Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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Editorial

Kihim - 15th March to 26th May 2003

The most cheering comment I can make on our stay is that the weather throughout was exceptionally pleasant. There was a cool breeze throughout the day and night and the temperature steady at 30°. The humidity (as indicated by the hygrograph) was almost 100% most of the time. I suppose Kihim was one of the few places in the plains where the temperature was so pleasant. It was sad to read about the heat strokes and the deaths caused by a vicious drought in so many parts of our country.

On the whole birding was disappointing though I did get good views of an olivebacked pipit *Anthus hodgsoni* pointed out by family members in our compound, and of a pair of paddy field pipits in Sasone wetland. With a cataract in one eye and one ear totally non-performing, I cannot blame the birds for not being seen or heard. In fact, family members refuted my fear about the loss of some species by confirming, fortunately, that the birdwatcher and not the birds was to be blamed. Apparently there were redbreasted flycatchers, paradise flycatchers, blacknaped flycatchers, the whitethroated ground thrush and also the charming local migrant, the brown flycatcher *Muscicapa latirostris* with its lovely white eye ring, in station. In future, my pleasures of birding will have to be restricted to the reports I receive from contributors to the Newsletter, and this will continue to be a great joy.

When we came back to Bangalore I found an enormous pile of articles and correspondence, which I will deal with in course of time. I would like to mention to contributors who keep sending in unannotated checklists that I may have to include them only in selected abstract form for lack of space. Readers interested in the complete checklist could procure it from the author.

The Serenity Trust, Admedabad

One of the letters awaiting my return to Bangalore was from the Serenity Trust. The Managing Trustee, Mr. Firdos Cambatta wrote that they appreciated the role of the Newsletter for Birdwatchers in arousing an interest in ornithology and conservation. To encourage us they have sent a cheque of Rs. 20,000/- to be used in any manner we wish. I wrote back to say that we would use the funds for supporting small conservation projects in the field.

Journal of Ecological Society

Some of you must be familiar with this Journal edited by Prakash Gole. In Vol. 15, 2002 just received, there is some pertinent material relating to the unhappy ecological state of our country because of mismanagement of our natural assets. In the Foreword, referring to our water problems the Editor says :

"Mountains can do this trick only if they are covered with adequate vegetation. The association between the vegetation and mountains is vital for precipitation of rain. Vegetation affects rainfall and rainfall determines the character of vegetation. The extent and distribution of rainfall together with vegetation affect the soil character. Different soils are associated with different patterns of rainfall and vegetation. Topography and soil, together with vegetation and rainfall influence the variety and quality of habitats supporting innumerable organisms. The living organisms have varied associations between themselves. In short, life on earth survives through innumerable associations which can only be broken at life's peril."

As we drive from Kihim to Mumbai and pass some of the outlying hill ranges of the Western Ghats, we see many hills being bulldozed and flattened to use the soil for road making and other purposes. If this trend continues we can stop being surprised every time there is a drought.

Yesterday's Deccan Herald (2 June) and The Hindu announced that the State Government have organized ceremonies for "divine intervention" by the rain gods. All of us in whatever way we can must try and influence the decision-makers of our country to rely less on the gods and more on our own conservation activities on the ground to ensure normal weather conditions.

The Killer of Vultures

As we know, the deaths of the whiteback and the longbill vultures have caused great concern in our country, and several scientific investigations are under way to find out the cause of these deaths. A report in today's paper says : "Professor Lindsay Oak of Washington State University, working in Pakistan with the support

of Peregrine Fund, has come out with the finding that Diclofenac, a widely used painkiller and anti-inflammatory drug is behind the large-scale morbidity and mortality of the vulture species". We have to thank the vultures for pointing out the damage done to the general environment by the introduction of chemicals used in these pills. It was the crested grebe on the lakes of America, which first alerted our world to the dangers of DDT. It was the death of these birds among other factors, which moved Rachel Carson to write her famous book *Silent Spring*. Let us hope that the death of the vultures has not been in vain, and that many lethal chemicals used in painkillers and other medicines will now be eliminated.

A Mystery of the Disappearing Eagles

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This is a singular wildlife chronicle depicting the strange chain of events in the life of a pair of Bonelli's eagles. It demonstrates a thrilling triumph of education over an unintentional, innocent act of wildlife destruction and is a saga of the birth of a conservationist. This is a true story that illustrates the usefulness of sincere and thoughtful bird watching. This is also an example of a successful rescue and hence needs to be documented, should a similar fate befall any other eagle.

The story starts somewhere in December 1998 at Kolhapur in Maharshtra, where Banda Pednekar, a keen bird watcher stumbled upon a nest of the Bonelli's eagle *(Hieraaetus fasciatus)*. From atop the fortification of a hill fort about 20 Kms from Kolhapur, Banda could see right into the active nest of this eagle. There were two chicks in white plumage in the nest. The nest was about 45 feet up in a Jamun tree(*Syzygium cumini)*. Since the tree was on a steep slope in a valley, the adjoining fortification commanded an excellent internal view. For two years, Banda observed the nest and every year both the chicks suddenly disappeared from the nest after the second week. The eagles had failed to propagate successfully. In the third year, when the eagles laid a clutch of two eggs in the same nest, Banda informed me. I phoned my friend Niranjan Sant from Belgaum, since it was near for him to visit the nest and document by taking photographs. Niranjan and Banda visited the nest in the last week of January, 2002. They saw two chicks in snow white plumage. Chicks with both parents on the nest were photographically documented. I visited the nest on 2nd February, 2002 with Amit Pawashe and Banda. It was a 250 km drive from Pune.

When we reached the fortification after a steep uphill tiring climb with cameras and other equipment, and glimpsed in the nest, we were surprised to find only one chick in the nest. Some dark sprouting feathers were seen in the tail and wings, but the chick was otherwise white. The mysterious disappearance of the chicks had commenced for the third consecutive year of observation. A strange discomfort engulfed my mind. Banda had a strange thought all this time. Were the eagles eating the chicks? He had seen something white in the nest after the disappearance of the chicks the previous year, and he was worried if these were the remains of the chick. But we first decided to rule out the possibility of a chick falling from the nest before entertaining this bizarre thought. Hence we climbed down the steep cliff. To our utter amazement we found the chick on the ground under the nest. The chick was dead. Rigor mortis had set. There were early signs of putrefaction. Insects and flies were crawling on the carcass. There was a visible injury on the back of the dead chick. The chick in the nest had lost a sibling and was now alone. Had this chick pushed out the weaker sibling? On the hill fort we came across a band of children. The oldest was studying in eighth class and the youngest was in the fourth class. In conversation, we found that the boys spent their spare time attending to cattle, gathering honey, eating wild berries and chasing monkeys and in similar activities. They appeared knowledgeable in bird behaviour and identification. With a heavy and gloomy heart we returned to Kolhapur. It was a Saturday. Since the next day was a Sunday, we decided to visit the nest again. It was 45 minutes journey in a state transport bus from Kolhapur bus stand till the base of the hill fort.

Why and how had the chick fallen from the nest? Why was it happening every year? We wanted answers to these strange disappearances. This was a bad thing for the eagles. On Sunday we were to sit in a hide and observe the eagles keenly. We would frantically look for some clues. But a different destiny lay before us. On reaching the fortification after the steep climb we were in for a rude shock. We just could not believe our eyes. The nest was empty, there was no sign of the chick that we had seen just ten hours ago on the previous evening. The nest was inexplicably empty. The chick had vanished. It was unbelievable yet true. We immediately rushed down the cliff to check if this chick too had fallen. On reaching down we saw the same boys. They were carrying a cloth bag. On seeing us they called us from a distance. To our enormous relief and utter surprise they opened the bag and showed us the chick. It was alive. The boys had gone out early in the morning for grazing their cattle and had found the chick under the nest tree. They were bringing it up to show us. The eaglet was examined and there were no injuries. Now what? That was the immediate question.

We unanimously decided to keep the chick back in the nest and observe. There was no substitute for parents, their care, guidance and rearing and their ability to mould the chick to an independent free life. Artificial rearing in an orphanage would be the last option. Before keeping the eaglet back in the high nest, we carefully examined it. It was about 6 feet tall and equally big in diameter. It was inclined to one side. We thought this to be reason for fall of the chicks. Imran, an active member of this children's syndicate, took upon himself the task of climbing the tree and place the chick back into the nest. The upper most branches at a height of about forty feet were rather thin to bear the weight of an adult. The climb was perilous and the upper branches of the nest tree were swaying with the wind. The chick weighed about 400 gms. After a lot of hard work the chick was taken up to the nest. Imran literally poured the chick in the nest from his cloth bag. It reminded us of a grocer pouring potatoes. The nest inclination was corrected with branches set in a relay manner from below. During the descent Banda fell down from about 15 feet, when a branch snapped, but he escaped with minor injuries. The chick was back in the nest again after an absence of at least 12 hours. The eagles had noticed the empty nest and were not observed since we had arrived.

During this operation two strange observations alerted us of an ominous possibility. The branches bearing the nest bore marks

of extensive abrasions. At several places the bark was peeled as if cut by a sharp instrument. Were the eagles scratching the nest bearing branches to see if they were viable and thereby ascertaining the safety of the nest? The other observation was even more crucial. After placing the chick in the nest, Imran wanted to throw the empty bag down. What we saw was that he picked a fist sized stone from within the nest itself, put it in the bag and then flung it down so that it would fall vertically and not get caught in the branches. The *stone should not have been there.* A chill ran down my spine. Were these very boys up to some mischief? Were they throwing stones at the chicks from the fortification? But that would be dealt with later.

We assembled on the fortification to watch the replaced chick. Would the parents accept it? The absence from the nest was short but certain. The eagles had noticed it. What if the parents do not accept the chick? We watched with bated breath. Everyone was tense. Time ticked slowly. Anxiety grew. There was no sign of the eagles. Tension started mounting.

And then after more than an hour the adult eagle came to the nest. The female was darker and larger. On observing the eaglet in the nest she flew and returned with a freshly cut eucalyptus branch with several green leaves. It was held in the talons. The branch was dropped in the nest and then several branches were brought and placed in the nest. Eagles continually bring fresh leafy branches to the active nest. Chicks sat on them. Whether this is to make the hard nest softer or whether the eucalyptus leaves repel ticks, mites or lice is worth a study. But to us, bringing branches meant that the parents had accepted the chick. We had taken a wise decision. Our efforts were rewarded. The eaglet would survive and would be free. Parents soon returned with a freshly killed koel and fed it to the hungry chick. Amongst the prey base, we observed poultry, which were commonest, blue-breasted quail, dove, squirrel and crow. The interesting prey was a shikra. The eagles fed tender flesh to the chick and the feeding was mostly done by the female. Prey was brought by both parents. Bones were eaten by the parents. Poultry was de-feathered on another tree and was brought dressed to the nest. Smaller birds were eaten with feathers. Prey was allowed to soften and putrefy for some hours before it was fed to the chicks. The prey was left in sunlight.

On one occasion we had observed a pack of Hanuman Langurs coming near the nest tree. The parents having noticed this trespass swooped from the sky and with both legs held forward struck the langur with enormous speed. The langur lost its hold and fell down. The pack immediately disappeared from the vicinity.

When its parents fed the replaced chick, we heaved a sigh of relief. We then decided to speak with the children and to take them in our confidence. Scolding would have alienated them. The suspense and the final acceptance of the chick by the eagles had impressed them. On gentle inquiry the innocent boys accepted that they were behind the disappearance of the chicks all these years. Imran revealed their little secret to us. Another boy from a nearby town wanted a pet. Observing wildlife films and TV channels had aroused in his mind a strange and strong desire to keep a pet. He wanted either a monkey or a big bird, maybe a kite or an eagle. In return he would give an airgun as a reward. Imran and friends had failed in trapping a monkey when the animal had attacked them. On noticing this nest, they had devised a strategy of throwing stones at the chicks and then pushing them out and make them fall. For two consecutive years the chicks had thus died. Once they had got a live chick but it had succumbed. This year they had managed to climb and get a live chick from the nest to win the airgun. We had witnessed that the first chick had succumbed to stone pelting. But, when the live stolen chick was actually handed over to the boy who wanted it as a pet, his parents refused to keep it at home. This boy then gave a ten-rupee note to Imran and asked him to manage the chick. It was then, that I realized how wise was our decision to make a second visit to the nest. If we would not have come, the boys would have attempted rearing the chick by themselves, and like before, it would have died.

When we heard this chilling confession, we applauded them for their truthfulness. We told them of the importance of protecting wildlife, of the right of wild animals to freedom. And we also told them that such acts of stealth or disturbance were illegal and punishable. We gave them some books on wild birds and animals in Marathi. The boys quickly understood their mistake and assured us that they would not disturb birds, animals and especially the eagle in the nest again. They told us that in this remote place there was no one to tell them these things. We had pardoned the innocent but lost children, and in return, the eagles had accepted the lost eaglet. After a few weeks, the eaglet grew into a powerful eagle and flew away. It was occasionally seen throughout the year sometimes alone, sometimes with the parents.

The story completed a full circle after one year. In January 2003, my telephone started ringing, the boys from Kolhapur were at the other end. Imran was insisting that we visit the nest again. The enthusiasm in his voice was palpable. Two white chicks were in the nest. The boys were not disturbing them any more. Last year's rescued eaglet was rarely seen soaring near the nest tree but the parents did not allow it to alight on it. Imran's inner voice had compelled him to make a phone call to us. He wanted to share with us, the joy of the return of *their* eagle. Education, love and understanding had transformed Imran and friends for the better. The mystery of the disappearing eagles was solved and their unabated stealth had finally stopped.

We visited the nest in February, 2003. Two eaglets in rufous-brown plumage were seen in the cradle in the sky. They were safe and growing well. The eagles had finally succeeded in passing their genes to the future. The larks were singing and sunbirds were chirping. Everything was apparently the same. But there was one subtle yet important difference. The hands of the children, which once yielded stones, now held binoculars. Their minds, which once schemed to destroy and seize, were now full of appreciation of nature. Once, ignorance had made these children perform a crime. A ten-rupee note or an airgun as a reward was enough to make them play with the priceless life of the Master of the Sky. The Supreme Hunters were helpless before the cruel sport of wanton boys! But the metamorphosis in their vision had now proved to us the value of education. Education was necessary in urban areas since demand for pets arises from there, and it is also required in the rural regions, since the demand is met from here. Today I am fully convinced that the mind can always be educated, that the hands that can kill can also care. There is hope. But a loving, sustained and focused effort is necessary.

Acknowledgement:

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of the following team members – Banda Pednekar, Abhijit Patil of Prakruti Prayog Parivar, Kolhapur. Dr. Satish Pande, Amit Pawashe, Chandrahas Kolhatkar, Anand Abhyankar, Prashant Deshpande, Dr. Mohan Panse of ELA Foundation, Pune. And above all Imran and his

other innocent friends who truthfully and with an open mind confided in us their mistake and took the first step towards conservation.

Note: This true story has been chronologically video-taped and a VCD with commentary in English & Marathi has been made by the ELA Foundation. For inquiry please contact the author. Screening of this event may be used to promote nature education and conservation awareness.

Bird News from Rishi Valley

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Another disappointing monsoon at Rishi Valley left us dry through the greater part of 2002. After an initial promise, the clouds disappeared and by August the Valley was dry and parched. The birds were not too happy and it was becoming difficult to spot them as many of them - particularly the waterbirds - deserted us and left for greener (wetter) pastures.

Not so the snakes – we had several of them attempting to get closer to the inhabitants of the campus, much to the discomfort of the latter. We had sightings of the Russell's and saw-scaled vipers from within buildings and there were a host of other snakes – green keelbacks, green pit viper, bronzebacked tree-snake, wolf snake, cat snakes, rat snakes and cobras - presenting themselves at every available opportunity..

Well the birdwatchers did not have to grumble although they had to struggle for their sightings and to record unusual things to keep their interest going till the onset of winter. One good news was the return of the painted spurfowl and the apparent increase in their numbers. When I landed up in the campus in 1998, I had been hearing calls that I had attributed to this species. The books were really of no great help as there appears to be some gaps and confusion in the literature pertaining to the vocal habits and calls of this bird. But based on reports from students and others who have been seeing the bird I concluded that it was indeed the painted spurfowl. After sometime the calls were heard sporadically and the birds remained in the background until around early 2001. I got to see them in the campus in the residential areas in the dry season that year. But in 2002, I had a look at a family party of four in the hill afforested by the school. On 13th July two of them were juveniles. They were not too scared seeing us and ran quietly down the path and disappeared. On 5th October, as I went up the same hill, a movement caught my eye and I froze. It was one of those rare days that I had been alone and so I managed to remain really quiet. Next to me off the path was a sheet rock and moving on it was a lovely male spurfowl. I am sure he noticed my presence, which he acknowledged by taking somewhat cautious and deliberate steps as he sauntered forward. He appeared curious and by no means was he shy. He gave me an uninterrupted view of himself for a good three minutes and all his features including the lovely plumage and the spurs on his feet were clearly seen.

I have been hearing the bird ever since and it is my presumption that there are more than a pair of them in the campus. Their regular call-notes can be heard both in the mornings and late afternoons. The calls are loud and have the attributes of the game birds and are loud. At a distance it sounds somewhat like that of a hawk-cuckoo. The call-notes vary from being three to four noted and at times even six notes could be heard. On rare occasions the notes were uttered in runs of up 15-20. The calls are on an ascending scale. To me the call sounded like "Kye - Kye ....Kye – kye –kye - kye". I hope one of these days I would be able to record them and study them more closely.

A second interesting bird seen in the campus was none other than the Shama – the songster *par excellence.* On 16th October, I spotted a male sitting on a low bush next to the Guest House. There were clumps of bamboos and other vegetation overgrown and wild close to this area and the male bird that turned up even gave me a few samples of its repertoire before diving into the depths of the shrubbery. As I was leaving the campus on a vacation, I alerted others about the new arrival. It appears the Shama has been showing up in my absence and perhaps trying to decide on where to settle down. The nearest Shama recorded before this sighting had been at the foothills of Horsely hills in the dense dry deciduous forests along the stream and the bird is regularly seen/heard at the Horsely hills where it has also been recorded breeding. We are looking forward to having a long association with this bird in our campus and hope it will fill our campus with its sweet music.

The day I saw the spurfowl at close-hand was also the day the resident pair of brown fish owl that usually roost on the large Eucalyptus tree on the bund of the Lost Lake (actually a pond) located halfway up the hill, decided to reward me with great views and present me with a gift! A tiny feather drifted from the bird that was preening itself on a branch of the tree and landed at my feet. I accepted the present and have preserved it in my bird Diary. A few of my colleagues have been seeing a third bird on the tree and this was sign that the birds managed to breed despite the dry conditions.

On 19th November and later on Jan 1st 2003, I came across the tiny warbler on the dry rocky hillside on the south-eastern end of the campus. I have had occasions to see this bird in the winter months of earlier years. It had a noticeably greyish-brown upperparts and yellowish undersides. The most interesting aspect of the bird was its behaviour – unlike the other *Phylloscopus* members, here was a warbler that foraged on the boulders and on the trunks of the short trees that grew on the degraded hill. The call sounded like a subdued 'chip'. Having seen the Olivaceous leaf warbler (also known now as the Sulphur-bellied warbler) in Maharashtra and in the Rajaji National Park, I could conclude more from its behaviour than field marks that it was indeed this species. I had suspected the bird to be the Tickell's leaf warbler on earlier occasions. The bird never stayed long enough at a spot to permit a detailed observation, especially a look at its yellow and orange supercilium. There are few records of this species in this part of the country and I wonder if it is because the bird has been overlooked or mistaken for other species.

At this point I would like to digress and make a comment on the new field guides. I have been brought up on "Salim Ali", "Whistler" and other such "old-fashioned" books that can in no way be compared with the new entrants in the market in terms of the printing quality, illustrations etc. Yet, I feel there is a certain lacuna of information of the behavioural and ecological kind – the information that can clinch identification based on certain

characteristic posture, behavioural pattern or habitat association – information that was gathered based on careful, long-term, and intimate observation of birds. Earlier, in April 2002, when I made my first-ever foray into the north-east, I encountered a bird from the window of the train, which (as is normal to the trains running in this region) kept stopping every now and then. This bird was either a large warbler or a small babbler – brown as these birds tend to be. As my field glasses were packed up, I had to be content seeing it with naked eyes. It was in a marshy grassland and the bird indulged in singing lustily from the top of bushes or grass stalks. Foxed as to what it could be, I kept watching it and presently the bird descended on to the ground and *walked.* Neither Grimskipps nor Kazmierczak came to my rescue. Fortunately I had the sense to pack in Salim Ali's " *Field Guide to Birds of the Eastern Himalayas*" and there was no need to look at the colours or for any of those mysterious fieldmarks that only these books have referred to. The bird was identified as the Striated Marsh Warbler. It is not my intention to say that field marks, colours and patterns are insignificant but that even notes on behavior and ecology are important in bird identification and must find a rightful mention in any good field guide.

Coming back to my narrative on the birds of Rishi Valley, we had another addition to our list this season. I was out watching birds with some students on the afternoon of 28th December. We were at the fodder farm behind the school dairy and watching the hordes of common rosefinches (a few hundred strong) and grey wagtails (numbering over 100) come in to roost in the tall dense grasses, standing over 4 m in height. On the top bare branch of a nearby tree was a sparrow-sized bird, with a finch-like beak, a little bigger than the rosefinches and quite striking in its colouration – bright yellow underparts and red head, throat and upper breast. It sat there facing us and in the several minutes of observations I could not get a good look at its back and upperparts. But the colours were striking and distinct that it was not difficult to identify the bird as the redheaded bunting (*Emberiza bruniceps*). It appears that the bird is again an uncommon winter visitor in this part of the country, though recorded from south-western and northern Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and south to Coimbatore. Despite my efforts I could not spot the bird on subsequent visits to the field. Perhaps there was just a single bird and spotting it amongst the large congregations of rosefinch was like looking for the proverbial needle in the haystack.

Now at the fag end of winter we are beginning to see what is in store for us. The waterbodies are dried up. A juvenile grey heron put in a brief appearance at our dried-up Percolation Tank. The pond herons are adopting newer strategies and looking for newer sites to forage. This afternoon, I noticed them foraging on the thin carpet of leaves on the ground next to a frequently used path. I was also shown a bird that came to an artificial pond, recently constructed in the courtyard of one of the hostels. The birds had discovered it. There was a commotion sometime back when a new bird turned up to share the tiny pool with its former occupant and the intruder was successfully put to flight. Perhaps things will not be too bad – there may be some unexpected rains and the birds can come back again soon.

The Thrushes Chorus

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(Who, or why, or which, or what Is the Akond of Swat?
(Edward Lear, 1888)
(Inventor of the nonsense rhyme limerick, made some evocative paintings of Indian scenes)

Until the late 1960's, the State of Swat, located to the east of Dir and Chitral, was ruled by the Akhund (actually called the Wali), who was in fact an enlightened ruler, whose small state possessed more dispensaries, schools and a better highway system than neighbouring parts of the NWFP.

This is the story of a memorable day spent in the northern part of Swat, taken from my diary notes of May 22nd, 1983.

I was at that time collecting voice recordings of as many birds as possible for a book I was compiling on the birds of Pakistan, and knew that in the forests around Kalam in northern Swat, I could get recordings of the rufous–tailed flycatcher (*Muscicapa ruficauda).*

Having reached the capital of Swat, Saidu Sharif, the evening before, after a drive of over 600 km from our home in Punjab, my wife and I got up at 5.30 a.m. to drive some 80 km north along the river valley, which snakes its way between ever higher mountains, till we reached the village of Kalam, situated at an elevation of 2,400m in a wide open cultivated amphitheatre, surrounded by forest clad slopes.

This valley was formed in ancient times by a huge glacier, so that the modern river runs in a comparatively narrow steep sided ravine with broad plateau shelves along each side. Our destination was the forested part of this plateau where the tributary branch of the Ushu river joins the Swat river. Here there is a magnificent stand of tall deodar trees (*Cedrus deodara)*, margined along its edges by stands of smaller holly oak (*Quereus baloot).* In the clearings and forest edge there is also an attractive under story of shrubs, of which, in May the Witchi hazel (*Parrotiopsis jacqeumontiana)* is particularly conspicuous with its large papery white flowers bearing golden yellow stamen centers. Other shrubs include the Himalayan hazel (*Corylus jacquemontii)* and in dryer stony places the purple flowered (*Indigofera).*

It was a warm dry afternoon with tawny orange Western Courtesan butterflies (*Sephisa dichroa)*, sailing around the tops of the holly oaks, and the air scented with the resinous fragrance of deodar. Listening out for bird song, I was at once excited to hear the "chillia-chillia" song of Tickell's thrush which I had not encountered this far west before. I was able to watch both the male and female, and noted that the female was browner, less blue grey than her mate, and with a less bright orange yellow beak. When I got too close they gave their alarm calls "quoit-quoit", similar to that of the grey winged blackbird.

There was also mistle thrush (*Turdus viscivorus)* singing from the top of a deodar, and when I got closer I was able to see that their first family of fledged chicks were already out of the nest and being fed by the female. I think he hoped to start another brood instead of helping his mate. The blue headed rock thrush *Monticloa cinclorhyncha,* is actually a forest thrush, and a male was also singing nearby, but I could not detect any evidence that they had started nesting, though a female close by also started giving alarm calls. Further away, I also soon heard the repeated fluting phrases of the chestnut backed or grey headed thrush

(*Turdus rubrocanus),* which is the commonest thrush in the forests of Swat. Having logged up four species of singing thrushes, I went to the edge of the forest, and clambered a little higher up the tree covered slopes above the plateau and soon heard the lovely song of the blue rock thrush (*Monticola solitarius),* the male perched conspicuously on the top of a large boulder. Returning to the forest, I was able to listen to sooty flycatchers, and record singing rufous-tailed flycatchers, and the "tissyip" repeated calls of Brook's leaf warbler (*Phylloscopus subviridis*). A pair of lanceolated jays called gratingly in the distance, as well as a female kestrel, and the tinkling bell of a browsing goat with the twittering of long tailed minivets (*Pericrocotus ethologus*) foraging overhead added to the surrounding chorus. As we walked back to the road on the edge of the river ravine, a Himalayan blue whistling thrush (*Myiophonus caeruleus*) was giving its unmistakable strident song, mingling with the hiss and roar of the river below. Within a less than three hours we had encountered a total of six species of singing thrushes within a few hundred yards of each other.

Compared to the mournful single drawn out whistle of the rufous tailed flycatcher (my target species), for the human ear, listening to the spring song of any of the thrushes registered on a higher spiritual and emotional plane, and even without my diary notes I shall always remember that particular afternoon.

A Magic Moment With Birds

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When the pleasant and the wish-full subconscious manifests into reality, unanticipated and in a lightning flash, that is the magic moment in life. So it was around 0800 a.m. on 02 Nov. 2002 when I happened to look up and saw eight species of birds, all in a single vision-shaft and at one instant.

Since the 25th October, 2002, I had passed by the same open space daily on the homeward* stretch of my morning walk because of a kind of infatuation with one Indian roller. His perch was a power cable between two poles, spaced about 30M apart. If not there, he was atop the upper-most branch of one of the several Saal trees close by. I normally halted to admire him; the harmony in contrast of the colours of his plumage as also the aura of imperturbability that he exuded. The rufous streaks indicated that he was of the nominate race**. Over the nine consecutive mornings if ever I failed to stop and look at him, he seldom hesitated to croak and admonish me!

But when on 02, Nov I looked up he was among rich and varied company of the feathered fraternity; perched on the cable were three green bee-eaters, two olive-backed pipits, one black drongo and one long-tailed shrike and on the ground directly beneath their perch, one hoopoe, one paddy field pipit and one laughing dove.

The three bee-eaters had obviously taken note of the ground birds feeding ravenously on and in-between the tufts of grass-in-seed. So they look to gliding down from the power cable, one at a time, snatching insects from and around the tufts of the grass seed, flying back up to the cable, making a quick meal and getting into the relay circuit back again. Apparently, the hoopoe inadvertently put up insects as he dug for grubs. The smart bee-eaters had noticed this and used the movements of the hoopoe to great advantage. At times the bee-eaters worked so close to the hoopoe that he would fan-out his crown-crest in warning and also sort of hiss at them in annoyance. Shortly, the bee-eaters had their fill or the insects there about had all been devoured, so the three of them now sat in a row on the cable leisurely preening and sunning their feathers in total contrast to the frenzied feeding sallies just seconds ago.

The two olive-backed pipits appeared quite content soaking in the morning sun. After a while though, one of them descended to the ground and joined the paddy field pipit on the feed. For no apparent reason, this pipit felt insecure of the presence of the laughing dove in their vicinity, so believing that offence is the best form of defence he chased the dove over the ground with such determined intent that the dove was compelled to yield and fly away. Without any victory display or fuss he resumed feeding nonchalantly the next moment. The long-tailed shrike (*Tricolour),* a winter visitor here, remained totally inert possibly because the insects were too small for his butchering-ways. Now several white wagtails, *Leucopsis* and *Dukhunensis,* arrived on the scene. As always, they were the most hyper active; feeding, bobbing their tails, chasing each other the while on the ground, suddenly taking to wing and resume the chase in short spurts of jinking flight in sheer playfulness and cheeping non-stop all through this entire activity. The black drongo was in a world of his own duetting some unseen bird in the distance, most earnestly.

The show lasted about five minutes till on some cue all of them, on the perch and over ground, all of a sudden and all together took to wing and vanished out of sight in a trice. The roller who all this while had watched the circus with detached amusement, held his ground but not for long. Uttering a sharp "Kraak" he too took to flight with his monumental slow wing-beats, putting on brilliant display the light and dark blue bands on his flight feathers. These 'bands' looked all the more dramatic and attractive when at the moment of alighting on a near by Saal tree, he held his wings out at full stretch for a fraction.

* McCluskie Ganj, Lat 23° 48' Long 84°56', ASL 300M, 60 KM NNW of Ranchi (Jharakhand).

** The status of the Indian roller in this region is documented as resident but ever since 1993 I have encountered them in the winter months (Oct-March) only. The habitat here has been severely altered.

Kolleru - A Ghost Lake

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A disturbing spectre of a ghost lake slowly unveiled itself before us when myself and K. Subramanyam, a freelance photographer visited Kolleru lake on 8th and 9th, March 2003. Though drought had taken its toll, it is less significant compared to the toll extracted by anthropogenic activity. What remains of the lake today is infinitesimal which does not reflect its past pristine glory. The present status of the lake will make Hieun Tsang, who recorded its existence in his travels, turn in his grave. To me it looked as though the shrunken and shriveled lake was hiding its face behind the rushes and reeds. The lakebed, partly sun-cracked and partly

weed-infested and the drains which are bone dry are virtually a dying declaration of the lake. There is no doubt that the lake is fast slipping and fading into history.

At Atapaka, adjoining Kaikalur town what is left of the lake is a stretch of water body, perhaps the only shelter for the resident birds. During the last migratory season less significant numbers of migrants had visited this part of the lake. In this water spread we recorded a few purple moorhens, pond herons, gray herons, little cormorants, bronze winged jacanas, night herons, whitebreasted kingfishers, river terns, coots and spotbilled ducks. The only watchtower at Atapaka is a grim reminder that in the days to come it may not serve its purpose but only remain mute standing sentinel that had witnessed the rape of the lake. The unimpressive appearance of the non-functional Environment Education Centre near the tower enhances one's feeling of despair and despondence.

Vast extents of the lakebed are covered by fish farms and paddy fields, all of which are encroachments. The inhabitants of the lanka villages claim that they have a right to enjoy the usufruct of the lake within their village limits. The initiative of the State Government to form Primary Fishermen Cooperative Societies in 1976-1977 funded by Andhra Pradesh Agricultural Development Bank and granting of lease-hold pattas for formation of fish tanks to better the lives of the fishermen had a snowballing effect. The lure of pisciculture encouraged and emboldened the locals to encroach vast extents of the lakebed for excavating fish tanks. Pockmarked with number of fish tanks, the lake today has the appearance of a splintered mirror.

At Pallepadu we saw two such tanks, one of which was dry. In the second tank with small pools of water and slushy tank bed, we observed a number of blackwinged stilts, sandpipers, blacktailed godwits, besides a few purple herons and grey herons. In the central shallow pool we saw around 3000 shovellers, both male and female. Perhaps shovellers are the last migratory birds to leave this area.

While passing through Bhujabalapatnam, we noticed huge syntex tanks stocked on either side of the road which are used for transporting fish seed. This village is a nerve center for fish seed and the suppliers not only supply seed to the fish farms in Kolleru lake area but also export it outside.

A wooden bridge spans the Circar canal, a major drain of 16 kms for Kaikalur. This canal is also called the Pilot Channel and its downstream forms the Upputeru channel which drains the lake water into the Bay of Bengal at Perentalakanuma. Starting from the wooden bridge there is a kutcha road laid on the lakebed leading to Pandiripalligudem, Srungavarapupadu, Gummalapadu, Gokarnapuram and Kolletikota lanka villages. Anthropogenic activity was very visible at this point. A number of shops, and hotels have sprung up like mushrooms and several cars and two wheelers ply over the bridge frequently. Lorries carrying fish feed and fish seed were parked on the bank and unloading operations were underway.

While cruising along Eluru-Kaikalur road we saw the Polaraju drain and Chinayedlagadi drain, which were bone dry. In Pedayedlagadi drain, the biggest of the drains, the bed was still wet and slushy with scattered pools of water which had attracted thousands of cattle egrets, hundreds of Asian openbilled storks, a group of 32 white ibises, black ibises, several blackwinged stilts, marsh sandpipers, purple moorhens, purple herons and a pair of yellow wagtails which were perhaps on their return journey.

My enquiries revealed that out of 80,000 acres of the lake bed 63,000 acres have been encroached by fish farms and paddy fields. The remaining 17,000 acres consist of what remains of the lake, feeder roads, drains and channels.

The lake suffers both ways during floods and drought. During floods when the fish farms are affected, the excess water is pumped into the already flooded lake causing drastic water level changes. During drought, wherever small quantities of water remain in the lake and its drains, it is pumped into the fish farms so much so that the lake and its drains are dry. The villagers informed me that in their lifetime they have not seen the lake and its drains running dry. They become nostalgic and happily recount how they were enjoying swimming in the lake waters.

There is an agglomeration of seven tanks excavated in the lakebed within Nidamarru village limits covering about 500 acres. The cement pillars planted in the lake bed defining +5 contour after satellite survey clearly indicate that these tanks are well within +5 contour which the State Government had declared as a wildlife sanctuary in their G.O. Ms. No. 120, Environment, Forests, Science & Technology Department, dated 4.10.1999. Vast extents of paddy fields are also within +5 contour. The above tanks are secured by the highrise earthen bunds on which a kutcha road is laid to have easy access to the fish tanks. Besides, for the management of the fish tanks, sheds are constructed on the bunds. At the time of our visit the harvested cultured fish mostly the Indian carp rohu (*Leabeo rohita)* and mrigal *(Cirrhinus mrigala)* were being weighed and packed in plastic containers with ice. In view of the large number of benami transactions, most of the fish farms are under the control of the rich and influential and only strong political will can take on their challenge.

On the way to the above tanks we recorded rosy starlings (48), pied mynas (3), common swallows (36), white ibises(12), blackwinged stilts(34), Asian openbilled storks(300+), redwattled lapwings, purple herons, grey herons, pond herons, little cormorants (21), darter (1) and a pair of yellow wagtails.

The largest congregation of birds in the area was in one of the seven tanks covering 100 acres, containing a number of shallow pools of water. This tank was drained for harvesting the cultured fish a couple of days ago. The birds observed in this tank were Asian openbilled storks (12,000), painted storks (15000+), Grey Pelican (1), median egrets (25), cattle egrets (15,000+), white ibises (320), black ibises (157), blackwinged stilts (380), river terns (18), marsh sandpipers (15,00+), little stints (3000+), large egrets(3), little cormorants (70), grey herons (18) and purple herons.

At Aredu and Sarepalli vaillages where there was the biggest pelicanry in 1949, discovered by Prof. Neelakantan, we made enquiries whether the grey pelicans had at any time staged a come back. Suvarna Rao, a farmer of Aredu, whose lands are in the proximity of the former pelican habitat, told us that the pelicans had deserted the area three decades ago and that they have not been seen since then.

At the outskirts of Undi town, we saw heaps of apple snail shells stocked near kilns. These shells are burnt and converted into lime, which is sprinkled on the dry bed of fish tanks to kill the microbes.

It is a paradox that on December, 20th 2002 Kolleru lake along with ten other wetlands was declared a Ramsar site when actually it has drastically undergone adverse changes in its ecological

character. Ramasar sites "where changes in ecological character have occurred, are occurring or likely to occur" are put on Montreaux Record. The purpose of Montreaux Record is to identify priority sites for positive attention and action. In June, 1993 the Union Ministry of Environment & Forests had requested The Ramsar Bureau that Chilka lake be placed on Montreaux Record as it was undergoing adverse ecological changes. However, Ramsar Mission after a visit to the lake recommended that the lake could be removed from Montreaux Record in view of the action taken by the Chilka Lake Development Authority in restoring the ecological character of the lake. On the same lines Kolleru lake should be put on Montreaux Record till its ecological character is fully restored.

Wrapping up our visit we returned convinced that in future there is nothing to pen except compose elegies and write obituaries on this ancient lake.

Status of Brown Rock Chat *Cercomela fusca* in Gujarat State

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The brown rock chat *Cercomela fusca* (Blyth) is an endemic species, capriciously distributed in some parts of Pakistan and India and show some seasonal movements (Ali and Ripley 1983). In India, it occurs from the Punjab foothills south through eastern Rajasthan to Northern Gujarat (including Kathiawar and Kutch), Madhya Pradesh to the Narmada River, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar to West Bengal (Ali and Ripley 1983). As far as its distribution in Gujarat State is concerned, both Grimmett *et al.* (1998) and Kazmierczak (2000) have shown its distribution in North Gujarat and Kachchh only, however, Kazmierczak (2000) has also shown an isolated record in Saurashtra region. Obviously, our knowledge about distribution of the species has not improved after the survey of the birds of Gujarat by Ali (1954). Recently, Khacher (2000) observed a pair at Vadodara in April and considered it as a range expansion. Here, we are presenting records of its breeding and sightings in different parts of the state to determine its status and distribution.

As shown in the Table, there are records of the occurrence of this species from entire Gujarat State. Kachchh and North Gujarat are known areas of its distribution. However, its wide spread distribution in Saurashtra, central Gujarat, and south Gujarat are new distribution ranges. Though the sighting records are from entire Gujarat state, its occurrence all through the year at a particular site is not yet established. Hence, it appears that the species is largely migratory.

All the sightings of brown rock chat at Vadodara, Anand and Ahmedabad were in the area / society where new building construction was going on.

We saw two pairs nesting at Vadodara during April 2001. A pair was seen feeding its two young ones whereas second pair was building its nest in a building under construction. It may be a breeding species in other parts of the state, which remains to be determined. Within the known distribution range, its breeding season is February to August, chiefly April to June (Ali and Ripley 1983). Present breeding records fall well within the period given by Ali and Ripley (1983). Earlier there was no record of its breeding in Gujarat state, however, based on certain evidences, Ali (1954) opined that principal breeding months in Kachchh are June to August.

Dharmakumarsinhji (1955) had recorded its absence in Saurashtra, however, he did not rule out possibilities of a few birds visiting northern Saurashtra coast. Ali (1954) had recorded the species only from North Gujarat and Kachchh and collected a few specimens. So current records indicate that distribution range of brown rock chat has certainly expanded in recent years and it also breeds in Gujarat.

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Sl. No.	Date	District	Location/Place	No.	Activity	Recorder
1	3/4/01	Vadodara	Saurabh Park, Vadodara city	2	Perching on a building	BMP
2	6/4/01	Vadodara	Sama, Vadodara city	2+2	Feeding young ones	RV
3	6/4/01	Vadodara	Sama, Vadodara city	2	Nest building	RV
4	6/4/03	Vadodara	Saurabh Park, Vadodara city	2	Calling from building	BMP
5	12/4/03	Vadodara	Fatehganj, Vadodara city	1	Within buildings under construction.	RV
6	17/3/03	Anand	Anand city	2	Within buildings under construction	BMP
7	3/4/03	Ahmedabad	Ghuma, Ahmedabad city	2	Chasing each other and calling, within buildings under construction	BMP
8	April/03	Ahmedabad	Bodakdev, Ahmedabad	3	-	BN Trivedi
9	April/03	Gandhinagar	Nr. Science city	1	-	BN Trivedi
10	2001	Surat	Outskirts of Surat city	4	Moving in half constructed buildings and calling; regularly seen since last 7 years	A. Bhatt 2001
11	26/1/01	Jamnagar	Narara coast	1	Perching on a pole	BMP, RV, Rajesh Shah, D.R. Vaishnav
12	14/1/03	Rajkot	Near Rajkot city	1	On the hedge of crop field	BMP
13	23/10/98	Junagadh	Nr. Sarkadia Hanuman, Gir forest	1	Moving with Indian Robin, on the rocks	Ashok Mashru 1999
14	31/8/98	Bhavnagar	Outskirts of city	1	-	N C Bhatt 1998
15	31/3/03	Banaskantha	Jassor Wildlife Sanctuary	1	Moving on ground	RV
16	5/4/01	Kachchh	Kalo Dungar	1	Catching insects from air like a flycatcher	S N Varu 2001
17	10/2/02	Kachchh	Kalo Dungar	1	Feeding on cooked food	SN Varu 2002
19	13/4/01	Kachchh	Admand Lake	2	-	SN Varu 2001

BMP = B M Parasharya, RV = Raju Vyas

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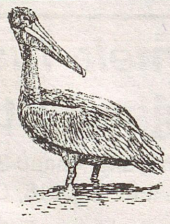

STATUS AND DISTRIBUTION OF PELICANS IN KUTCH DISTRICT OF GUJARAT

(Contd. from last issue)

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Table 3. Sight records of the Rosy & Dalmatian Pelicans in Kutch

Place of Sighting	Date	Numers sighted	
Guhar	05-11-1997	1500	Rosy Pelicans
Chhari-Dhand	22-01-98	600	
Sanghipuram Dam	01-01-98	2	Dalamtian Pelicans
Maniaro-Dam	10-01-98	55	Rosy Pelicans
Chhari-Dhand	12-02-98	50	
Sanghipuram Dam	22-02-98	5	
Akri Sea coast	04-03-98	3	
Medhi	06-03-98	4	
Nanda	18-05-98	1	Dead R. Pelican
Kar wetland Banni	11-11-98	800	Rosy Pelicans
Kori Creek	11-11-98	1	Dalmatian Pelican
Desal Pur G.Rann	13-11-98	15	Rosy Pelicans
Garamdi Bet L.Rann	14-11-98	50	
Nanada	14-11-98	50	
Jakhau Salt pans	20-11-98	830	Rosy Pelicans
Moti-Ber	02-12-98	02	Rosy Pelicans
Baranda Dam	28-02-98	10	Dalmatian Pelicans
Servo-Dhand	29-03-99	9	Dalmatian Pelicans
Jamkuneria Dam	28-03-99	1	Dalmatian Pelican
Sanghipuram Dam	27-04-99	4	Dalmatian Pelican
Sanghipuram Dam	05-01-2000	250	Rosy & 20 Dalmatian
Sarvankavadia	08-01-2000	375	Rosy Pelicans
Bhimsar tank	08-01-2000	250	Rosy Pelicans
Chhatradi tank	08-01-2000	300	Rosy Pelicans
Snaghipuram Dam II	14-01-2000	328	Rosy Pelicans

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Predation on Vultures, their Eggs and Chicks by different Predators in and around Jodhpur

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Introduction

In India there are eight species of the old world vultures comprising of king vulture (*Sarcogyps calvus),* cinereous vulture *(Aegypius monachus)* egyptian vulture (*Neophron percnopterus),* lammergeier (*Gypaetus barbatus),* eurasian griffon (*Gyps himalayensis),* long-billed vulture (*Gyps indicus)* and white-rumped vulture (*Gyps bengalensis).* Of these eight species only one species viz. lammergeier has not been observed in the great Indian desert and Aravallis. Most vultures feed on carcasses. They do not attack man and livestock. Vultures are the most eco-friendly

birds. They help us to save our planet from infectious diseases by feeding upon dead animals even during natural disasters like floods, droughts, famines and epidemics. I have been observing vultures in and around Jodhpur in an area of about 150 sq.km. since 1995, while studying hanuman langurs in the wild. Incidentally langurs share the hillocks where vultures rest and breed. Interestingly vultures never attack langurs and their infants and juveniles never disturb nests, eggs and hatchlings.

Material and Methods

Since 1977, I have been working on the ecology of vultures by following nesting sites, collecting demographic data, predation, interaction of vultures with other species and collecting their seasonal migration data with the help of photography. According to Vibu Prakash, Jodhpur is the largest known nesting site in India.

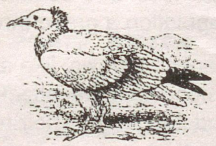
Results

In the vulture census of 2000, 690 vultures of six different species were counted. All the 7 species of vultures with other birds and mammals were feeding at the same feeding site (Municipal Corporation's dead animal dumping ground). Common birds, observed feeding at the dumping site along with vultures were, common raven (*Corvus corax)*, house crow *(Corvus splendens),* cattle egret (*Bubulcus ibis)*, drongo (*Dicrurus macrocercus)*, green bee-eaters (*Merops philippinus)*, rosy pastor *(Sturnus roseus)*, etc. and mammals like feral dogs and jackals.

Out of the seven vulture species, three species *viz.,* the white backed vulture, king vulture and scavenger vulture nest on trees, whereas the longbilled vultures nest on the cliffs. 92 nests of longbilled vultures (all with single egg) were inspected during October 1999 - April 2000 at 19 different nesting sites. (Table-1).

Table 1 : Nesting sites of longbilled vulture

Sl.No.	Nesting site	Total number of nests with egg
1	Bariganga	2
2	Nimba-Nimbri	2
3	Shiphouse hill	9
4	Fort	18
5	Masuria hills	13
6	Bhembharak	4
7	Sidhnath hills	5
8	Golasni hills	6
9	Chopasni hills	11
10	Arna	22
	Total	**92**



Out of the 10 nesting sites, seven were in the outskirts of the city and the rest within city limits. Predation by different predators on vulture's eggs, chicks, juveniles and adults was observed at nesting sites and feeding sites (Table -2).

Prey upon	Numbers	Observed predators
Vulture eggs	2	1 jackal 1 crow at nesting site
Vulture chicks	5	1 jackal 1 jungle cat 1 unknown 2 killed by vulture of same species at nesting site
Juvenile vulture	4	2 on the roads by dogs near nesting site 2 at feeding site by dogs
Adult vulture	3	3 all by dogs at feeding site
Total	14	

Conclusion

Increasing number of dogs at Municipal Corporation dumping ground (the only feeding site of vultures) was a major threat to juvenile & adult vultures at feeding site

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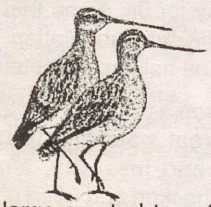

The Large Crested Tern and Eurasian Curlew at Dhuvaran, Gulf of Khamabhat

B.M. PARSHARYA, C.K. BORAD and N.A. THAKOR, AINP on Agricultural Ornithology, Gujarat Agricultural University, Anand 388 110

The large crested tern *Sterna bergii* is known to breed on the islets off the coast of Sindh (Pakistan), Kutch, Mumbai, south western Sri Lanka, West Bengal, Bangladesh as well as Lakshadweep. The species is reported to be dispersing along the entire seaboard during post-breeding dispersal (Ali and Ripley 1983). Though it is reported to nest off the coast of Kutch (Ripley 1982), the species has never been sighted from any part of the Gujarat State (Ali 1954, Khacher 1996). In recent publications, Grimmett *et al.* (1998) have not shown its distribution in Gujarat. However, Kazmierczak (2000) has shown winter distribution on the southern coast of Saurashtra.

On 4th August 2002, we visited Mahi River estuary at Dhuvaran near Khambhat (22° 19'N; 72° 38'E) on the tip of the Gulf of Khambhat. We saw about 100+ large crested terns *Sterna bergii* sitting loosely on the mudflats at the edge of receding water. We spent about an hour watching the terns through our spotting scope between 1000 to 1100 hours.

Ali (1954) had an unconfirmed sight record of a small flock from Mandavi (Kachchh) on 13 March 1944. After that, except recording of this species in the report on Gulf of Kachchh (Naik *et al.* 1991) this species has never been reported from Gujarat coast. So now its occurrence on the Gujarat coast is confirmed.

Besides the great crested terns, there were whiskered terns *Chlidonias hybrida* (200), blacktailed Godwit *Limosa limosa* (100), painted stork *Mycteria leucocephala* (2) and reef heron *Egretta gularis* (15). There was also a huge concentration (2000+) of eurasian curlew *Neumaneus arquata* on the coast. A huge flock of eurasian curlews have been recorded earlier also on south Gujarat coast as well as Gulf of Khambhat in July-August. It has been recorded in small numbers on Ghogha (21° 01'N, 72° 16'E) coast throughout summer months during 1980, 1981 and 1982 (Parasharya 1984). The fishermen around Ghogha too claim that the species breeds on the coast. However, still there is no evidence of its breeding on our coast. Their number suddenly increases during southwest monsoon, which suggests that there is an influx of migratory population. In view of the suggestions made by Ali (1954), further investigations seem desirable, particularly after the discovery of breeding of the Avocet.

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CORRESPONDENCE

THE WHITE BELLIED SHORTWING IN KODAIKANAL. *BOB STEWART & TANYA BALCAR, Vattakanal Conservation Trust, Shola Tree Nursery, P.O. Box 109, Kodaikanal 624101, Tamil Nadu.*

In our article "Regeneration of Pambar Shola (Kodaikanal)" NLBW 42 (1) We had mentioned our brief and only one sighting of the White-bellied shortwing.

Recently, a pair seem to have taken up residence in the nursery. They are very tame and easily observed with the naked eye. We read the song of the bird to be quite strong but we have noted a low trilling song audible only from close up that sounds like a distant skylark. Black and orange flycatchers have also become very friendly.

The nursery is literally an oasis after this very long drought period. Pambar continues to flourish.

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A SAD DAY AND BLEAK FUTURE. *LT. GEN. B.C. NANDA, Hebbetegiri, K. Nidugane Post, Madikeri, Kodagu Dist., Karnataka 571 201*

When I joined the Army in 1949, we were taught that hygiene, sanitation and civic sense were a part of discipline – discipline, that was vital to the Army and also an integral part of any civilized society. We were made aware of how certain indicators, that could be observed even before we carried out a detailed inspection, laid bare lack of hygiene and sanitation of an army unit or establishment. These indicators were the presence of crows, kites and stray dogs. I am sure these assessment norms apply equally even today to any village, town or city. Let me demonstrate what I have stated by taking the example of Mercara (Madikeri), my home town.

All records from the earliest days that the British started making such records, (the British took over Coorg (Kodagu) in 1834) commented on the rarity or near absence of crows in Coorg and Mercara in particular. Alas this does not hold well anymore. With a very large influx of population and a breakdown of discipline and utter lack of hygiene and sanitation, the crow (*Corvus macrorhynchos)* population has exploded.

This may be all very well to those who consider the crow as some kind of holy spirit connected to their ancestors. But those of us, who love and observe birds, find this explosion of the crow population a grave threat to almost all other species of birds.

Gangs of crows, like armed hooligans, are now on the rampage around Mercara, attacking and killing adult birds, eating their eggs and fledglings. Their numbers seem to give them the edge over all other species. They even attack raptors, but appear wary of the Bonelli's hawk eagle (*Hieraaetus fasciatus).* Their behaviour is to my mind very akin to what political majoritism is doing to the lesser people of this land.

The 20th September 2002 was a sad day for us, as on that day the havoc the crows are playing on the bird population was demonstrated in our back yard, leaving us helpless spectators.

A grey wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea)* had been a winter visitor to our garden since 1997. It had given us great watching pleasure and had increasingly become less and less shy, almost tame. It was this lovely bird that a crow attacked and killed on the fateful day.

We saw a flurry of feathers and heard the sounds of a scuffle outside the window and rushed to see what was happening but we were too late to save the wagtail from the evil crow that had preyed upon the poor unsuspecting bird and all that was left to us was a small flurry of soft down feathers.

On 12th October, 2002 exactly 14 days later, we had 5 grey wagtails in our garden. They came that one day and have not been back since. Was it a wake? Did they come to share our sorrow? Perhaps another wagtail will make its winter home in our

garden. In the meantime crows are *persona non grata* around our home. I do believe that their population should be controlled before the damage they do become irreversible.

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BLUE WHISTLING THRUSH IN CHANDIGARH. *LT. GEN.BALJIT SINGH, House No. 219, Sector 16 A, Chandigarh 160 015*

I had reported the sighting of a blue whistling thrush in the Chandigarh rose garden (NLBW, No. 42, No. 5, Sept.-Oct. 2002) on four occasions in 2002; once each in Jan and Feb and twice in April. The weather of 2002-03 was wet and foggy and the coldest for the last 20-30 years. While the common citizen cursed the weather I rejoiced in the hope that this would probably lead to many more encounters with the blue whistling thrush. Alas, I neither heard nor saw any.

Now the good news comes from Mr. Gurdial Singh (House 99, Sector 8-A, Chandigarh), a retired master from the Doon School who had been initiated to birding under the likes of Lt. General Sir Harold Williams and BB Osmaston. He tells me that he had also a) heard the thrush in the winter of 2002 and b) heard and saw one in 2003 also; and on both occasions approximately two km east of the rose garden.

Reverting to Whistler's narrative on the blue whistling thrush, he states "There are records from as far South (of the Himalayas) as Jhang and Rohtak". The former is now in Pakistan and one does not know the current status of its habitat. Rohtak, which is in Haryana, approximately 150 km south west of Chandigarh, has completely lost its old habitat and is now in the forefront with Punjab in wheat and rice cultivation. So, Chandigarh may well be the new southern limit of vagrant blue whistling thrushes.

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SIGHTING OF BLACK STORK AND WHITE STORK IN AHMEDNAGAR, MAHARASHTRA. *DR. SUDHAKAR KURHADE, Honorary wildlife warden, Riddhisiddhi, Vidya Colony, Opp. HUDCO, Pipeline Road, Ahmednagar 414003, Maharashtra*

Kapurwadi and Pimpalgaon, the nearby water bodies, are our regular bird watching sites where numbers of local and migratory birds are seen in hundreds. But because of scanty rainfall Kapurwadi water reservoir dried up in early October, 2002; so Pimpalgaon is the only site for birds and birdwatchers.

On January 16th 2003, we were at Pimpalgaon water reservoir (12 km from Ahmednagar city) for bird watching. At about 7.00 am we started walking around the reservoir watching the birds; the reservoir was almost dry, except for a small saucer full of water. We saw a large flock of white birds on the opposite side. About 40 spoonbills (*Platalea leucorodia)* were feeding along with 15 painted storks (*Mycteria leucocephala)* in the scanty water. As it was a bright and clear morning some other birds like purple heron (*Ardea purpurea)*, grey heron (*Ardea cinerea)*, spotbill (*Anas poecilorhyncha)* wigeon (*Anas penelope)*, common sandpiper (*Tringa hypoleucos)*, river tern (*Sterna aurantia)*, pond heron (*Ardeola grayii)*and plover (*Charadrius dubius)* were also seen.

In the flock of large white birds I noticed 10 black storks (*Ciconia nigra*) feeding in shallow water and were accompanied by 10 whitenecked storks (*Ciconia episcopus episcopus)*. Both the storks were feeding on the fishes in very shallow muddy water. We could observe the red beak and feet and white under parts of the black stork.

On Monday, 20th January we visited the same site in the evening; and found that the 10 black storks were also accompanied by 8 white storks (*Ciconia ciconia)* but spoonbills and painted storks were absent.

On Thursday, 23rd January we visited the same reservoir in the morning and found only two white storks with 34 whitenecked storks, two painted storks, three white ibis's (*Threskiornis aethiopica)* and 40 cattle egrets (*Bulbulcus ibis)*.

This is the first time that we have recorded 10 black storks and 8 white storks from Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra. Both the storks are rare in the Deccan area of Maharashtra and the black stork is only recorded from Sholapur district (S. Ali and S.D. Ripley, 2001).

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BIRDING UPDATES. *URUJ SHAHID, c/o. Mashood Hussain Siddiqui, Near Pandit Chakki, Moh-Maharaj Nagar, Lakhimpur Kheri, Uttar Pradesh 262701. Email : uruj_shahid@rediffmail.com*

Update 1: According to Dr. Salim Ali (1941), the food of the black necked stork is frogs, reptiles, crabs, etc. But, on the pleasant evening of 16th February 2001. Dr. Farah Ishtiaq. Mr. Khalid, Mr. K.K. Mishra, Mr. D. Devarishi and I saw a blacknecked stork feeding on a purple moorhen, by plunging it into the water, with the help of its bill. To my mind, perhaps the stork was trying to pluck off the feathers from the body of its prey. This unusual incident took place at about 5.10 p.m. in Keoladev Ghana National Park, Bharatpur.

Update 2 : Ali. S. and Futehally, L (1968) have mentioned that the food of the cattle egret is chiefly grasshoppers, blue-bottle flies, cicadas and other insects; also frogs, lizards, fishes, figs and so on. But, on the cloudy & wet dusk of 17th July, 2001, around 6.00 p.m. I sighted a cattle egret with a dead rat in its bill, passing over my house at Moh-Maharaj near, Lakhimpur Kheri, towards its roost.

Update 3: On the foggy forenoon of 29th October, 2001 at about 9.00 a.m. I heard the familiar call, of a common jungle babbler that was coming from my neighbour's house roof at Maharajnagar in Lakhimpur Kheri, U.P. But, there were no jungle babblers, at all, around my and neighbour's house, at the time. Then I focussed my binoculars towards the black drongo that perched upon the pole that stood on the roof of my neighbour's house. At that time I was totally astonished to find that this black drongo was the bird that was calling perfectly like a jungle babbler, I then understood that drongo was doing, what we call mimicry.

Update 4 : On the clear sunny winter morning on 8th February, 2003 at about 8.00 a.m. I saw two birds for the first time in the pond at Maharajnagar, Lakhimpur Kheri. The first bird, I spotted was a solitary greylg goose(*Anser anser*) floating as well as flying among a large flock of little grebes. As the flock of grebes was off

towards the sky it also took off and as the grebes landed it also landed. How and from where it came here, is still a wonder. This goose was still here on 20th February 2003 too! The second bird I saw was alone, grey heron (*Ardea cinerea*) flying over the pond, but next day it had gone.

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NESTING OF SPOTTED MUNIA, (LONCHURA PUNCTULATA). *MANJULA MENON,* Research Scholar, c/o. C. Muraleedharan AE, E/M, C/O.GE (I), R&D (East), C.V.Raman Nagar, Bangalore 560 003 , Email : manjumenoncama@yahoo.co.in

It was very interesting to note the nesting habits of the spotted munia around the EIA division of the campus of the Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History. According to Salim Ali these birds flock about open cultivation and when disturbed they fly out into the bushes and trees with feeble chirrups.

During the weekdays when there was much movement of people in the Institute nesting pair abandoned their activity and were hardly sighted but during week ends when the institute is closed the pair often visited its nesting site and were active in nest building. The nest is globular shaped with a lateral entrance hole near the top and too large for this little bird.

The need for suitable support and concealment and the need for protection from the forces of environment, govern the selection of the nesting site. Disturbance due to movements proved a detrimental factor on their nesting and the birds leave off to avoid the disturbance and visited the nest during the weekends. In spite of this, nesting continued in the bush of the *Lantana camera* aware of the detrimental factor and the breeding was found to be successful with two young ones hatched out.

Are these birds evolving into the line of the sparrows, which nest around human habitations or are they channelising themselves to be linked with human civilization?

Whatever be the conclusions, it seems that birds have started nesting boldly in and around human habitations, slowly evolving themseleves to get adapted to the changes man has forced on them.

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BEHAVIOURAL OBSERVATION OF WHITE-BACKED VULTURE (GYPS BENGALENSIS). *ROMESH KUMAR SHARMA and ARUN KUMAR, Northern Regional Station, Zoological Survey of India, Dehra Dun 248 195, Uttaranchal, India, e-mail: romesh_bird@yahoo.com*

Vultures are large and ugly looking birds in the aves group. A total of eight species i.e. Indian white-backed vulture *Gyps bengalensis*, long-billed vulture *Gyps indicus*, red-headed vulture, cinereous vulture *Aegypius monachus*, egyptian vulture *Neophron percnopterus*, slender-billed vulture *Gyps tenuirostris*, himalayan griffon *Gyps himalayensis*, bearded vulture *Gypaetus barbatus* of vultures are present in Indian subcontinent.

Dramatic decline in vulture population in India has caused serious threat to scavenging. From last five-six year, two species of vultures namely white-backed and long-billed vulture, are facing a catastrophe, the birds having been decimated by 95% (Singh, 2002). Due to near extinction these species are listed in critically endangered category by IUCN. Recent report in particular indicates that one more species i.e. slender-billed vulture is included in the same category (Down To Earth, 2002).

The present study was carried out in Rajaji National Park. The Park lies in between latitude 29°15¢ 7² N-30°15¢ 5²N and longitude 77° 57¢ 7E²-78° 23¢ 36² E, and covers a total of 820.42 km² of area. Only two nests of White-backed vulture were selected for study. In the present observation, we studied the behaviour of White-backed vulture during and after the nest preparation. During the preparation of nest, a pair of bird prepare and arrange the nests. They collect dry twigs of different vegetation types and cover the nest by green leaves both from inner and outer sides. The collection of leaves was very interesting. Bird perched on the top canopy of any green tree and nips the soft green leaves and arrange in a right manner. After completion of the nests one of the pair of birds produced a call in stereotypes manner like *carrrr.....carrrrr....* for about a couple of minutes at the same time displaying its wings three or four times to its partner then the latter bird comes inside the nest only to be followed by the bird making the call and mounting takes place. In this courtship some one could be made out than it is the male bird that first produces the call and as it in visiting its partner into the nest and mate with her. In the open nest that we observed we found one of the pair of birds the mate making the calls displays and the open bird -the female either fly away or sometimes attack the male producing the call *kaaa...kaaa....*

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A RARE OCCURRENCE OF MUTANT ALBINO MYNA (Acridotheres tristis) AT THE SULKAI HILL, NEAR VITA, IN MAHARASHTRA. *SALUNKHE P.S., Sadaguru Gadage Maharaj College, Karad 415 103. Dist. Satare, M.S.*

During a holiday excursion at Sulkai hill, I observed a mutant albino variety of Indian common myna (*Acridotheres tristis).* Generally different varieties of mynas such as - grey headed myna *(Sturnus malabaricus)* brahminy myna (*Sturnus pagodarum),* Indian pied myna (*Sturnus contra),* hill myna *(Gracula religiosa)* and jungle myna *(Acridotheres fuscus)* have been common in the Deccan Plateu. Even white headed race of myna with perky of brown coloured plumage with white bars underneath the wings is a common characteristic feature. More or less multiple alleles for perky brown and white colour bars are common for all the mynas, but a case of complete albinism had not been reported elsewhere. Therefore, this present article is concerned with new expression of recessive alleles for the white colour in Indian common myna.

After the eggs hatched I could observe the chicks being fed and guided by the parents. After a fortnight the young ones could successfully fly among the branches of trees nearby. The also

preyed on the insects around seen in large numbers. One of them was an Albino myna.

The common myna preys on insects (Kotpal, 1992, Nigam 1995). It is so with the different species of mynas in general and this minimises the insect pests and acts as a biological control of crop pests in general. However, albinism expressed in full from as in this case in which recessive alleles become dominant may be dominant may be handicap in which playing an effective part in insect. Control and may even interfare with its feeding efficiency.

The only white mutable genes have been reported in *Mirabilis* and the maize (Altenburg, 1957). The pseudoallelelism of white and apricot has been reported in *Drosophila melanogaster* (Lewis, 1952). The present case may be of gene mutation. Such expression of recessive autosomal gene mutations is always harmful for normal survival, because they lack the mimicry with environment and fall easy prey to enemies.

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INDIAN MAGPIE ROBIN (COPSYCHUS SAULARIS SAULARIS) *NIRMALA SNEHAL, Nature Club Surat, 81, Sarjan Soc - Surat 395007*

One of the field projects of Nature Club Surat was keeping bird nest boxes at different places. At 81, Sarjan (Nature clubs office) nest boxes were kept. Usually squirrels occupied them. But this year a pair of Indian magpie robins decided to occupy one of them. They lined the box with hay and the egg laying chamber was given a final spiral shape. The eggs were oval in shape with one side broader than the other. The colour was off white with greenish tinge blotched with reddish brown markings. The markings were more prounced and darker on the broader end, but lighter and less prounced on the thinner end.

By 24th May 2001, 2 eggs had been laid in the nest box and on following day two more were laid and the fifth egg was laid on the third day. The female incubated the eggs, turning them often with her beak and was also checking and removing insects that wandered into the nest. The male magpie robin brought food for her and sometimes she left the nest unattended for a few minutes. The male was always in attendance, singing from a near by tree or bring food to his mate.

On 5th June two eggs hatched followed by two more on 6th and the last egg hatched on 7th. Thus the incubation lasted 13 days. During the hatching time she was seen inspecting cracks and assisting the egg to hatch. First a small crack appeared on the egg and within half-an-hour the shell divided into two halves. Some of the egg shell pieces were taken out and some were eaten by the parent. The female sat in the nest upto the morning of 8th June, and on the following nights she left the chicks alone in the nest.

Chicks were born featherless and blind and were dark brown in colour. As the days passed, the colour turned darker and almost black, they opened their eyes on the fifth day. The parents were busy feeding the chicks. The chick feeding began by 5.50 in the morning and ended at 7.48 in the evening. The parents collected ants, snails, earthworms, caterpillars, termites, butterflies, dragon flies and whatever insect they could find in the locality. Female groomed the babies when they were small. The babies ejected white coloured fecal sac, by turning their back towards the parent and the fecal sack was picked up directly and carried outside. Sometimes two chicks ejected their the fecal sacs simultaneously and in such times the parent ate one and carried away the other. The nest was kept clean and tidy by the mother. Sometimes she was found inserting her beak deep inside the nest to change the position of the chicks. By the fifth day wing development was noticed. The chicks were very demanding and were always asking for more food. Silvery colour appeared on the 8th day and the growth was very fast. Now the chicks started preening themselves somewhat unsteadily at first. Tail feathers developed and the white line on the tail also developed. Around this time the chicks started observing the activities around the nest and were seen picking up any insect that passed by. The parents were seen taking some rest in the afternoons. One could see them preening and singing from the near by trees.

On 20th June (15th day of hatching) two chicks started exhibiting restlessness. Once or twice they attempted to leave the nest but returned to the nest as they heard some noise. Around this time the parents made fewer visits to the nest. On 21st June morning one chick left the nest and in the evening another chick followed suit. This makes their stay at nest for about 15 days. On the following day all the chicks left the nest and the parents continued to feed them outside. The chicks were found around the area for about a week, but after that period only the parents were seen in the locality. The chicks must have left for new locations to live on their own.

The male visited the nest less often than the female. But he brought bigger items like snails, earthworms and butterflies. The peak feeding times were between 9.00 am and 10 am and again between 6 pm and 7 pm. During these periods they made an average of about 22 visits in an hour. After these peak periods they took some rest. Their visits were less often between 10am and 11am and between 1 pm and 2 pm.

These observations were made sitting inside the house watching on T.V. A close circuit T.V. camera was fitted on the nestbox and throughout the day, we could watch the ongoing activities at the nest, live on T.V. with video recording.

A small camera about 30mm (1.2 inch) x 50mm (2 inch), was used. Power supply of 6 volts was drawn from a battery. The cost of the camera is Rs. 4000/-.

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BIRDS AT THE HEBBAL TANK DYING... *MANJUNATH P., KIRAN KUMAR H.K., HARISH BHAT, Green Cross, #107, Swiss Complex, #33, Race course road, Bangalore 560 001. Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore 560 012*

4th June 2003

Ten birds were found dead at the Hebbal tank of which 6 were raptors like pariah kite and brahminy kite and 4 were water birds

like little egret, pond heron, grey heron and cormorant. The water at the hebbal tank has almost dried up leaving sparse water at very small area congregating many fishermen and water birds competing for fish.

The death of these birds remains unsolved though the reason could be due to drought, lack of water and food availability, increase in temperature and poisoning. Proper laboratory study of the dead bird specimen might reveal the reason for the death for these birds.

Almost all tanks have totally dried up in north Bangalore. This very Hebbal tank was heaven for the water birds just a couple of months ago which had attracted many new birds like the grey pelican and a large flock of painted storks. It is sad to see these birds dying and many more are likely to follow suit.

6th June 2003

A discussion was arranged by the Green Cross members with Ms Vanashree Vipin Singh, IFS, DCF, Lake Development Authority, GOK and Shri A.K Varma, IFS Chief Executive Office, Lake Development Authority, GOK. They were requested to look into the matter and take up proper conservation measures and explore the possibilities of rejuvenating the water drainage points, which are presently clogged.

9th June 2003

The rescued bird (a juvenile brahminy kite) by Kiran Kumar of Green Cross was further treated by Harsha and Salim (Active birdwatchers) and it recovered soon. It was released at the Hebbal Tank by Kiran Kumar at 10.40 am in presence of the Ms. Vanashree Vipin Singh, IFS, DCF, Lake Development Authority, Bangalore. The bird was very active and healthy when compared to its emaciated condition a couple of days earlier when it was rescued. The bird took a sharp flight and soared high, farther and farther happily. Ms. Vanashree complemented the effort of the organization and said that such a kind of collective effort by an organization in conservation and protection is very much required.

Post mortem report

A dead bird specimen was sent to the Veterinary College for post mortem. Unfortunately no significant clue was available to draw a conclusion as to why the birds had died. Doctors said that the specimen had decayed and was impossible to analyze the visceral parts.

However, judging with common sense, one could infer that the birds had possibly died due to poisoning by miscreants as there were no further report of bird deaths, after the forest staff intensified their vigilance.

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ON OBSERVATION OF THE NESTING AND BREEDING OF THE GREAT PIED HORNBILL (BUCEROS BICORNIS) BY A BARE FOOT ECOLOGIST. *HARISH R. BHAT, Centre of Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Sciences, Bangalore 560012*

Great pied hornbill (*Buceros bicornis)* is found in evergreen and moist deciduous forests, from Kumaon east to Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh, NE hill states, Western Ghats complex from Khandala south up to Kerala (Ali, S and Dillion Ripley S; 1983). The nesting and breeding details are explained by the authors in the book – Pictorial Guide to the birds of the Indian Subcontinent as "Nest holes in mature forest trees. The female walls herself into the nest, leaving a small aperture through which the male feeds her during the incubation period, and in many species till the young fledge out. The female is believed to undergo an accelerated wing moult during her incarceration." This behaviour sounds interesting. Chennappa R.M., a driver at the office of Range Forest Officer of Daroji Slot Bear Sanctuary in Hospet of Bellary district, Karnataka, has an immense knowledge of these huge birds and recollects his observation when he was working in Hangal. Dr. J.C. Uttangi trained him to watch and observe birds during his free time, as a result he was able to identify and name about 25 birds in English. He shared his observation with me during the conversation that surprised me for his keen interest and excellent information. He used to go along with Dr. Uttangi for bird watching. In the month of January 1994, he sighted these large birds breeding on Ficus trees on the Hanagal road. He could see male feeding the female who was inside the nest incubating her eggs. The nest was very well plastered with clay and had a hole for the female to receive food from male. In the month of April, the young chicks came out of the nest after the hole was widened. He said that the nest was once again plastered and the female remained inside the nest. Now it was the turn of the male and the grown up chicks to feed the female sitting inside the hole nest. After several days the female came out of her nest and flew away. He then climbed the tree, curious to see what made the female sit inside the nest once again and could see lot of feathers of the female that were shed inside. He explains that, the female would shed all her feathers while incubating the eggs and will not come out of the nest after the eggs are hatched. She is later on fed by the male and the grown up chicks through the holes, and flies away only after she develops the feathers. He also said that he could see about two young chicks per nest. This observation substantiates the nesting and breeding details provided in the pictorial guide.

Cover: **Ashy Wren-Warbler** *(Prinia socialis)* is a noisy and excitable bird during the breeding season, thus unintentionally betraying its nest to predators. Nevertheless, the bird is adept at broken wing display followed by rolling on the ground to distract potential predators away from the nest. This warbler utters a sharp nasal *tee-tee-tee* as it flits from bush to bush. But the loud *jimmy-jimmy-jimmy* is its favorite call, which is repeated several times as the bird moves jubilantly among the vegetation.

Photo : S. Shreyas