andhra Pradesh and not in Tamil Nadu.]

# Incubation period of Thick-billed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum agile*

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The Thick-billed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum agile* is a common resident of Ratnagiri district, Maharashtra. Ali and Ripley (1999) state that its incubation period "undetermined". On the 7<sup>th</sup> of February 2002 we saw this bird building its nest. The nest was located on a *Nyctanthes arbortristis* tree, at the height of 6.4m.

Two birds were seen engaged in nest building. We could not differentiate between male and female, but many times two birds were observed working together on the nest. They started work early in the morning and around 11:00hrs they almost stopped. Construction activity started again at 16:00hrs and stopped when it became dark.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of February the nest was completed. For regular observations we fixed a bamboo ladder under the nest. We started to check the nest every morning and evening. A small mirror on a bent handle was used to look inside the nest.

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of February at 07:00hrs the first egg was seen in the nest and on the next day at 08:30hrs there was another.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March we observed the nest continuously for eight hours and sixteen minutes (09:21hrs to 17:37hrs). During this period, the bird incubated for just four hours and nine minutes. It left the nest 40 times. The longest stretch of time it incubated was for 46 minutes. From 09:21hrs to 10:45hrs and again from 16:56hrs to 17:37hrs incubation lasted only 0.5 to 1 minute. From 10:45hrs to 16:56hrs it was for a longer time.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of March at 19:10hrs, a chick was seen inside the nest. On the same day at 20:30hrs we saw that the nest was completely covered by tree ants. With torchlight we observed that the entire nest was full of ants and it was not easy to clear them. We cut the branch on which the nest was attached and took it down to clear all the ants. The newly hatched nestling was dead but fortunately the second egg was intact. With great difficulty we cleared the ants, removing each one of them without disturbing or damaging the nest. It took us about two hours to clear the entire nest of ants. We replaced the egg inside the nest and re-attached the cut branch in its original place with the help of a stick and wire.

We also spread some insecticide on the edge of the branch to prevent another ant attack. We completed the entire work by 22:30hrs.

Early next morning (9 March) one parent was seen inside the nest (incubating?). At 12:00hrs the egg was seen in the nest. At 17:00hrs it had hatched and a chick was visible in the nest.

From next day both parents fed the chick regularly. On the 27<sup>th</sup> of March at 09:30hrs the young bird fledged. Its parents were seen feeding it near the nest. The chick was last seen on the campus at 11:00hrs.

Our study revealed that the Thick-billed flowerpecker incubates its eggs for 13 days and 18 days is the time taken to fledge. The incubation and fledging periods are calculated as per Skutch (1954), from last egg to last hatching and from last hatching to fledging, respectively.

## Acknowledgement

We wish to thank Dhananjai Phadke, for his help in the project.

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[**Editors' observations:** This note raises an ethical issue. An active nest should never be handled even when the aim is to do good. This is a cardinal rule in the birdwatchers' 'code of conduct.' It is not clear whether the ants killed the first chick. Ali & Ripley (1999) actually say, "Frequently builds among the leaf nests of the vicious red ant (*Oecophylla*) without apparent harm, and possibly for protection." We wonder what happened to the ants and what disarray the insecticide caused.]

## Recoveries from Newsletter for Birdwatchers – 3.

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N.L.B.W. March 1961: Letters of encouragement continued to come in about our *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* and the proposed Indian Ornithological Society. Wilbur G. Downes, Trinidad Regional Virus Society, wrote, "It will certainly be desirable to have an active group coordinating efforts to preserve Indian bird life, and stimulating the interest of the coming generation in birds." He also sent a brief note about his delight at seeing our birds for the first time, "These novelties are among the commonest birds of India, but evoke a real thrill with each one seen. First noted possibly are the bulbuls in every town and park. What a thrill to see the first one, and then in short order to see three or four species."

Lt. Gen. Sir Harold Williams of the Central Building Research Institute in Roorkee said, "I have just seen No. 1 Newsletter, and hope you will succeed in getting it started. Keep it at a little less technical level than the BNHS Journal, and I am sure you will have plenty of members in due course." I might mention here that Sir Harold played a very important part in our conservation movement. At a meeting convened in Delhi to consider the possibility of establishing an Indian Wildlife Service, at the instance of some members of the BNHS and other Societies, Sir Harold pointed out the impracticability of having two officials of the central government, the territorial D.F.O. of the Forest Department, and

one from the Wildlife Service operating in the same geographical area. The Forester was expected to produce the maximum revenue from forestry operations, while the other would be expected to preserve every tree and shrub in the interest of wildlife. There would be endless conflict. The better option, he said, would be to train selected members of the existing service, in ecology and wildlife management, and ultimately it would result in a synthesis of the two disciplines.

This suggestion led to the development of the wildlife-training course for Foresters in the Wildlife Institute of India, and I believe that the scheme has been of great benefit to our country. S. G. Neginhal was one of the members of the Indian Forest Service who undertook this Diploma Course, and we have seen from his writings and action how much good he has done for protecting our natural environment.

In this March 1961 issue of the *N.L.B.W.* there is an article by Dr Joseph George, then at the Forest Research Institute in Dehra Dun, on the morning calls of the Himalayan Whistling Thrush (*Myiophonus caeruleus*) which I am sure motivated the nascent birdwatching community, specially in the hills, to take a greater interest in the wonderful birds of their locality. I know that George did influence the eleven year old Ram Guha who is now a world famous environmentalist and historian. I quote, "The call of the Himalayan Whistling Thrush is one of the most prominent bird sounds of Dehra Dun on winter mornings... With the cooperation of observers the time of first call of about 50 whistling thrushes was recorded whenever conveniently possible during the last nine winter seasons, The birds under observation occupied territories in an area approximately 175 hectares in extent." The data analysed revealed a very close connection between the time of sunrise, and the time of the first call. It was noted that in the event of the sky being totally overcast, the timings of all birds was delayed. I wrote a few years ago about my experience with the resident White-breasted Kingfisher (*Halcyon smyrnensis*) in our garden in Kihim. Its first call on several successive days in March was at exactly 10

minutes past 6 in the morning.

In the 1960s the M.S. University of Baroda was perhaps one of the few centres of learning, which gave any importance to ornithology. A group of students led by R. M. Ajmeri of the Zoology Department got interested in checking the nests of birds in their campus and found one of the Ashy Prinia (*Prinia socialis*) on a *Duranta plumieri* which was constructed somewhat differently from the normal ones made on broad leaved shrubs. Because of the small sized leaves of *Duranta*, the birds had to attach the nest firmly to the stems of the shrub. On reading this, the indefatigable Serrao soon found references confirming that the architecture of bird nests varied considerably according to the needs of the environment. He found EHA's note dated, Dilyar, Sind, 1904, about a Tailor Bird's nest at the end of a pendent branch of *Salvadora oloides* in open sand hill country. It was woven like the nest of a Fantail Warbler (*Cisticola*) of various kinds of vegetable down, a number of the narrow leaves being sewn to it at the sides as supports. He also found a similar nest in a rose bush in Karachi.

Salim Ali was then the Chairman of the Indian National Section of the International Council for Bird Preservation (I.C.B.P.), which has now evolved into the International Ornithological Committee of which Dominique Homberger is the Secretary General. The I.C.B.P. at its meeting in Tokyo in May 1960 had recommended that every country should designate a National Bird to pinpoint public interest and attention on a particular bird which was in need of the greatest protection. Salim Ali was annoyed at the Indian Board for Wildlife selecting the Peacock as our National Bird. Responding in characteristic manner he wrote, "I submit that the selection of the Peacock by the I.B.W.L. is totally misconceived and meaningless. It was not at all obligatory for India, as a Member of the I.C.B.P. to adopt a National Bird, but if it is conceded that doing so would further the ends for which the step was recommended then it is obvious that the Great Indian Bustard is the species which merits this distinction."

## Crustacea in the dietary of Rosy Pastor *Sturnus roseus*

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On 16.xi.2000, while on a birdwatching trip to the Yelandur Tank complex in Chamarajnagar district of Karnataka, large flocks of Rosy Pastors *Sturnus roseus* were observed in paddy and ragi fields near the Kesthur Tank (12°5'N, 77°1'E). The Rosy Pastor is a common winter visitor to the area, but it was especially numerous in that year and the next, with 'swarms' exceeding 20,000 at many places (Thejaswi 2001), wrecking standing ragi and jowar crop at many areas that featured prominently in the local press.

Many flocks were present on the bund of the Kesthur Tank, with a large proportion of juveniles in them. Several birds, chiefly juveniles joined by a few adults, were observed feeding on crustaceans laid out to dry by fishermen on large plastic sheets. The crustaceans, largely freshwater shrimp known locally as "Seegdi" in Kannada, were picked up and swallowed whole by the birds.

Crustacea are not reported in the dietary of the Rosy Pastor by Ali and Ripley (1987) who otherwise include a large list of food

items including fruits and berries of several species of plants, flower nectar, a variety of insects and cereal grains, chiefly bajra and jowar. Crustaceans may not be an important component of the Rosy Pastor's diet but could be included as a result of opportunistic feeding when large 'sieges' of birds are present leading to pressure on food sources and food availability.

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## White-winged Black Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* in Kutch

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On 6.vi.2004 I visited Devisar Tank, 15km northwest of Bhuj. I saw three Whiskered Terns *Chlidonias hybridus* in summer plumage. Along with these, two other terns were seen with black head, neck, back and belly. Tail was white in colour, thus these two terns were unmistakable White-winged Black Terns *Chlidonias leucopterus*. This is a first record for Kutch, though there are some records from Gujarat during spring migration. Shivraj Kumar (1955) has seen this bird at Jasdan during June 1949 and May 1955. Then Mundkur (1987) has seen this bird at Lakhota Lake of Jamnagar on 14.v.1985.

Apparently this species also visits Kutch sometimes, during its spring migration.

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## Sighting of White-naped Tit *Parus nuchalis* at Udaipur

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White-naped Tit *Parus nuchalis* is a globally threatened bird species categorized as "vulnerable" by BirdLife International (2001). According to Ali (2002), its distribution is range restricted and disjunct in the states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Tiwari (2001) has documented several places in Rajasthan, where it occurs, except Udaipur.

On 15.v.2004, in the evening, our group of six sighted a pair of White-naped Tits at Khas Aodhi, southwest Pichola, in Udaipur. The two birds were feeding on the tops of *Acacia* spp., and continuously calling softly. As we approached closer they flew off to a distance. After waiting for a few minutes the pair visited a *Pithecolobium dulce* tree where they were seen clearly.

The area where the birds were seen is a patch of thorn-scrub forest with the dominance of *Acacia* spp., interspersed with bushes of *Lantana camara* and some deciduous trees. This scrub forest is under private ownership. Its distance from the city and its ownership status has preserved this area. Moreover, on its northern side is Pichola Lake with some cultivated land. Its eastern and western

sides are covered with woodlands and its southern side is a restricted area, under the control of the Indian armed forces, with extensive scrub forest. Few vehicles use the roads that pass through the area. If maintained in its present form, this area will continue to attract birds.

Participants present at the time of sighting were: Preeti Bhandari, S. Maqsood Ahmed, Hitesh Sukhwai, Vandana Audichya and, Praveen Mehra.

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## Reviews

### Mumbai birds

Aasheesh Pittie

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**Birds of Mumbai.** By Sunjoy Monga. 2003. 1st ed. Mumbai: India Book House Pvt. Ltd. Paperback. (9.6 x 19.0cm, with illustrated cover by; Carl D'Silva), pp. 1-176, 2 line drawings (by; Carl D'Silva), 273 colour plates (by; Carl D'Silva), 14 colour photographs (by; Nayan Khanolkar, Krupakar-Senani, Sunjoy Monga and, V. Muthuraman), 2 colour maps (endpapers, by; Deepak Chachra). ISBN 81-7508-391-3. Price: Not mentioned.

**Contents:** Title (p. 3); contents (pp. 4-5); Introduction (pp. 6-9); Joy of birdwatching (pp. 10-11); Know your birds (pp. 12-17); Glossary (pp. 18-19); Using the guide (pp. 20-21); Wetlands (pp. 22-71); Forests (pp. 72-115); Grass & scrub (pp. 116-153); Urban areas (pp. 154-163); Related & unusual sightings (pp. 164-166); Old sightings (pp. 166-167); Far afield (p. 167); Power perches (p. 167); Heronries in the region (p. 168); Baya colonies (p. 168); In our backyard (pp. 168-169); Acknowledgements (p. 170); Index (Common names, pp. 171-173; Scientific names, pp. 173-175).

This is a book that reflects the psyche of the Mumbaiite. Slim, svelte, slick. It's just the type of compact field guide that a birdwatcher (tourist or native) would like to carry his / her hip pocket in the hustle and bustle of India's mega polis and the extremely birdable regions that surround it. Monga follows an unconventional (for India) style for a field guide. He divides the book into four sections based on broad habitats: wetlands (112 species), forest (90 spp.), grass and scrub (89 spp.) and, urban areas (20 spp.). The common birds of each habitat are illustrated (two species to a page) with brief notes about each species. A simple colour-coding scheme has been introduced to indicate birds that tend to overlap habitats. Carl D'Silva executes the plates with the felicity and clarity of line that we've come to expect of his work. Places where birds can be seen in each of the habitats are listed at the beginning of each section, with abbreviations alongside the text for quick reference.

At the end of the field guide are a few interesting lists. The

first is a list of 'Related and unusual sightings' of winter visitors or passing migrants (72 spp.). The second is of 'Old' pre-1976 sightings (27 spp.). These are followed by a list of birds that use man-made perches; of heronries of the region (active during 1997-2000); of baya colonies (active during 1998-2000); of backyard birds (city) and their country cousins (forest); of escaped cage-birds and, of nocturnal birds. The work, though entitled *Birds of Mumbai*, covers much more ground than that. This is shown clearly on the maps that are spread over the two endpapers.

A word about some of the plates will not be out of place here. The iris of the White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* (p. 31) should be dark coloured. On page 53, the flying Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa* should have a white rump (not black as shown). The portrait of the female (?) Shikra (p. 74) has got inadvertently cut! The Common Hoopoe on p. 131 seems to have a black supercilium, which it should not. On p. 147 the partially migrant race *bicolor* of the Pied Bushchat *Saxicola caprata* is illustrated. In the resident race *burmanica*, the white of the belly is restricted to the vent. The artist is to be lauded for depicting pertinent races in of some species e.g., Jungle Babbler *Turdoides striatus* (p. 103). I thought that the tail of this bird was shown too rufous. But on checking Ali and Ripley's *Handbook* found that in fact it is so in the race *somervillei*, which inhabits the Mumbai region! The Small Minivet *Pericrocotus cinnamomeus* (p. 98) however looks like *malabaricus*, which is found further south of the geographical scope of this book.

The text is admirably free of blemishes. The complete binomen of the Malabar Pied Hornbill (p. 88) is *Anthracoceros coronatus*, which the Index reflects. The correct specific name of the Yellow-wattled Lapwing is *Vanellus malabaricus* (p. 125).

My aim in pointing out these 'flaws' is not to criticise but to alert the author and artist so that future editions may be suitably rectified. I am sure that this 'little' power-packed field guide will be 'big' on editions!

## CORRESPONDENCE

### Birding in Kausani, Almora district, Uttaranchal

I am grateful to you for having forwarded a copy of 'Newsletter for Ornithologists' for me to go through. I enjoyed much of the material contained within it, even though I do not feel I can claim to be an ornithologist, simply someone who observes with interest what bird life he sees around him, seeking to put a name to what he sees... I have enjoyed two new sightings in recent weeks. The first was at our village centre close to Danya, a small market east of Almora at around 5,000' altitude. In front of the centre was a red hibiscus plant, on which a female Crimson Sunbird *Aethopyga siparaja* was observed, flitting from flower to flower. When I came outside again, the female had gone, but there was a male with the distinctive crimson breast. The second sighting was more recently on a large toon tree in front of the ashram office, where the girls were very excited to see an unusual bird. It was a Himalayan Golden-backed Woodpecker *Dinopium shorii*, and was tapping away for some time on a large limb of the tree. However it did not return. We are about 6,000 feet high.

I have lived in my present cottage for the past thirteen years and during that entire period we have always had Blue Whistling-Thrushes *Myophonus solitarius* nesting / living in the eaves. All the books say that it is usually found close to water, yet we have no running water nearby except during the monsoons after heavy rains. With them living on the roof, one has no need of an alarm – at first light they serenade us every day!... Spot-winged Grosbeaks *Mycerobas melanozanthos*... only come when the acorns are on the Himalayan Oak, and the wild cherries on the Padam, and only in the mornings. Where they go for the rest of the day, and the rest of the year remains a mystery.

At present I lack that basic necessity of even a birdwatcher – good binoculars. I have been wondering if you might recommend a good source of binoculars in India whom I might contact.

David Hopkins

Lakshmi Ashram, P. O. Kausani, District Almora, Uttaranchal  
263639, India.

Dated: 6 September 2004.

### Newsletter for Ornithologists

Congratulations to all of you for such an excellent issue. I think the layout with the two column spread for the heading makes it more attractive and readable... the additional information - Ready Reckoner, Library, Recently Published, etc. - add much to the value of the publication. I enjoyed Zafar Futehally's article on recoveries and learnt something new about the origins of the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*. Incidentally, two corrections: (1). It's Jack Gibson, not Jim. (2). Jack was, I think, the first Englishman to get both the O.B.E. and the Padmashri, but not the only one. J. A. K. Martyn, Headmaster of the Doon School, also shared the honour of having both Governments decorate him. John Martyn got his Padmashri some years after Jack Gibson, though.

Aamir Ali

14, Chemin de la Tourelle, 1209 Geneva, Switzerland.

It is a delight to go through the issues of the *Newsletter for Ornithologists*. The sections on the recently published literature are a great help and keep us updated on the advancements in ornithological research.

The article 'Changes in avifauna over a sixteen-year period in the Pondicherry University campus' is a fine example of the application of long-term bird monitoring as an indicator for bird habitats. The authors have very diligently presented the data and given some very practical and useful suggestions about the planting of indigenous trees and habitat conservation. Such studies need to be carried out in urban areas at a larger scale and in a coordinated manner to understand the rapid changes taking place in such landscapes. This will not only make us aware of the bird life around us but also of the changes in in our urban habitat, that might affect the quality of life. For birds are also indicators of the health of habitats.

Hope we will see more such quality papers in the newsletter in the coming years.

M.K.S. Pasha

Director, Wildlife Protection Society of India, M-52, Greater Kailash Part I, New Delhi 110048, India.

### About the artist: Damodar Lal Gurjar.

Born in 1958 and educated at the Rajasthan School of Art, Jaipur, Damodar has made his career as a freelance artist painting numerous private commissions (including Painted Storks, Laggar Falcon and Short-toed Eagle) in watercolour, gouache, tempera and oil. In 1999, he received a State Award from Rajasthan Lalit Kala Academy and All India Award by the Department of Environment. Damodar is influenced by the traditional school of painting, but his technique is a blend of the traditional and contemporary. He is skilled in depicting textures in detail in his subjects - whether petals, ceramic pots or feathers. His botanical paintings were exhibited at the Hunt Institute of Botanical Documentation at the Carnegie Mellon University in 2001. I have commissioned him to make wader plates for the proposed book on the waders of the subcontinent.

### Collections:

Shirley Sherwood collection, U. K.; Hunt Institute collection, U. S. A.; Numerous private collections.

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Harkirat Singh Sangha.

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Black-bellied Tern *Sterna acuticauda*



Malabar Lark *Galerida malabarica*



Ceylon Frogmouth *Batrachostomus monileger*



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