

Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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Threatened Birds of Asia, CD-ROM

Birdlife International kindly sent me this magical disc, which, incredibly contains all the information within the covers of the two volumes of the Threatened Birds of Asia totaling 3038 pages. Apart from the text it has 400 maps and a black and white illustration of each of the globally endangered species. As I wrote to Mike Crosby of Birdlife International, reviewing this mass of material, so meticulously researched in a way which does it justice, is beyond me, and I am giving here only a brief outline of the information it contains.

Birdlife International now operates in 103 countries, in collaboration with 6 partners in Asia (two more on the way). It has a staff of 4161, a membership of 2,564,808 worldwide, and it owns 1,055,845 hectares of land. Its mission is to conserve birds, their habitats and preserve global diversity.

In passing I might mention that a few years ago when Birdlife International was investigating the prospects of a suitable partner or partners in India, some of us had suggested that it may be advisable to form a Federation of Indian Natural History Societies which would be its Indian partner. This scheme did not materialize and the Bombay Natural History Society is now the anchor of Birdlife International in India. From all accounts the partnership is doing well and we wish it success. Independently of this issue the idea about the Federation should be pursued. Federations are useful institutions for making representations to Government on national problems.

When I opened the disc I was naturally interested in clicking the section relating to India. The threatened species of our country are listed under the standard headings of Critical, Endangered, Vulnerable, Data Deficient and so on. In the Critical list I find the Christian island frigate bird, pinkheaded duck, white-rumped vulture, slender-billed vulture (formerly known as the Himalayan long-billed vulture), forest owl; *Heteroglaux blewitti*, and of course Jerdon's courser; *Rhinoptilus bitorquatus*. (The former generic name was *Cursorius*).

There is extensive information about the populations, geographical distribution, former records and recent records, conservation action suggested and almost everything that an ornithologist would like to know about any threatened species. When I clicked the section of the spotbilled pelican (*Pelecanus philippensis*) I was amazed to see a reference to the solitary bird we had seen floating so impressively on Dodda-Gubbi Lake during the annual meet of our Newsletter on 16.12.1999. Anish Andheria has been credited with this sighting and the source was possibly the article he wrote for the Newsletter for Birdwatchers, published in the Jan/Feb 2000 issue. I was also glad to see references to S. Sridhar and S. Subramanya in relation to these pelicans in Kokrebellur.

For ready reference I reproduce the species on the endangered list. You will remember that the entire list of 76 species under the various categories had been printed earlier in the Newsletter.

White-bellied heron	<i>Ardea insignis</i>
Oriental stork	<i>Ciconia boyciana</i>
Greater adjutant	<i>Leptoptilos dubius</i>
White-headed duck	<i>Oxyura leucocephala</i>
Great indian bustard	<i>Ardeotis nigriceps</i>
Bengal florican	<i>Houbaropsis bengalensis</i>
White-winged duck	<i>Cairina scutulata</i>
Lesser florican	<i>Sypheotides indica</i>
Spotted greenshank	<i>Tringa guttifer</i>
Rufous-breasted laughing thrush	<i>Garrulax cachinnans</i>



Newsletter for Birdwatchers



The Annual Gathering

The next Annual Gathering of subscribers and supporters of the Newsletter for Birdwatchers will be held on Sunday, the 19th January 2003, at Dodda Gubbi, Bangalore

for further details and registration contact

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I suggest that many of you serious ornithologists purchase this CD available at the subsidized price of £12/- from NHBS Ltd., 2-3 Wills Road, Totnes, Devon TQ9 5XN, U.K. It is not a transaction you will regret.

Errata

In Vol. 42 No. 3, May-June 2002 issue, on page number iii sixth line from top, it is printed as : Small Blue Kingfisher. It has to be changed to Oriental dwarf kingfisher.

Prof. Satish Dhawan

Satish Dhawan's death earlier this year saddened everyone who knew him or of him. I saw him a few weeks before he died in Dr. A.R. Pai's Clinic. He looked frail and tired, and it is a mercy that he did not suffer from a long painful illness. He believed in the principle (often quoted by Salim Ali) that man does not live by

bread alone, and here I can do no better than quote K.B. Sanjayan, who is associated with Countdown, the House Journal of the Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre :

"Prof. Satish Dhawan (1920-2002), former Chairman, ISRO, who passed away on January 3rd 2002 at Bangalore, was a seasoned birdwatcher. A great variety of birds, both migratory and resident, that frequented Sriharikota Island (SHAR), off the coast of southern Andhra Pradesh in the Bay of Bengal, fascinated him. He studied avian flight in particular and authored Bird Flight, which turned out to be his magnum opus.

Birds such as greater flamingos (*Phoenicopterus roseus*), cattle egrets and painted storks (*Mycteria leucocephala*) attracted him specially and he spent hours observing them at SHAR. He can be rated on par with the leading birdwatchers of India."



Blue Whistling Thrush in Chandigarh

Lt. GENERAL BALJIT SINGH, House 219, Sector 16, Chandigarh 160 015

On a misty, bone-chilling January morning in the Chandigarh Rose Garden (Lat. 30° 45' Long 70° 45' AMSL 360 M), there was no mistaking the rasping, clipped bird call "Kree" and repeated twice more at brief intervals. I froze in the hope that the bird might show up. Instead and luckily, the bird embarked on his song but for some instinct called off abruptly. Anyhow I was reasonably sure by now of the presence of the blue whistling thrush. *Myiophonus caeruleus*. But at Chandigarh? In the plains of NW India?

The bird call put me on the fast-reverse memory mode. From 1964 to 1971 my wife and I had an unbroken spell of four to six week trekking at high altitudes in the Himalayas, each year. The first few days as also the last few were invariably passed in the habitat loved by the blue whistling thrush; boulder strewn streams, thickly wooded gorges and steep ravines. These spots were also our favourite night halts. The whistling thrush was always there, hopping over boulders or sprinting on the grassy patches by the banks of the stream in search of tit bits. But when contented, almost always he perched on a big boulder mid-stream, its surface glassed under a thin sheet of flowing water. And that was the setting which always inspired the bird to pour out his long, fluid, whistling song, to the music of the stream. There were occasions when the bird kept up the song for a minute and even two. The bird was then a picture of joy and laughter. Once the spell was broken, the bird took to wing and reverting to the harsh "Kree-Kree" call, vanished into the green darkness of the Himalayan Woods. The echo of the call lingered for a while and longer if we were camped in a gorge. That was forty years ago!

Now back to Chandigarh. Two weeks later on another very cold morning on 5 Feb. 2002, I checked in mid-stride on hearing "Kree" loud and clear. And joy of joy, less than five metres away was one blue whistling thrush looking up from the stream-bed in the Rose garden! He was in his best feathered splendour; glossy Mediterranean blue tinged with purple by the morning sun and the crescent formed by the five prominent silvery white spots over the median coverts had my heart in flutters. Sounding a tentative "Kree", he alighted on a branch of a bottle-brush tree, level with my eyes. Changed perch from left to right, pecked at the bark, stole a side glance at me and then, was gone keeping to the contours of the stream.

Whether by chance or by instinct the bird's stop-over space in the Rose garden is the closest man-made replication of his natural habitat. There is the meandering stream, alas sans rushing water and boulders, both its banks planted with bottle brush trees. The trees are sturdy and tall, their canopies dense and the inward spread of foliage forms an arch over the stream for most of its length. Regrettably, the trickle flow in the stream, has neither the kind of vitality nor the music to inspire the blue whistling thrush song.

How was the bird here? Back home I scanned my two latest bird books, one by Messers Grimmett and Inskipps (1998) and the other by Krys Kazmierczack (2000). According to both the bird need not be here but they concede to solitary records from Punjab and Haryana; and Chandigarh happens to be tentatively in the center of the bird sightings shown on the distribution maps in these books. Not fully satisfied, I opened Whistler (1924) who happily resolves the issue thus, "..... strictly speaking a resident species (Himalayas), its fine powers of flight tend to make it wander a good deal and in the winter months numbers move down into the foot-hills while stragglers even appear in the plains far out of sight of the hills." So here is something to look out for, in the coming winter 2002-03.

I had put the blue whistling thrush aside atleast till the next winter. So I thought, till jolted once again by several "kree-kree" calls from directly over-head on 05 April, 2002. There he was on a *Ficus benjamina* tree but I could not fathom the cause of his excitement at the persistence of calling. There was no response. Because of my indiscretions, he made away towards the stream in the rose garden, some 500 metres away, and fell silent. But that was not the last encore. On 07, April, 2002 he called and flew right across my walk-path, the yellow of his beak unmistakably on full display as he seemed to be heading North. That the blue whistling thrush does visit Chandigarh and remains around till early April seems probable.

In concluding, I simply must return to Whistler again who had such a special empathy with the avians. Just look at this sensitivity in his narrative on the blue whistling thrush; "...the bird seems the living embodiment of all the qualities of vitality and fitness that one associates with nature and the hills". That was so when the bird went by the name Himalayan whistling thrush, when Mumbai was Bombay and Chennai was Madras!



I am presently posted in Kashmir and have been since enthralled by the diversity of avifauna that exists here. The birds that I have observed and identified in this area, to name a few are the Indian griffon vultures, yellow billed blue magpie, paradise flycatchers, white wagtails, yellow headed wagtails, (now renamed as yellow wagtail), Himalyan whistling thrush, white cheeked bulbuls, blossom headed parakeets, kestrel, pied kingfishers, Brahminy, jungle and Indian mynas, hoopoes and so on. These were observed at heights varying from 1500 metres to 3500 metres. Apart from these, I would also like to share a few interesting observations with the readers.

In January - February 2002, white wagtails were aplenty here (Western Kashmir, height - 1500 metres). These white wagtails were inevitably found flitting about in groups of 5 - 6 from one place to another in a golf course, feeding on insects on the ground. One day, amongst these white wagtails, I even spotted two yellow coloured birds. On closer observation with binoculars, I identified the pair to be yellow headed wagtails that were mingling quite freely in the group of white wagtails. After being away from this place from Mar 13 to Mar 29, when I returned the wagtails (both, white and yellowheaded) were nowhere to be found ! They had vanished without a trace ! Did they migrate to some place else ?!

In May-June, I was at a place in the same area but now at a

Enthralling Birds of Kashmir

Capt. ROHIT GUPTA, 370 Fd Coy, 12 Inf Bde, c/o 56 APO

height of 3100metres. Apart from the griffon vultures soaring high up in the skies everyday, I was witness to a 'kestrel' in the sky performing its unique 'balancing act'. It would hover at a spot in mid air constantly peering down on the ground for its prey. On spotting something it would start losing height vertically, in a zigzag manner to catch its prey on the ground. The drill would then be repeated. It is noteworthy that the bird would always be against the wind when performing this hovering feat. The wings of the bird would be spread out (without flapping) and only the wingtips would be hovering to keep its balance, but, it was really a visual treat to watch this aerodynamic feat of the kestrel.

In the same area (height - 3100 metres), I spotted a pair of small sparrow-sized birds perched together on a shrub. On observation with binoculars from around 10 metres, I found one of them black and white with white throat, a prominent white brow on the eyes and a perky tail which it jerked up frequently. The other bird was also similar except that the black portions in the first bird were replaced by brown. On referring to the 'The Book of Indian Birds' by Salim Ali, I found these traits matching that of a 'pied flycatcher shrike'. However, in this book there is no mention of white brows on the eyes and the perky tail, against the description of this bird. Also, it was obvious from my observation that the pair was the male and female. Once, when I approached them for a closer look, they flew off together into the dense undergrowth of shrubs.



Birds Recorded on a Trek to the Valley of Flowers National Park: The Upper Garhwal Himalaya

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The birds of upper Garhwal Himalayas were first recorded by Osmaston in 1921. Later, others followed including Lavkumar, Devillers and Sankaran (1994). However, none of them included the area of the valley of Flowers National Park. This valley is about 5 km. long and 2 km. wide and has the largest concentration of 600 wild flower species, endemic to the Himalayas.

A total of 28 species of birds were recorded during the survey. Although all the species have earlier been recorded from upper Garhwal, the record of striped throated Yuhina, *Yuhina gularis* is new for the recently formed Chamoli district. (This species has been earlier recorded from Kedarnath sanctuary (Green, 1986) which is now Rudraprayag district (Fig.1).

Yellow-rumped honey guide, *Indicator xanthonotus* (2). A globally near-threatened species. Observed between Govind ghat and Bhyundar hovering over an occupied rock bee (*Apis dorsata*) comb hanging on rocky cliffs along the Laxman Ganga river. The birds were observed feeding on bees/bee-wax while hovering close to the comb and retreating to a leafless branch on the cliffs nearby.

Golden eagle, *Aquila chrysaetos* (2). A juvenile and an adult seen soaring high on the way to the valley of flowers from Ghangaria.

Himalayan monal, *Lophophorus impejanus* (2+). A small party flew over rocky slopes on the way at Hemkund towards the VOFNP.

Himalayan snowcock, *Tetraogallus himalayensis*, (2+). Call, a wailing prolonged whistle, heard on the western slopes of VOFNP along the Donagiri river from a distance. On approaching, the birds were noted climbing up the slopes, before disappearing.

Winter wren, *Troglodytes troglodytes* (1). One bird hopping on piled up stone wall and rocks beside a hut on the way to Hemkund from Ghangaria.

Chestnut-tailed minla, *Minla strigula* (1). (Now called as bar-throated minla) Noted between Ghangaria and Bhyundar on taxus trees.

Stripe throated yuhina, *Yuhina gularis* (1). Observed on silver fir (*Abies pindrow*) trees between Ghangaria and Bhyundar in a mixed hunting party of tits.

Rufous sibia, *Heterophasia capistrata* (1). An individual observed calling on the way between Bhyundar and Ghangaria.

Variiegated laughing thrush, *Garrulax variegatus* (2). Recorded in forest undergrowth between Bhyundar and Ghangaria.

Chestnut crowned laughing thrush, *Garrulax erythrocephalus* (3). Recorded among small bushy shrubs near Bhyundar.

Blue whistling thrush, *Myiophonus caeruleus* (1). Recorded in a gorge beside Laxman Ganga river between Pulna and Bhyundar.

Goldcrest, *Regulus regulus* (2+). Recorded at Ghangaria on trees beside the small forest rest house.

Blyth's leaf warbler, *Phylloscopus reguloides* (4+). Many present in alpine meadows and on *Betula utilis* trees in VOFNP. Call also heard. Probably breeding on slopes in the valley of flowers as one bird was observed carrying an insect in its beak.

Tickell's willow warbler, *Phylloscopus affinis*. (1). Recorded inside a fir forest near Ghangaria.

Lemon-rumped leaf warbler, *Phylloscopus chloronotus* (1). Observed near Pulna village.

Blue-fronted redstart, *Phoenicurus frontalis* (2). One noted on barren rocky slopes on the way to Hemkund from Ghangaria and the other along the river far north in the VOFNP.

Brown dipper, *Cinclus cinclus* (2). Recorded along the torrents of small streams, with blooming *Epilobium latifolium* flowers, flowing across the meadows in the VOFNP.

Spotted nutcracker, *Nucifraga caryocatactes* (1). Recorded flying overhead across the river Bhyundar Ganga at Bhyundar.

Redbilled chough, *Pyrhcorax pyrrhcorax* (2) Making sorties over Pushpavati river in northern part of Valley of Flowers.

Large billed crow, *Corvus macrorhynchos* (4). Recorded flying over Govindghat.

Grey crested tit, *Parus dichrous* (1). Seen on fir and maple trees near Ghangaria.

Black throated tit, *Aegithalos concinnus* (6). Found in small parties at Ghangaria and Bhyundar.

Alpine accentor, *Prunella collaris* (1). Photographed sitting on the roof of a small hut beside the trail on way to Hemkund from Ghangaria. Yellow base of lower mandible distinct.

Rufous breasted accentor, *Prunella strophinata* (2). Recorded near Hemkund shrine on the rocks.

Hodgson's plain mountain finch, *Leucosticte nemoricola* (11). Sparrow like birds observed from a close distance feeding on the ground beside the Hemkund shrine.

Collared grosbeak, *Mycerobas affinis* (2). A pair was noted perching low in a shady patch of fir trees between Bhundhar and Ghangaria.

Dark-breasted rosefinch, *Carpodacus nipalensis* (5). A small party seen feeding on the ground on barren rocky slopes inside the Valley of Flowers.

Red-headed bull finch, *Pyrrhula erythrocephala* (2) Seen twice on fir trees at Ghangaria in the morning beside the rest house.

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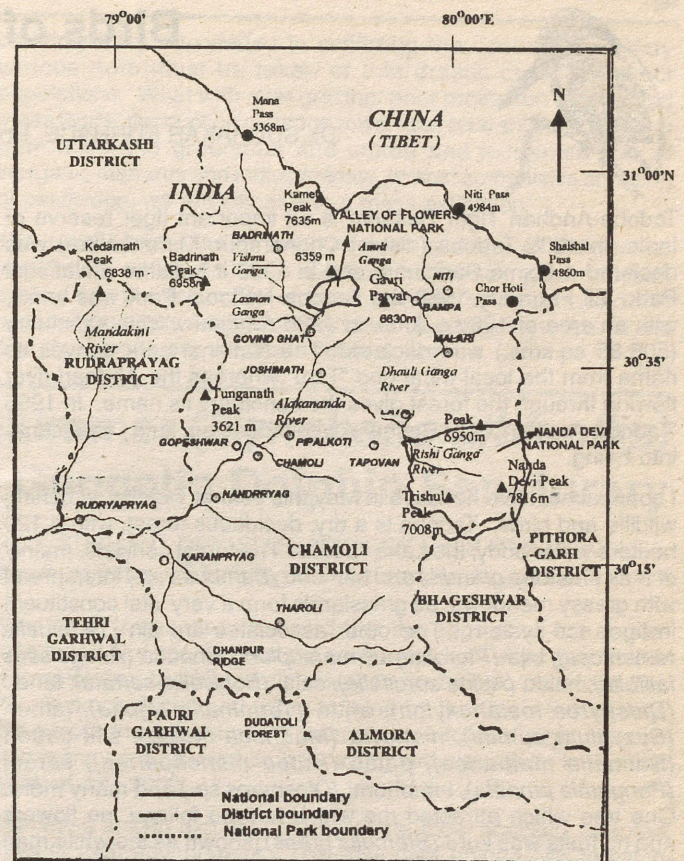


Fig. 1. Map of Chamoli district depicting the location of valley of Flowers National Park and sites as mentioned in the text

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Birds of Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve, Chandrapur, Maharashtra

Dr. SUDHAKAR KURHADE, Honorary Wildlife Warden, Riddhisiddhi, Vidya Colony, Opp. HUDCO, Pipeline Road, Ahmednagar 414 003, Maharashtra

Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve is an important tiger reserve of India. In 1935 Tadoba (district Chandrapur, Maharashtra) was declared a Game Sanctuary and in 1955 it became a National Park. Till February 1986 the Tadoba National Park was small, with an area of 166 sq. kms. In 1986 Andhari wildlife sanctuary (508.85 sq.kms.) was declared. The National park derives its name from the local tribal god "Taru" whereas the Andhari river flowing through the forest gives the sanctuary its name. In 1955 'Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve' with 625.40 sq. kms. area came into being.

I spent almost five hot days in May this year in Tadoba, watching wildlife and birds. Tadoba is a dry, deciduous forest, with a 120 hectare water body, the Lake Tadoba. The forest consists, mainly of teak (*Tectona grandis*) and bamboo (*Bambusa sp.*) interspread with grassy meadows, as grasslands form a very vital constituent in tiger eco-system. The other associates are ain (*Terminalia tomentosa*), bija (*Pterocarpus marsupium*), dhaoda (*Anogeissus latifolia*), haldu (*Adina cordifolia*), salai (*Boswellia serrata*), tendu (*Diospyros melanoxylon*), arjun (*Terminalia arjuna*), jamun (*Syzygium cumini*), mahuwa (*Madhuca indica*), silk cotton (*Salmaal malbarica*), palas (*Butea monosperma*), karanj (*Pongamia pinnata*), tembhurni (*Diospyros sp.*) and many more. One tree which attracted me which had no foliage, no flowers and no fruits was kuru (*Sterculia urens*) [known as the white man because of its white trunk and branches].

Though Tadoba has rugged hilly territory, the sanctuary area is rather plain. The tiny streams and man-made waterholes provide water to wild animals and birds. The faunal diversity of the forest is very rich. Though the major attraction of the sanctuary is the tiger and other large mammals, the avian fauna is also remarkable and makes a lasting impression on the visitors. Paradise flycatcher (*Terpsiphone paradisi*) was always seen flitting gracefully in the shady trees around the lake and streams in the Panchadhara area. While in flight the streamers of the male float gracefully behind. The birds (male and female) were once observed taking bath in a small pond at Panchadhara and the male was diving from a fallen tree trunk that he was using as its perch. Male, female and subadult were seen flying together along the side of the lake particularly in the afternoon. The Panchadhara area has huge tall trees where we observed the mottled wood

owl (*Strix ocellata*) hidden in the thick foliage. We observed its white facial disc and white foreneck collar through the binoculars as the bright sun light was penetrating through the leaves. We could not hear the famous harsh screeching call of the bird.

While on a trail alongside of a small stream, a small blue flash hovering over the water was our prime entertainment. This small blue kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*) was seen singly many times. The Tickell's blue flycatcher (*Muscicapa tickelliae*) sitting on low bushes beside the stream was occasionally darting from branch to branch. Golden backed woodpeckers (*Dinopium sp.*) flew from tree to tree and in characteristic fashion, were hammering the tree trunks.

While on a foot trail around lake Tadoba, a honey buzzard (*Pernis ptilorhynchus*) soaring over the expanse of the lake, suddenly perched on the top branch of a totally dry tree very close to us. We could clearly observe its silvery grey wings, and the round greyish tail with its broad dark and pale bands. The pied kingfisher (*Ceryle rudis*) was stationarily hovering over the lake and fishing in characteristic fashion. Many water birds could be seen around the lake.

On Pandherponi road side we enjoyed the sight of a flock of about 20-25 green pigeons (*Treron phoenicoptera*) feeding on a flig laden tree; the birds flew away when one of us stepped down from the vehicle for photography. We heard the loud cackling call of the common grey hornbill (*Tockus birostris*) many times.

The check-list of birds of Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve include 195 species, but when we were there, the migrants were, obviously, absent; Only 63 species were recorded during our stay of five days in the reserve.

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Mr. Atul Dhamankar, Mr. Pramod Dekate and the team of 'Green Pigeon Nature Society', Chandrapur for their kind help during my visit. Thanks are also due to Mr. Milind Bendale, Ahmednagar for his friendly association during my visit.

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After the initial rain, which filled up the lakes and promised the commencement of a good monsoon, there has been no rain and July has almost gone without any rain. The SW monsoon wind is blasting across Saurashtra and so we can still hope for deluges when the wind stops for a few days.

It seems Indian pittas have become regular breeders here and I heard several birds calling in the ravines around the fort. In earlier years, though pittas regularly put in appearances for a few days during summer, they were known to regularly breed by circumstantial evidence only in the Gir. Dharmakumarsinhji had

The Changing Scene at Hingolghadh

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recorded a nest on Shetrunjaya but this bird was never a breeding bird with us. Whether we should rejoice at the regular spotting as improvement in the habitat or an increase in pitta population is debatable. I had made some comments on the new presence of blackheaded cuckoo shrike and the brain fever bird around Hingolghadh. The cuckoo shrike is no longer heard for the last two monsoons, and this year, the cuckoo is far less audible. Is the increased presence of the pitta then to be rejoiced over or seen as a warning of general environmental degradation in the region as a whole?

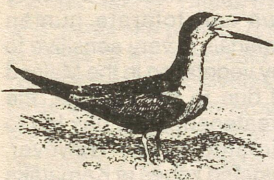
The small and whitebellied minivets, Marshall's iora and the yellow-eyed babbler, which were such a delight of the *Molisari* jungle around Hingolghadh, have shown a drastic decline. Last year, there was a significant fall in the numbers of rosy pastors, this year I have yet to see a single bird.

For the last few days a couple of hundred cattle egrets have joined the pigeons in putting grand flight displays around the hills. They seem to have been attracted by an explosion in the population of small brown grasshoppers. In past years, it was the large flocks of rosy pastors (mainly juveniles) who feasted on these insects.

Talking of insects, these are hardly being drawn to lights. We

certainly have succeeded in sanitizing the countryside. Very serious note must be taken of this drastic crash in insect populations. What with over grazing, poor protection of reserved grass lands, destruction of hedge rows, near total shift of cultivation from millets to groundnut and cotton and increased use of inorganic manures and indiscriminate, almost compulsive spraying of pesticides, we are witnessing a mass extinction.

The ray of hope lies in the tenacious survival of indigenous vegetation, which makes a startling comeback given efficient protection, the fecundity of most species of insects and the capability to make adaptations by birds. But, we cannot be casual and must make our concerns taken notice.



Sighting of Indian Skimmer (*Rynchops albicollis*) in the Vikramshila Gangetic Dolphin Sanctuary

SUNIL K. CHOUDHARY, SUSHANT DEY, SUBHASIS DEY and SATYA PRAKASH, VBREC, Univ. Deptt. of Botany, T.M. Bhagalpur University., Bhagalpur 812007

Over the years the Indian skimmer (*Rynchops albicollis*) has been sighted off and on in the Vikramshila Gangetic Dolphin Sanctuary (VGDS), but were not at any stage numerous. The highest number of skimmers at one sighting was 70 birds in two groups in the year 1997. Since 1999 skimmers have been sighted on a regular basis in the VGDS but their numbers have been low. Vikramshila Gangetic Dolphin Sanctuary includes a 60km approx. segment of river Ganga from Sultanganj to Kahalgaon in the state of Bihar.

This year in the first week of May, a group of 26 Indian skimmers along with small Indian pratincole, Indian river tern, little terns and river lapwing were spotted on a sandy midchannel island, in the river Ganga, near Bhagalpur. On investigation it was found to be a nesting ground of these birds. A total of 4 nesting sites of the Indian skimmers were found in which 11 eggs were counted. There were more than a hundred nesting sites of the small Indian pratincole each having 2 or 3 and some with 4 eggs. One nesting site of the Indian river tern with 2 eggs, and 2 nesting sites of the river lapwing with 8 eggs were also found. None of the nesting sites overlapped one another as each bird species seemed to have its own preferred nesting area. The little terns had their own nesting site on a different island, a few hundred meters away.

It is interesting to note that the skimmers though being larger birds, had eggs smaller in size compared to those of the Indian

river terns. It was also observed that the eggs of all the above-mentioned bird species had the same drab light olive grey colour with splotched black/brown markings. It was also observed that the skimmer chicks had taken to wing by the first week of July, just before the advent of the monsoon. A total of eight juvenile skimmers were counted in flight along with the adults in the first week of July 2002.

Skimmers are an example of one of the most specially adapted birds to their environment. They use their unique bills to catch fish in rivers and other waterbodies. The prey is caught by flying low over the water with mouth open, and the lower mandible skimming the surface of the water.

Of the three species found world wide, the Indian skimmer is perhaps facing the highest threat to its survival. The Indian skimmer is classified as "Vulnerable" and the total population is only about 10,000 birds (Zusi 1996). It is restricted to the Indian subcontinent with a small number locally distributed in Southeast Asia. Threats include decline in food availability due to over exploitation of fisheries, loss of habitat due to increasing agricultural encroachment into nesting and roosting places, pollution of rivers and other waterbodies frequented by them and poisoning due to indiscriminate use of pesticides and insecticides in floodplain areas.



Occurrence of Black Throated Weaver Bird (*Ploceus benghalensis*) in the Shimoga District of Karnataka State

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Our fieldwork on the common baya (*Ploceus philippinus*) carried out during July 1999 to January 2000, revealed to our surprise that the black throated baya (*Ploceus benghalensis*) also occurs in Karnataka State. The observations were made twice a week both in the morning (between 7 to 9 a.m.) and evening (4 to 6.30 p.m.).

According to the pioneering research of Manson & Maxwell Lefroy (1912), Salim Ali and Ripley (1973) and other recent ornithologists, *Ploceus benghalensis* is confined only to north India.

To survey the nesting population of *Ploceus benghalensis*, we selected B.R. Project area near the University campus as a central

point. This area is a part of Malnad (heavy rainfall receiving area) located under the foothills of the Western Ghats in Karnataka. The crops of the area include paddy, ragi, sugarcane, jawar. Paddy provides two or three crops annually. The area includes two irrigation systems : Tunga irrigation system and Bhadra irrigation system. The area is rich in water sources and vegetation.

For our convenience the study area was divided into two imaginary zones and as stated the University Campus was considered as a central point. The two zones include, zone I, (B.R. Project) located on the north, and zone II, (Shimoga) in the South East direction, each about 30 km².

The study area includes abandoned fish nursery ponds. These ponds are infested with *Typha* sp vegetation. The blades of *Typha* sp in the abandoned nursery ponds were used for nesting by *Ploceus benghalensis*. As many as 80 leaf blades of *Typha* were used in hanging a nest by these birds. There were 8-10 abandoned fishery nursery ponds used by the black throated weaver birds for nest hanging.

Zone II was a sugarcane plantation. It was found that in all sugarcane plantations around Shimoga *Ploceus benghalensis* was nesting and hanging its nests on the leaves of sugarcane plants. The details about the number of nests in *Typha* sp. and in the sugarcane fields are shown in Table 1 & 2 respectively.

Table-1 : Nesting Population of *Ploceus benghalensis* in Zone I. [B.R. Project Area]

Particulars	Site I	Site II	Site III
Total Number of nests	98	108	34
Name of host plant	<i>Typha</i> sp.	<i>Typha</i> sp.	<i>Typha</i> sp.
Height of nest from the ground	6-8 feet	6-8 feet	6-8 feet
Complete nest/Normal nest	17	26	4
Incomplete nests	81	82	30

Table-2 : Nesting Population of *Ploceus benghalensis* in Zone II. [Shimoga Area]

Particulars	Site I	Site II	Site III
Total Number of nests	65	39	46
Name of host plant	<i>Saccharum</i> sp.	<i>Saccharum</i> sp.	<i>Saccharum</i> sp.
Height of nest from the ground	9-10 feet	9-10 feet	9-10 feet
Complete nests/Normal nests	40	21	18
Incomplete nests	25	18	28

In Zone I, we recorded 240 nests. All the nests were constructed on *Typha* plants and height of the plants was about 6-8 feet from the ground. In this area out of 240 nests only 47 nests were complete and suitable for breeding, and the rest were incomplete or abnormal nests. The rate of success was only 19.5%. It may be due to the disturbance caused by fishermen. These ponds were also used for storing water, which was pumped through regular fishery ponds. The pumping machine was making a sound of more than 90 dB.

Zone II is located on the southeast of the University campus. It was a sugarcane field, where we found 150 nests hung on sugarcane plants. The height of the plant was about 9-10 feet, the rate of success in this case was 52.6%. It was quite high when compared to zone I. This may be due to the reason that the area was surrounded by paddy fields and thick vegetation. Here the disturbance by humans was also low. It was observed that this habitat was shared also with *Ploceus philippinus*.

We found a total number of 390 nests constructed by *Ploceus benghalensis* in both study zones. A single male can construct 2 to 3 nests in a season (Sharma 1995) and so the total population may be around 100 pairs.

Ploceus benghalensis is very specific in its host plant selection, unlike *Ploceus philippinus*, which can hang its nest on a variety of host plants. *Ploceus philippinus* can tolerate human disturbances, whereas *Ploceus benghalensis* is very sensitive to human disturbances. Most of the marshy vegetation in the Malnad area are converted as croplands and due to this change, the survival of *Ploceus benghalensis* is threatened. This has led to loss of breeding places for black throated baya. However, increased sugarcane plantation in the irrigated zones of Karnataka especially Shimoga area, has become a boon for the species. The sugarcane provides raw materials for nesting, protection and breeding grounds as well.

Acknowledgments

We thank Dr. Ranjith Daniels R.J.R. Care Earth, Chennai for the suggestion he made to write this paper for the Newsletter for Birdwatchers.

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South African Penguins and other birds of South Africa

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I visited the Boulders which is part of Cape Peninsula National Park near Cape Town, South Africa, on 11th May, 2002. This is close to the famous Table Mountain of Cape Point, a tourist attraction. Boulders near False Bay, today has become world famous for its thriving colony of African Penguins and magnificent wind sheltered, safe beaches. The South African penguin is a Red Data Book bird and is the only example of a penguin breeding in Africa. Of the 1.5 million African penguin population estimated in 1910, only some 10% remained at the end of the 20th century. The uncontrolled harvesting of penguin eggs (as a source of food), and guano scraping, nearly drove the species to extinction. They were earlier called the Jackass penguin because of their donkey-like braying call. Since several species of South American penguins produce the same sound, the local birds have been renamed African penguins. Their diet consists mainly of squid and shoal fish such as pilchards and anchovy. They can swim at an average speed of seven kilometers per hour, and can

stay submerged for up to two minutes. The predators of these penguins in the ocean include sharks, Cape fur seals and, on occasion, killer whales (*Orca*). Land-based enemies include mongoose, genet, domestic cats and dogs - and the kelp gulls which steal their eggs. Their distinctive black and white colouring is a vital form of camouflage - white for underwater predators looking upwards and black for predators looking down onto the water. Although the African penguins breed throughout the year, the main breeding season starts in February. They are a monogamous species and the lifelong partners take turns to incubate their eggs and to feed their young. The nest is a bowl-like depression in the sand, and I saw several of these during my recent visit in May, 2002. The peak moulting of the African Penguin is during December, after which they head out to sea to feed (since they do not feed during moulting). They return in January to mate and begin nesting from about February to August. Penguins have very sharp beaks and can cause serious

injury if they bite or lunge. So visitors have to be very wary when approaching them. But, I found them quite adapted to visitors. For the tourists, special wooden bridge walkways are erected wending through mangroves close to the beach, to enable them to watch and enjoy these birds. These penguins are reminiscent of toddlers at play. From just two breeding pairs in 1982, the penguin colony has grown to about 3000 in recent years. This is partly due to the reduction in commercial pelagic trawling in False Bay, which has increased the supply of pilchards and anchovy, which form part of the penguins' diet. Further, demarking their breeding area on the boulders as protected helped in the restoration of the penguins in the last two decades.

Other birds of Cape, South Africa. The cape habitat is called Fynvos Biome. This is the area to the South and West of Cape and plants like protea, erica and restio form shrub lands. Fynvos consists of the Mountain Fynvos and Coastal Fynvos, and both have rich floral biodiversity but less bird biodiversity. Some of the birds sighted in and around Cape Town between 5th and 12th May, 2002 are as follows: Blacknecked grebe, *Podiceps nigricollis*. This is common in saline waters. I could not see the dabchick, *Tachybaptus ruficollis* which is more common in fresh waters. Grey heron, *Ardea cinerea*. This is mostly found in lagoons. Cattle egret, *Bubulcus ibis*. This is commonly found in open meadows following sheep in fenced ranches, typically as we see them in India. South African shelduck, *Tadorna carnata*. This has characteristic black bill and legs, found mostly in fresh waters. Redbilled teal, *Anas erythrorhyncha*. This is the most common teal of South Africa. Ostrich, *Struthio camelus*. These are in fact feral stocks mostly found in ostrich farms, which is also a tourist attraction. Here, ostrich eggs and meat are served as delicacies. The wild ostrich are found only in Namibia and Kalahari. Greyheaded gull, *Larus cirrocephalus*. This is commonly found at the Cape Coast and fairly abundant at the famous waterfront shopping center close to the Cape port. Rock pigeon, *Columba guinea*. Like our blue rock pigeon (*Columba livia*) this is found in the urbanized areas. Laughing dove, *Streptopelia senegalensis*. This is found in urban gardens and even on pavements and footpaths foraging below avenue trees. Little swift, *Apus affinis*. This is seen in flight in urban areas. Pied crow, *Corvus albus*. Seen in small flocks flying in urban areas. I found the bird very beautiful, with white running from behind the neck into breast and belly, rest of the colour being black. The common crow, *Corvus splendens* seen in India is also found in South Africa since 1972, when a small population got established in Durban. Cape robin, *Cossypha caffra*. A sooty grey and orange bird found commonly in parks and gardens. Cape white-eye, *Zosterops pallidus*. This is common in suburban gardens and I saw a flock feeding on small berries on a tree instead of insects. Cape wagtail, *Motacilla capensis*. This is common in parks and gardens. House sparrow, *Passer domesticus*. Typical of the species, it is very common in urban setups. South Africa has a lot of old manors and houses with sloping roofs providing ample nesting sites for house sparrows. Cape sparrow, *Passer melanurus*. Common both in urban and outskirts areas. The male has a pied head and chestnut back. There are some active birdwatchers clubs in South Africa.

Those interested may contact the following: 1. Cape Bird Club, PO Box 5022, Cape Town 8000, South Africa. 2. Eastern Cape Wild Bird Society, PO Box 27454, Greenacres 6057, South Africa. 3. Diaz Cross Bird Club, 39 African Street, Grahamstown 6140, South Africa.

Suggested book for reference: Ian Sinclair and Phil Hockey. The larger illustrated guide to birds of South Africa. Illustrated by Peter Hayman and Norman Arlott, Struck Publication Limited, Cape Town.

REVIEW

A FIELD GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF DAKISHNA KANNADA. By K. PRABHAKAR ACHAR & K. GEETHA NAYAK.

With 211 black and white sketches by Sheik Irfan Kuntalpad. Printed in English and Kannada. Bhuvanendra Nature Club, 211pp. Rs. 100.

In a recent TV interview, Mr. Theodore Bhaskaran deplored the fact that most writing on natural history particularly on ornithology was in English; there was very little material in local or regional languages. This meant that many people who lived in villages or small towns, the very people who had best chance of sustained and continual observation, were deprived of useful material. Hot on the heels of Mr. Bhaskaran's complaint had come in two books, one in Kachchi, printed in the Gujarati script, and the other one printed in both English and Kannada, a fine innovation.

The general chapters on birdwatching, breeding, nesting, migration are written in English. This is followed by short descriptions of 212 species in English and Kannada. This and the accompanying sketches, where the artist has caught the characteristic look and posture of each bird makes identification easy.

This small light inexpensive but valuable field guide should play an important part in turning the villagers of Karnataka into birdwatchers (and conservationists).

L.F.

CORRESPONDENCE

COLLARED SCOPS OWL - A RESIDENT BREEDING SPECIES OF GUJARAT, B.M. PARASHARYA and ANIKA JADHAV, AINP on Agricultural Ornithology, Gujarat Agricultural University, Anand 388 110

In the morning of 15 April, 2002, we saw a chick of a Collared scops owl *Otus bakkamoena* being harassed by two jungle crows near the workshop of our university campus (G.A.U. Anand). On 16 April, we searched for its nest around the site where the chick was found. We saw an adult scops owl sitting at the edge of a cavity Ca. 5m. above the ground on a *Peltophorum* tree, and found one more chick in the same cavity. On 27 May 1988, a juvenile of the same species was found in the campus of Gujarat Agricultural University, Anand (22° 32'N, 73° 00'E) by one of us (BMP).

Grimmett *et al.* (1998) has not shown the distribution of this species in Gujarat. They say that it is resident throughout much of the subcontinent, except parts of the north-west and north-east and parts of Central and Eastern India. In the map, it is shown absent from entire Gujarat and much of Rajasthan. Recently, Kazmierczak (2000) has also not shown its distribution in Gujarat but has placed a single green asterisk mark indicating that it is a resident species with isolated records. It seems that both Grimmett *et al.* (1998) and Kazmierczak (2000) have largely followed Ali and Ripley (1983) who say that this species is resident, approximately between 21° and 24° N from the Surat Dang (Gujarat) eastward through Khandesh (Maharashtra) and Madhya Pradesh to Orissa and Southern West Bengal. The precise limit is not worked out. About the West Pakistan collared scops owl (*O. b. deserticolor*), Ali and Ripley (1983) say that this is possibly the form that occurs in North Gujarat.

During his ornithological survey, Ali (1955) could not obtain any specimen of collared scops owl. He concluded from its calls that it is evidently, fairly common in moist deciduous forest areas of Gujarat that is around Surat Dang. During the same period,

Dharmakumarsinhji (1954) wrote his book on "Birds of Saurashtra". But it seems that the same is not referred to either by Ali and Ripley (1983) or by Grimmett *et al* (1998) and Kazmierczak (2000). Dharmakumarsinhji (1954) had collected specimens from Gir forest where the species seemed to be fairly wide spread. Very clearly he has written that it is uncommon in Saurashtra but resident in the Gir. Recently, Lavkumar (1996) opined that mistnetting operations (where? when?) have established that *Otus bakkamoena* is more widespread than suggested by Salim Ali's report. However, he has not referred to Dharmakumar's work nor commented on the breeding status of the species in Gujarat.

Conclusion

As the *O. bakkamoena* is a resident species in Gir (Dharmakumarsinhji, 1954) and as there are two recent confirmed reports of its breeding from Anand, this species should be considered as "resident breeding species" of Gujarat.

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STANDARDIZED BIRD NAMES : WHO WILL USE THEM ? B.M. PARASHARYA, AINP on Agricultural Ornithology, Gujarat Agricultural University, Anand 388 110

Both Ranjit Manakadan and Aasheesh Pittie deserve appreciation for bringing out "Standardized common names of the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent". There is no harm - rather it would be convenient to all of us if "Standardized names" are accepted and used in all subsequent publications. The major question is who will use this new "Standardized nomenclature?" An average Indian birdwatcher was using Salim Ali's "Pictorial Guide" until the publications by Grimmett *et al* (1998) and Krys Kazmierczak (2000) came out. Because of the quality of illustrations and affordable price the later publications are widely used now a days, and hence the birdwatchers use the common and scientific names given in the same field guide. And that is the most convenient thing to do. I feel that it will be totally impractical to use one guide for illustrations and another guide for nomenclature. Such a situation may add to the problems rather than putting up "Standardized Nomenclature", into practice. If we want our birdwatcher friends to use "Standardized Nomenclature", a new field guide should be published urgently with following characters:

1. Good quality illustrations (To match the quality of illustrations in Grimmett *et al* and Krys Kazmierczak.
2. Standardized nomenclature (Prepared by Ranjit Manakadan and Aasheesh Pittie.
3. Price that can be affordable to an average Indian birdwatcher (i.e. Not to exceed Rs. 700/-)

The entire exercise of standardizing the nomenclature will go waste if this is not done immediately. I wish BNHS would take immediate action in this matter.



COMB DUCK *SARKIDIORNIS MELANOTUS* (PENNANT, 1769) IN THE THAR DESERT OF RAJASTHAN, INDIA. SANJEEV KUMAR, C. SIVAPERUMAN, M. PARDESHI and Q.H. BAQRI, Desert Regional Station, Zoological Survey of India, Pali Road, Jhalamand, Jodhpur 342 005

Wetlands are important habitats for several species of waterfowl and waders. Out of 1,22,541 ha wetland in Rajasthan surprisingly 62, 140 ha area is in the Thar desert. The Thar desert is more or less treeless, and dry open grassland (Gupta, 1975), with nearly 58% of the area under sand dunes (Shankarnarayan, 1988). Despite the harsh climate, the Thar desert exhibits rich avian fauna.

According to Grewal, (1995) comb duck *Sarkidiornis melanotos* (Pennant, 1769) is a resident all over India, but uncommon in the extreme South and Northwest India. In the Indian subcontinent some workers have reported the comb duck from various regions, viz., Webb (1912), Gibson (1918) and Rubie (1935) at Sind in Pakistan; in India Basil (1921) in Allahabad; Foster (1927) in Madhya Pradesh; Stoney (1942) and Adams (1943) in Mysore; Deuti (1997) in West Bengal; Revindran (1998) in Kerala; Alfred *et al* (2001) in Northern India and Kumar (2002) (Pers. comm.) in Nalsarovar wetland, Gujarat.

Though Livesey (1921) has reported comb duck breeding at Kota in Rajasthan, the studies conducted by various scientists on avifauna of the Thar Desert have not reported this species till date from this region (Rana, 1973; Agoramoorthy & Mohnot, 1986; Bohra & Goyal, 1992; Sangha, 1993 & 1994; Sangha & Kulshreshtha, 1993; Bohra & Rana, 1994; Rahmani, 1994, 1997a, 1997b & 1997c; Rahmani & Sankaran, 1995; Sekar, 1998; Islam, 1999 and Changani, 2002). In view of this fact, this is the first report from the Thar desert of Rajasthan.

As a part of the studies of faunal diversity in the Thar desert of Rajasthan initiated in the year 2000, comb duck, a Schedule IV species, was recorded in the Thar desert on 4th July, 2002. The specimen was a sub-adult male collected from Phool Bagh Bera near Kure Haud by the side of Jojari River, Jodhpur. The wings of this male collided with high voltage electric wire at 2100 hrs, but fortunately it was not electrocuted. The injury was in its under tail coverts. Morphometric measurements of the species are as follows: Bill length (6 cm), Wing length (37 cm) and Tarsus (7.5 cm). The other characters like black above glossed with blue and green on dorsal side, white on ventral side, head and neck speckled with black, fleshy knob (comb) on top of the beak are in conformity with the standard description.

The specimen is preserved and kept in the museum of Desert Regional Station, Zoological Survey of India at Jodhpur.

The authors are thankful to the Director, ZSI, Kolkata, for providing the research facilities. The financial assistance from the Ministry of Environment and Forest, Govt. of India is also acknowledged.

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PREDATION OF NIGHT HERON ON CATTLE EGRET NESTLING. S. SIVAKUMAR and GARGI RANA, *Bombay Natural History Society, Hornbill House, S.B. Singh Road, Mumbai 400 023*

During a heronry count in September 1999, we observed an unusual attempt to predate by the night heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*. It was a huge mixed heronry of storks, egrets, herons and ibises near Ghana canal in Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur. We were counting and noting down their numbers.

A cattle egret nest, on a middle branch of an *Acacia nilotica* tree, had two nestlings. They were completely covered with down feathers. A night heron sitting a foot away from the nest, was trying to approach the nestlings by projecting its head towards the nest. The frightened nestlings threatened the intruder with their stretched necks and erect down, several times. We thought it was a normal association among colony breeders. After a few minutes, we repeated the count in the same area and were surprised to see that the night heron caught a nestling from the nest and tried to swallow it. The nestling was comparatively large for the night heron, which swallows prey entirely. The night heron started swallowing the head of the nestling but could not swallow the bulging abdominal portion. After twenty minutes of trying, the night heron dropped the nestling. It did not try again for either the fallen nestling or the live one in the nest.

The night heron is an opportunistic feeder on fishes, frogs, aquatic insects, dragonfly larvae (Ali and Ripley 1987, Grimmett *et al* 1998), tadpoles, rodents, snakes, lizards, spiders, crustaceans, molluscs, leeches and bats, and it consumes the eggs and chicks of terns, ibises and even of other herons (Hoyo *et al* 1992). Hancock and Elliott (1978) mention that they have seen night herons regularly visiting Manana island ternaries to steal chicks in the evening. But, this daytime (1530hrs) hunting attempt to steal the cattle egret nestling is unusual and worth sharing.

Acknowledgment

We thank Dr. Vibhu Prakash, Principal Scientist and Mr. N. Sivakumaran Research Assistant, BNHS for their suggestions on this note and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for financial support for the project.

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NOTES ON CHESTNUT-WINGED CUCKOO AND GREAT HORNBILL. ARUNAYAN SHARMA, *N.S. Road, in front of T.O.P, Malda 732 101, West Bengal*

On 15th April, 2001 morning I was watching birds at Malda Agricultural Training Centre. At around 0915 hrs suddenly I got a glimpse of a crow sized brownish bird fly sluggishly from one Mango tree to another in the orchard.

After searching for more than five minutes, I spotted the bird on a mango tree, c.4m from the ground devouring a caterpillar. As the bird flew from one tree to another, I continuously chased the bird for more than 30 minutes. In between I did not hear any call but recorded its plumage as; wings rusty or chestnut with a long shiny black tail, orangish hue from throat to breast, with a white half band on its neck. The back over all shiny black having, a prominent

crest. I identified the species in the field easily as an adult chestnut-winged cuckoo *Clamator coromandus* (Grimmett *et al* – 1999, Kazmierozak *et al* – 2000).

The Agricultural Training Centre (c. 40m ASL) is situated 2 km from English Bazar (Malda town) in Malda district, West Bengal. The natural habitat of this area included a few large trees, agricultural lands and mango orchards. The Malda district is situated partially in the Gangetic flood plains and in the Sub-Himalayan ranges (Ghosh – 1999). Sighting of this species in Central West Bengal is noteworthy for first time from the Central West Bengal. As per published authentic data it was recorded from Central & Southern West Bengal after 15 years.

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SAND BATH BY GREAT HORNBILL *Buceros bicornis*

On 18th February, 2002 I was at Jayanti range of Buxa Tiger Reserve, Jalpaiguri district, West Bengal for the animal census. After a day long census operation at around 1600hrs I stopped for a while at 13 number block waterhole to see some animals on the way to my camp. I noticed a pair of great hornbill *Buceros bicornis* on the dusty forest tract c. 100m from me.

At first I thought that they were on the ground to pick some fruits, as hornbills are occasionally used to do. But after 10 minutes I noticed that they were not moving from the spot. I approached towards them as close as possible c. 20m and looked through 10x50 binocular that they were actually playing in the sand. Both of them created a shallow depression in the dusty forest track and sat c. 1m from each other.

After a close observation for more than 30 minutes I observed that both of them were just playing in the sand and enjoying the sand bath.

I wished to observe them more but at around 1720hrs they were disturbed by a herd of 27 bison *Bos gaurus* and flew inside the deep forest. Hornbills are arboreal but occasionally they come down on the ground to pick fallen fruits. I never saw or heard about the sand bathing of great hornbills *Buceros bicornis* and found this observation noteworthy.



RANGE EXTENSION OF STOLICZKA'S BUSHCHAT OR WHITE BROWED BUSHCHAT. SUMIT DOOKIA, *Desert Regional Station, Zoological Survey of India, Pali Road, Jhalamand, Jodhpur 342 005 (Raj.) India*

On October 21, 2001 at 3.30 pm a pair of Stoliczka's bush chats (*Saxicola macrorhyncha*) was seen sitting on a twig of *Capparis decidua* in Gogelao Enclosure of Nagaur District (Rajasthan).

I observed them for nearly 15min with the help of my binoculars (10x50) from a distance of 50 metres. The male is darker than the female in non-breeding plumage and differs from the Stonechat, mainly by its wide and long white eyebrow and longer bill. Again I sighted a male at the same place on 11 November, 2001.

Gagelao Enclosure (73° 40' to 73° 43' E and 27° 14' N), is situated in the Nagaur District's headquarters Nagaur city in the Northwestern side of Nagaur-Bikaner National Highway No. 89, 2km away from the city. This is a forest enclosure, comprising nearly 5 sq.km. area with plain and has only a few small dunes at southern side. The average rainfall of this enclosure is 389 mm annually, 1°C to 48°C is the temperature variation per annum. Scrub, xerophytic type habitat with *Capparis decidua*, *Prosopis cineraria* and *Acacia tortolis* are the dominant plants.

During my 1 ½ years of avian study this is my first encounter with this small endemic bird on the semi arid area of northwest Thar desert of Rajasthan.

According to many birdwatchers, nowadays due to the expansion of irrigated area of the Thar desert, mainly Rajasthan desert, the sighting of this small rare bird is very rare.

Roberts (1992) supposed that, this bird is nowadays extinct in the Pakistan side of the Thar, because it is unable to adapt to the spread of irrigation and cultivation. Rahmani (1994, 1996, 1997) said, that in the Thar desert it is not so rare as supposed earlier and in some places it is very common. Its preferred habitat is *Capparis decidua* dominating habitat (Rahmani 1997). This new site is dense with *Capparis* bushes. Still various mysteries prevail about its movement because maximum sightings of this bird by birdwatchers are in winter. I observed it again in winter. The white-browed bush chat is considered local and resident, Ali and Ripley (1983), and apparently an endemic species (Roberts, 1992).

Recently the reappearance of this bird near Sultanpur National Park (Haryana); a semiarid tract, was noticed by Bill Harvey (2001).

This bird is mainly a resident of the Thar desert, but its typical habitat was described as desert biotope. But it was also found in semiarid area (eg. Aligarh, Meerut in western Uttar Pradesh). It appears that these areas were marginal for the species and its main stronghold was the vast waterless, sandy plain of the Thar desert. Besides habitat alteration, there does not appear to be any other threat to this rare tiny white-browed bushchat (Rahmani, 1997).

But recent sighting of this rare bird in this semi-arid part of Thar desert is new. So it may be a range extension of this rare and endemic bird.

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DOES THE REDSHANK HAVE ALBINISM? SUMIT DOOKIA, Desert Regional Station, Zoological Survey of India, Pali Road, Jhalamand, Jodhpur 342 005 (Raj.) India

On 19th January 2002 I was at Guda Bishnoian closed area only 20 km away from Jodhpur City (Rajasthan), in the east-southern side. I found a big flock of about 500 individuals of common red shank (*Tringa totanus*) sitting on a bank of a big pond named "Guda Bada Talab" attached to the Luni river catchment area. The water of this pond is somewhat salty in taste and harboring nearly all brackish water birds. In this flock I noticed a white colored bird, which was looking like a pied avocet (*Recurvirostra avosetta*) from a distance, but with the help of my binoculars (10x50), I identified and found an unusual bird that was an adult common red shank with complete white colour with characteristic orange coloured beak with a black tip, and typical orange legs. I again went to that site on 21st January 2002 and saw this bird with the same big flock carrying on its activities in normal manner.

Common redshanks come every year in winter, but in my three years study I never encountered this type of redshank.



THE SARJAPURA WETLAND. ALAN H MORELY, Bryn Dyffryn, Iolyn park, Conwy, Aberconwy, LL32 8UX, UK

These small areas of what most people would call waste land are in fact VERY IMPORTANT feeding areas for many species of birds and also the insects and other wild life that the birds feed on. As these small areas disappear in the name of "development" (for humans), wild life is pushed ever further away or disappears altogether. These small, seemingly insignificant areas are very very important for our dwindling wild life.

This particular site is ideally placed being so near a school. This school could easily get involved in study projects and monitoring of the many species of birds and so on that use the area. It could get the children interested in conservation and wild life and the protection of the environment as part of their education.

If the school could be encouraged to take an active interest in their immediate surroundings, i.e. the wetland by their school, they could also go some way towards protecting the site for future generations of school children as well as protecting the area for wild life. Guidance and advice for this kind of school educational project is available from such organizations as the Bombay Natural History Society or the Madras Naturalists Society.



THE AVIAN WEALTH OF LAKHIMPUR KHERI DISTRICT. URUJ SHAHID, Near Pandit-Chakki, Moh. Maharaj Nagar, Lakhimpur Kheri, Uttara Pradesh 262 701. Email : uruj_shahid@rediffmail.com

Lakhimpur Kheri is the second largest district of Uttar Pradesh and is located between 27° - 41' and 28° - 42' N Lat. And 80° - 2' & 81° - 19' E Long in the Himalayan foothills, where usually a cool tropical breeze blows from the East on moonlit nights. During spring and summer, when the trees are overlaid with fresh green foliage, the frantic calls of brainfever birds, Asian koels and barbets resound endlessly from all sides.

The total number of species recorded in Kheri is about 450, of which nearly 300 can be seen in the Dudwa National Park (DNP) and the Kishanpur Wildlife Sanctuary, which contain dense sal forests as well as grasslands of Elephant grass. The world famous Dudwa National Park (680 sq. km.) is situated on the Indo Nepal Border in Lakhimpur Kheri district. So also the Kishanpur Wildlife Sanctuary (227 Sq. Km.) established in 1972, the land of rhinos, swamp deer, bengal florican and especially the royal bengal tiger, constituted in 1977.

As October brings shorter days and colder weather into the Indian subcontinent, our migrant birds start to arrive from their breeding



haunts and spread out in all directions of Lakhimpur Kheri and beyond.

There are several small and calm rivers flowing through this district. These rivers have created some fine wetlands (tals), in the district such as Banke, Bade, Chedia, Kakerha, Ajit Nagar, Giraja Barrage and others. Understandably, a large number of migratory birds visit these tals as well as the rivers during winter. Apart from these water birds, a great variety of hill birds too can be seen in this region.

Lying in the Terai belt of the Indo-Gangetic plains Lakimpur Kheri has an exceptional variety of trees suitable for birds. The native trees specially are a great asset for bird life.

To name a few : mango, nimbu (citrus, limon), guava, pomegranate, peach, (*Prunus persica*), papaya, jamun, arjun, (*Terminalia arjuna*), desi babul (*Acacia nilotica*), tamarind, peepal, banyan, *Salmalia malabarica*, silk cotton and many more. The exotic flowering trees are, as is well known, not as attractive to our avifauna as the local trees.

In spite of the damage done to the environment by the cutting down of trees and other development activities, this District inhabits such rare birds like the sarus crane, bengal florican, marbled teal (*Marmarometta angustirostris*) and swamp francolin (*Francolinus gularis*).

This District is reputed to have at least 450 species which I am listing here. (List not reproduced for lack of space – Editor). I give below the birds which I have seen personally and which have given the great pleasure. The author would welcome comments and enquiries from birdwatcher over E-mail or by correspondence.

Grey bellied cuckoo (*Cacomantis passerinus*), Asian palm swift (*Cypsiurus belasiensis*), Jungle owlet (*Glaucidium radiatum*), Oriental turtle dove (*Streptopelia orientalis*), Lesser spotted eagle (*Aquila pomarina*), Greater adjutant (*Leptoptilos dubius*), Plain martin (*Riparia paludicola*), Streak throated swallow (*Hirundo fluvicola*), Jungle prinia (*Prinia sylvatica*), Orphean warbler (*Sylvia hortensis*), Common chiffchaff (*Phylloscopus collybita*) Thick billed flowerpecker (*Dicaeum agile*).

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GIANT HERON RECORDED IN JHARKHAND (BIHAR). KRISHNAU BHATTACHARYA, Estt., Dcos(TM), CLW, Chittaranjan, Burdwan 713331

I had gone to a lonely area beside the Ajay river in Jharkhand (Bihar) to study wetland birds and some other migratory birds. I have seen many species of birds. Here I saw a goliath heron or giant heron (*Ardea goliath*), for the first time in this state.

I had gone to that area for twenty days, with my group to study birds. On 6 of January, 2002 morning I was busy observing water birds. On both sides of the river there were tall grasses and some other plants. At 9.20 in the morning I was attracted by some movement of a large bird, which was standing on the opposite side of the river.

At first I was attracted by the huge size of that bird. It was a bird with long legs, long neck and long pointed bill. I observed it with my binoculars and was amazed to identify it as a giant heron. I observed it for 20 minutes with my binoculars and spot scope along with other partners. It was a gray-brown coloured bird with long black legs and long black bill, it was almost double the size of a purple heron (*Ardea purpurea*), it had no cap or crest on its head, like purple heron. Our movements disturbed that bird and it flew away. It was flapping its wings slowly and continuously.

I had seen only a single bird several times, I was searching for other individuals of the same species in that area but I did not succeed.



INDIAN SWIFTLET AT TIGER HILL IN TAMIL NADU. VISHWAS KATDARE, Near Laxminarayan temple, Chiplun, Dist. Ratnagiri, Maharastra 415 605.

We visited the breeding colony of Indian swiftlets *Collocalia unicolor* at Tiger hill in Ooty, Tamil Nadu (with reference to the Newsletter article 'So called Indian edible nest swiftlet *Collocalia unicolor* by M.P. Walkev, May 1978) to see the current status of the breeding colony. Fortunately this small breeding colony was seen undisturbed. There are two small caves in which 125 nests were seen. The breeding was in all stages : eggs, just hatched nestlings, juveniles.

A letter received from ZSI addressed to Chief Wildlife Warden, Nagpur, Maharashtra, says they have proposed to include the entire family Apodidae in the appropriate schedule of Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972. It reads :

"The entire family Apodidae including this species *Collocalia unicolor* Jerdon may be included in the appropriate Wildlife schedule to stop the poaching activity which is in practice for last so many years".

We are sending this letter to the Chief Conservator of Forest Bangalore, Karnataka and other concerned organizations.



BLACKHEADED MUNIA IN DENSELY POPULATED TRICHUR. T.V. JOSE, 8, Reena Apartments, Chincoli Bunder Road, Malad (W), Mumbai 400 064.

Blackheaded munia (*Lonchura malacca*) is a bird commonly seen in swampy fields and nearby grassy patches. It appears now some of these birds have been invading densely populated areas of Trichur town. What is remarkable in this town is the nonexistence of (or nearly so of) common house sparrows (*Passer domesticus*). What I suspect is that these munias will take over the niche sparrows could have filled in course of time.

A friend of mine has the habit of hanging weaver birds' pendulous neatly woven nests from the ceiling of the verandah of his house. Some of the visiting munias found these deserted nests usable to roost and to raise their young and they saved the trouble and time to build the nests in their own fashions.

Tree pie (Indian tree pie, *Dendrocitta vagabunda*) would occasionally drop in to steal their eggs from these occupied nests and perhaps the juicy soft chicks. My friend planned a device to protect the eggs and nestlings of the munias from "treepie" raids. He made a wooden box of 5" breadth, 4½" height and length 13" spending his time and effort to accord hospitality to the uninvited guests. Of course there were two small holes at equal distance on one of the broad sides of the box wide enough for the birds to go in and out. This was hung side by side of the weaver bird nests. Munias ignored these ersatz wooden contraption to my friend's disappointment. Tree pies continue their rounds as usual now. What surprised him is the fact that the munias did not enter the box in spite of the placement of some of

their chicks in the box. What could be the reason for this hostile aversion for the wooden box? Is it because of walls of the box not covered with dry grass or grass-like material? Any takers to find the actual reason?



MIXED BREEDING COLONY OF LITTLE TERN, PAINTED SNIPE, BLACKWINGED STILT AND SMALL INDAIN PRATINCOLE IN MAHARASHTRA. R.M. KASAMBE and J.S. WADATKAR*, M.R. Colony, MIDC Bypass, Amravati 444 606. *P.G. Department of Zoology, Amravati University, Amravati 444 602.

On 5th June 2001, a small breeding colony of 4 species of birds was recorded on a small islet in the Malkhed Reservoir situated near Sawanga (Vithoba) village, which is 18km south-east of Amravati in Maharashtra.

The descriptions are as follows

1. Little tern (*Sterna albifrons*): One nest in a small depression created by a man's foot. Two eggs were seen.
2. Painted snipe (*Rostratula benghalensis*): 3 nests were found, with 1, 4 and 4 eggs in the nests.
3. Blackwinged stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*): 3 nests were found, and each nest had 3 eggs.
4. Small Indian Pratincole (*Glareola lactea*): 7 nests were found.

The number of eggs were two each in 6 nests and 3 in one nest. Besides these 14 nests, we saw another 5 painted snipes, 24 blackwinged stilts and 32 small Indian pratincoles incubating.

The breeding record of little tern in Amravati district (Maharashtra) is the first record in Central India. As per Ali, S. and S.D. Ripley, the nesting is observed in Pakistan and on islands off the West coast of India (Vengurla, Uttara Vashi, etc.).

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DR. ALI AND THE "MID-NIGHT JAR", K. JAYARAMAN, Prarthana, 80, 50 Feet Road, NGEF Layout, Sanjaynagar, Bangalore 560094

My mentor and source of inspiration Prof. K.K. Neelakantan, invited me one day to a talk by Dr. Salim Ali in Maharaja's College, Ernakulam, where I was studying first year degree in 1962. After the inspiring talk, he introduced me to the great man, who promptly invited me for a 7 day camp at Chenganoor, Kerala. I did not need a second invitation and I was in the next bus to Chenganoor. We travelled 10 kms from Chenganoor to a village and crossed by boat to another village full of Cane Sugar fields. I do not remember the name of the village. Dr. Ali himself received us (2 students from the college) and impressed me with his down to earth simplicity to make sure that we were comfortable. We stayed in a small house sleeping on the floor, with Dr. sleeping in the open on a foldable camp cot. There were two more zoology students from Bombay working for their Ph.D.

Yellow wagtails were the migratory birds visiting the village in large numbers. In my estimate around 10,000 birds were roosting on the sugar cane fields. The project undertaken by BNHS was to ring them. We used to tie mist nets around the fields and drive the birds from underneath the sugarcanes. The birds would fly sideways and get stuck in the nets. Then we would collect them in bags, bring them to camp, insert light aluminium alloy rings in their legs and release them. It was hard work tying the nets early morning around 4 a.m., collecting birds till 10 a.m. The ringing would be completed by noon. We would tie the nets by 4 p.m.

and again collect birds from 6 p.m. till 8 p.m. The ringing would go on till 10 p.m. The hard work, untiring energy and enthusiasm of Dr. at that age (he must have been 60 plus) was to be seen to be believed. One night at around 1 a.m., we were all woken up by Dr. and we had to run behind him half asleep to see a rare night jar whose call Dr. had heard in the night. He showed us the bird high on a tree with his powerful torch. It was an unforgettable experience to spend a few days with the great man. I got hooked to birds for life.



SIGHTING GREYHEADED MYNA (*STURNUS MALABARICUS*) AND RUFIOUS WOODPECKER (*MICROPTERNUS BRACHYURUS*) IN UDUPI. HARISH R. BHAT, Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore 560 012.

It was the month of March and I had been to my native Udyavara, which is a small village near Udupi town in Southwestern part of Karnataka, close to the Arabian Sea. One evening, I was taking a stroll in my garden when suddenly my attention was drawn by chattering noises from the trees in our paddy field bund. At first I thought it to be a flock of Indian myna and did not pay much attention to it. But the continuous chattering noise made me doubt whether they were Indian myna as it was not the familiar notes of Indian myna. The curiosity made me take my binoculars and go near them to have a proper glance. To my surprise, the numbers of those birds were near a thousand! The bird was of myna size, with dull grey head and wings, having two conspicuous long black patches on the wings and had a yellow beak. The abdomen was of dull brown colour. Then I could identify them as Grey headed myna (*Sturnus malabaricus*). I had never seen these birds before and that too in such a huge numbers. These small birds were very active, chirping and hopping on the trees. Then suddenly they flew together towards the sky and swarmed in a circle and proceeded towards the south and thus faded from view as dusk approached. The questions still remain unanswered are, whether these birds were migrating locally and are there reports of sighting them in such large numbers.

One early February evening I was taking a stroll, trying to beat the coastal humidity. I heard a familiar sound: toc..toc..toc..trrrrr.. from the jack fruit tree within our garden. Initially I thought it to be that of a lesser golden backed woodpecker. On closer observation, I could see a dull brown coloured bird about the size of a myna. On careful observation I could see a Rufous woodpecker (*Micropternus brachyurus*). I was delighted, as it is not common in the region.

The bird was busy climbing up with short paces, chipping the bark of the tree. It would tap the tree trunk and move ahead, until it could hear a hollow sound. Then, it would actively chip off the bark. The pieces that were chipped off used to house termites that it would quickly eat. I could observe this behaviour of the woodpecker for an hour. Like a carpenter, it would locate the stronger part of the tree and move further up for the hollow place to chisel the bark pieces off. On the quest for termites, it would hammer with its strong bill, letting it vibrate. This way the hole would easily be drilled further. I observed this behaviour until dusk.



A CRAKE CHAPTER. THEJASWI. S., 639, "Sibia House", 16th Cross, 'B' Block, Vijayanagar, 3rd Stage, Mysore 570 017.

A silent tread, no splashes, nor the slightest 'plop'; a dumpy gait, surprisingly suited for manoeuvres through reed labyrinths; a vigilant and alarmed vision, but when unmolested not without a certain effrontery that it is not usually associated with, or credited to; an unhesitatingly flicked 'stump' tail, a cloak of chestnut-and-slate, a flash of black-and-white...a proximal sound...scurry...vanish. Sleight of hand? : A crane.

Crakes are ubiquitous but do not solicit attention; they confide in silence but vacillate in noise. A denizen of reeds, the crane along

with its larger cousin the rail, and the bittern, is an artist of life in a marsh. Several species inhabit reed beds, hyacinth beds and other swampy undergrowth, paddy fields, forest pools and swamps, mangroves, storm-water drains, even small ponds of neglected quarries. Although most rails and crakes are shy, the colours that clothe these birds: reds, vermilion and chestnut; black, white; blues, slate, sky and aquamarine; defy their choice of run-in-cover tactics.

A crake is best observed early morning. A suitable reed bed, *Typha* for choice, a narrow passage in the reeds, either naturally or created by clearing a few intervening reeds and patience fill the prescription for a good crake watch. If crakes are around they will almost surely come in to the opening, they love to feed in such places. Initial trepidation will slacken and the bird can come really close if the observer remains still. Of all the species of crakes observed, I find the Baillon's crake the most fearless (more so than the omnipresent white-breasted waterhen) and the more common ruddy-breasted crake the most finicky in response to an observer. But a lot also depends on the individual bird, each one differing in the degree of response to an action or perceived threat. The Baillon's crake is a winter visitor, not as uncommon as people think it to be and probably overlooked as most of its cousins usually are. I had a memorable time with this and other crakes last summer when a few birds were regularly observed in reedbeds close to the Lingambudhi lake in the outskirts of Mysore city. The site lies around a kilometre from the Lingambudhi lake, on the overflow channel of the lake. In 2001, sewage water was being directly let into the lake and the resulting runoff had stimulated a luxuriant reed cover in the spill over channel. A marsh was formed where this channel had breached and this unleashed *Typha* into new territories.

The reedbeds in March were witness to a spell of activity. Already, *Pandanus* thickets lined the outlet border in profusion and weaver birds, both baya and streaked, were now vying to establish new breeding colonies in the reeds. A coppersmith pair had set up its brood in a *Pandanus* branch that bore testament to being particularly favoured by previous woodpecker and barbet tenants. One of the several scattered date palms provided a daytime refuge to a spotted owl, with its bobbing head and seditious stares. In a nearby coconut grove, the rare lesser spotted eagle (*Aquila pomarina*) was incubating the single egg that it had laid. A sealed hole in a coconut tree with a female grey hornbill ensconced within saw regular visitations from the male, usually with an *athi* (*Ficus glomerata*) fig or two. Wisps of pintail snipe, one with a good forty individuals, were stocking up in the wet paddyfields; restless hordes of godwits, sandpipers, including wood, marsh and curlew on passage, spotted redshanks, greenshanks, ruffs and stints rose and fell; all in anticipation of the long journey back north. Warblers had transformed from those skinny birds that we see in September-October to egregiously lumpy creatures, and continued to load on more food even after being apparently stuffed up to the hilt! Chestnut and yellow bitterns surreptitiously clambered along the reeds. The wren-warblers of the locality (Prinias to be acceptably correct), were busy assuaging vociferous demands of their respective clutches. Male koels were in amorous pursuit of females in the accepted rule of the season. Calls of ioras, orioles, sunbirds, barbets, woodpeckers, hornbills, parakeets, minivets, bulbuls, bushchats and robins, mynas, bushlarks, skylarks, pipits and sunbirds rent the air. In this atmosphere ordinary birding would be exciting, providing unmatched opportunities so close to, and partly as a result of, the urban sprawl.

It was on a cloudy morning to the end of this March last year that I received a phone call from Mr. Shivaprakash, my favourite fellow-birder, constant field companion for the last six years and a habitue of the Lingambudhi lake, that he had seen a crake, in addition to the ruddy-breasted and brown crakes that normally inhabit the area, that he could not identify for certain. The next day we

reached the reeds at 0515 hrs, early for good measure, and took up positions close to where he had seen the bird the previous day. A low pressure depression in the Bay of Bengal resulting in gloomy skies kindled hopes of a good session with the crakes. Dawn advanced drawing out with it the loud "tewnk's" of several ruddy-breasted crakes, and sure enough, a pudgy, nervous little bird sauntered in from the reeds. After apparently making sure that our presence was not a predacious one it began feeding nonchalant, by pecking at fallen reeds for insects. We could discern pearly white spots on the back laid on rich brown, salty grey underparts up to the upper belly, bold back-and-white bars on the lower belly and vent, extending into the flanks and a yellow beak, all characters pointing to the Baillon's crake. I had observed this crake several times before, particularly at similar reedbeds in a storm-water drain closer to home, and could thus easily recognise it. It kept to this particular opening and rarely ventured out in the open between thick short grass growing in the slush. The bird was given to sudden, seemingly unreasonable dashes in to the reed cover, despite both of us keeping absolutely still and silent. It would either run away as was custom, or fly off in to neighbouring reedbeds. The returns of the bird to the patch, barring a few exceptions, were almost always by a 'burring' flight. A clear white trailing edge to the wing could be seen, although this would not be visible from a distance, and would appear as a series of neatly arranged, large white teardrops (rather the size of an elephant's teardrop!) on the back, where the secondaries are reposed at rest. These were apart from the smaller white spots that were present on the upper back. The bird gave us a delightful three hours of darts, ducks and close-ups before taking to the reeds after the sun reluctantly peeped through the clouds.

The bird was as confiding the next day, the day after that and up to the end of the first week of April when it suddenly went 'missing'. In the meanwhile, we had managed to locate four other Baillon's crakes along a meandering 500 metre stretch of the channel, but all of them departed within a couple of days of each other. In the span of a few days we had grown attached to these indefatigable tail-flickers, particularly the original bird that turned out to be to us, a first among equals. Not so the ruddy-breasted crakes. These birds are quite vocal and while the Baillon's was heard only a few times, they kept calling intermittently throughout the day, more so at dawn and dusk. They were, are, very retiring birds. But in comparison with the Baillon's this bird was observed to venture out easily to more open portions of the marsh. One crake of this species was seen clambering on to a single *Typha* reed and calling from atop in the manner of the white-breasted waterhen. The remarkable fact was that the bird could go almost right to the top without faltering; the tenacity of the reed, a leaf of *Typha* not the stronger flowering stem, to sustain the weight of a crake while it otherwise bends over on the weight of a weaver bird landing, was surprising.

The *Handbook* gives the breeding season of the southern race of this species from June to September, usually after setting of the SW monsoon. But birds have been observed with chicks in March and April, suggesting an extension of the breeding season, although the majority breed during the rains. They defend territories, ranging from a few tens to a few hundred square metres depending on the availability of suitable habitat, and do not tolerate infringements. Vocal assertions are common, so are the more vocal fights. A pair usually raises three to five young; all hesitating individuals right from early days, possessing perhaps an atavistic quality that has persisted over millions of years of evolution, for the rail family is known from antiquity.

The ruddy-breasted crake is a distinct bird, with a deep chestnut breast and belly, rich brown upperparts, chestnut-and-white barring in the lower abdomen and vent and striking red legs. The brown crake on the other hand is soberly attired in an olive-brown and grey plumage and is often passed over as a juvenile waterhen, despite it lacking the chestnut vent and bright yellow-green legs

of the latter. I remember a brown crane that played truant in fading light one day; the bird would dart in and out of the reeds in frenzy, apparently chasing something, and never allowed me more than a fleeting glimpse of brown and brown. After half an hour in diminishing light and what seemed to me then a belligerent bird, I rose in a huff and prepared to leave. And lo! The bird rushed straight to me and ran between my legs, giving me the fright of my life! I let out a shout and turned around. The startled bird froze a moment, just sufficient for me to recollect and have an adequate look at it, and then realising that something was amiss, bolted into the reeds. I should like to meet that Brown Crane once more and ask of it the reason for running into me like that! I have also seen a brown crane by the road far away from water with three chicks, near Kadur in the Chikmagalur district of Karnataka. On a query, villagers tending cattle nearby informed me that the nearest water-body is a small temple pond two km away! White-breasted waterhens are more often seen away from water, in vegetated borders of dry fields.

Another reserved member of the rail family is the blue-breasted rail (*Gallirallus striatus*), a striking bird but usually quiet and timid. I have not come across this bird often and when I did it was never more than a passing glimpse. Mr. Shivaprakash informs me that he once saw the bird up close, when he was crouching behind a bush observing the nest building activities of a Magpie-Robin; the bird appeared suddenly on the edge of the paddyfields, close to a bund with bushes, and then proceeded to peck at the somewhat scanty remains of a dead crab. He was captivated by the bird's colours, he recounts, the vermilion red crown and nape, the contrasting slaty blue chest, the lightly barred upperparts and deeply barred underparts that made him abandon at once the nesting magpie-robin for the rail!

The kora, also known as the watercock is perhaps the most unobtrusive of all the rails and crakes. A crepuscular bird, it is rarely seen but more often heard, especially during the breeding season. It is more frequent in lowlands than higher elevations, the Gangetic plains and delta of West Bengal and Bangladesh, the Bramhaputra plains in Assam and the marshes, coastal backwaters and 'Kole' wetlands of Kerala and is accordingly rare on the peninsular plateau. I treasure a memorable meeting with the Kora a year and a half back. It was sundown of 10 December 2000 as we trudged back to the bus-stop after an exhausting but exhilarating day with waders in the large floodplain marshes of the Kaveri river in the Krishnarajasagar dam backwaters. There had been Eurasian curlews, comb ducks, several thousand waders mainly little and temminck's stints, ruffs, golden plovers, greater spotted eagles, hundreds of brown-headed gulls, terns and many more interesting birds. My fellow-birder Mohan's native village was nearby and he wanted to visit his grandfather who was supervising work in paddy fields. I could not walk any more, after having sprained an ankle while attempting to negotiate a wide channel of water that I knew I could not cross, and was installed rather ceremoniously on a platform beneath an *arali* (*Ficus religiosa*) tree that faced a small, derelict tank overgrown by *Typha* and *Salvinia*. A tar road passes through that tank and splits it into two irregular portions. I was occupied in self-deprecation at having the sprain when I espied a large brown

bird that ran from one part of the lake to the other, crossing the road in the process. It stood alert awhile in the reeds and over the next fifteen minutes sporadically raised its head to check if everything was OK. It was a kora, a male in non-breeding dress. It grew completely dark by the time my friends Mohan and Keshav returned and I narrated the encounter with the kora, resulting in a flood of recrimination about them being only at a shouting distance away and not being shown the bird. I rather doubt if the bird would have remained hanging around after a couple of loud cries that would be sufficient to scare away even the most tolerant crane or any other bird, with the possible exceptions of the crow and the myna, let alone a kora.

Narasambudhi lake (12° 05'N, 76°43'E) is a huge irrigation tank built on the Gundal river, a tributary of the Kabini. It is situated 27 km south of Mysore, close to the temple town of Nanjangud and has a water-spread area of some 800 hectares. It is an excellent birding area, with wetlands, drylands and groves; a hundred species in four hours on a winter morning is the usual count including hundreds of bar-headed geese, a couple of thousand glossy ibis, several thousand duck, pintail mostly, also garganey, shoveler and wigeon, waders, greater spotted eagle and peregrine falcon. On a visit to this lake on 9 December 2001, we even spotted a grey bushchat (*Saxicola ferrea*), the first record of the bird from south India. On the same day, while walking on the bund of the Tagadur Ramachandra Rao canal near the lake, Mr. Shivaprakash came across a dead crane lying on the road and beckoned to us. It was overall brown, darker above and lighter below, generously spotted white on the chest, sides of neck and conspicuous white barring on the flanks and wings. The Grimmskipps guide confirmed it to be a juvenile spotted crane (*Porzana porzana*). The spotted crane is a rare winter visitor to south India, being known only from a handful of records. We had observed it only once before, at the Hosabudanur lake near Mandya in 1994.

I return to the Lingambudhi overflow marsh site as I draw this crane chapter to a close. It is now March 2002. The sewage has stopped, fortunately for the lake, and so the marsh is no more in existence. The reeds were indiscriminately cut in the intervening period; many baya and streaked weaver nests, some with chicks, were just thrown away by the reed cutters, many more destroyed by farmers in the vicinity who explained it away to the weaver being a pest to ripening paddy. The bayas have suffered several successive losses of nesting sites in recent years to a ring road and new layouts and are on slow retreat from the area. The nest of the lesser spotted eagle had collapsed during a bad storm but fortunately the chick had grown, survived the ordeal and we saw it fly away one day. The coconut grove where it nested has been bought by a private developer and would be cleared, probably in a couple of years. Several date palms had been brought down and many smaller ones, regularly stripped of leaves for brooms, looked bald and sullen. A bright new board proclaiming the establishment of a new bank housing colony is yet another stamp of looming urban development. The overflow channel will in all probability be converted into a drain that it partly served as until the sewage was diverted. But there will be a distinction; a rushing, paved drain would no longer support the diversity that the original overflow channel did. The crakes will be gone and so would the birdwatcher.

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Cover: Female **Tickell's Blue Flycatcher** (*Cyornis tickelliae*) at nest. This graceful blue coloured flycatcher prefers to build its nest in thick cover and shade and on the wooded banks of streams. It continually sings a merry little song and flits about the bushes. Its population has declined drastically due to habitat loss.

Photo : S. Shreyas.