

NEWSLETTER

FOR BIRDPWATCHERS

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THE HOUSE SPARROW

By

V. Ravi, President, Nature Study Club, Guntur.

(In this note we are giving an outline, in a general way, of the nesting behaviour of the House Sparrow. Dr. Salim Ali's appeal for a thorough study of this very common and important bird of the human environment, as well as D. Summers-Smith's interesting monograph on it, stimulated us to make such an attempt. The latter book helped us generalize some statements by comparing our rather meagre observations with the substantial ones made by the author. Thus, though our knowledge of how a pair begins nesting is not very wide, we could form an idea of its general nature. Most of our study concerns a few established pairs, all nesting in one house. In this note we deal with the period from nest construction onward to the feeding of the young. We also give an account of the bird's other social activities).

NESTING:

(a) Construction: An experienced cock bird begins by looking into every possible hole and corner in the house till it finds a suitable site. Ready-made sites, such as nest boxes, are readily adopted. A hen is attracted to the site, usually in two or three days. Once the hen approves of the site chosen by the cock, the construction of the nest commences. A cock with two or more sites under consideration seems unable to decide which is the more suitable, and fails to have a nest built at all. One

particular male bird with an unsuitable site was unable to secure a mate for a long time. Again there are pairs which leave half-built nests, not being satisfied with them, and then change their site to begin again. They may remain unsuccessful for years together.

The nest is made of grass, straw, coir, coconut fibre, ribs of pinnate leaves, etc., depending on what is readily available. The inside is lined with softer fibres; feathers, cotton and string. Wherever possible, domed nests are built, as mentioned in Summers-Smith's book "The House Sparrow".

Generally it takes two or three weeks for a pair to complete the nest. Pairs have been known to build it in less than a week, and even start laying within that time. Birds which do not fully attain breeding condition in time, we think, delay the work for days or even months. An 'old' pair, rather too old to breed, collects material and takes it to the nests of other breeding birds. A senile pair which has an earlier nest of its own uses it for regular roosting.

The cock has an important role in the collection of the building material. In the first few days the work goes on at a rapid pace as the builders merely fill the chosen site with material in large quantities. Sometimes a sparrow builds a nest on the mere support of an electric wire pinned to the corner between two walls! In such places the birds work hard and stuff large masses in the corner in order to make a stable base to build on.

(b) Mating: When the nest is nearly completed, mating begins. Birds with old nests re-line their nests and at the same time indulge in coition. This activity is seen at the nest and away from it, too. Sometimes the hen avoids the cock if it keeps trying to mount her. Ordinarily, though, it is she who invites the cock bird to do this. The sight of one pair indulging in this activity seems to tempt the neighbouring ones to make attempts (often premature and unsuccessful).

(c) Egg-laying: It is normally within a week or ten days of the mating that the eggs are laid. The hen bird sleeps continually in the nest for a few days before laying. The usual clutch consists of four eggs, apparently laid at the rate of an egg per day. We noted no nest with five eggs. The incubation period is fourteen days from the day the first egg is laid. While the hen does most of the incubating, sometimes the cock sits on the eggs for a couple of minutes, considerably giving the hen a break.

(d) Feeding the chicks: During the first few days the chicks are supported on insect-food consisting of caterpillars, mealworms, flies and ants. This is gradually replaced by an entirely vegetarian diet, and the nestlings are later fed largely with kitchen scraps. Cooked rice and pulses seem to be favourite foods. When there is adequate light (as from an electric lamp) night-feeding is also done by the hen.

Two or three chicks survive out of the four. One chick usually dies in the naked stage, and the dead body is carried out and dropped by the parents. We noticed sometimes young birds did fall off alive, but when they were returned to the nest they were accepted by the parents.

By the tenth day the pin feathers are well opened and cover the naked chick. The young birds stay in the nest for 15 to 18 days, and sometimes upto three weeks.

(e) Later days in the nest: In the last few days of the young bird's nest life the cock goes into a feverish display and follows the hen noisily, not helping much in feeding the chicks. In his book Summers-Smith says that the purpose of this behaviour is to urge the young birds to come out. However, what we are led to infer is that the cock makes advances to the hen for re-mating - for the next brood. Finally the parents guide the chicks out by stages to some nearby bush. Young birds that leave the nest at the regular time are not

as strong fliers as those which linger a few days more. The parents take care of the fledglings for another 2 weeks, or possibly three; only one of the parents appears to attend to them, not both.

(f) The next brood: As soon as one brood is raised, the pair prepares for the next, and in this way it is capable of raising as many as 7 broods a year. As a pair ages the capacity for raising broods possibly decreases. If a brood fails, with the young dying either in the nest or after fledging, another clutch is laid to make up for the loss. Once, in such a case, only a single egg was laid.

(g) Breeding season: The breeding season appears to be very long, extending from July to May of the following year. During the short period in which the breeding ceases the birds go through an "annual moult".

(h) Partnership: Usually a pair remains together from the beginning unless one of the birds dies. If this happens while there are chicks in the nest (and it was usually the hens we saw die at this stage) the other ordinarily carries on with its duty, and takes a new mate later on. But there is a case where the cock took on a new mate at once, leaving the chicks to their fate. One particular cock changed 4 or 5 hens in the course of 3 years, while another, in just as long a period, changed none.

We also noted a tendency among the birds towards bigamy. This has usually happened when the hen of a neighbouring nest lost her first mate. Only after some dispute with the two hens did the cock secure the second mate. Of the four cases we had occasion to observe, only one cock was able to breed successfully with both hens and raise two broods simultaneously. The cock helped neither of them much but left each to take care of its own brood.

It was by a curious circumstance that this cock became bigamous; as another cock with two mates died, this bird adopted one of the dead cock's mates. This bird now wanders about with its two mates following it.

OTHER SOCIAL ACTIVITIES:

We have recently been making some interesting observations on the social behaviour of the bird. The most important perhaps is its roosting habit, many birds roosting together in a suitable tree. At first this appeared to be an irregular habit, the roosts appearing at no definite times of the year, and the sites changing. Later we realised that a regular communal roost is formed in winter. We learnt from Summers-Smith that small roosts are also found in summer; but this is not remarkable, as the sites are shifted. We have big winter roosts near our house where hundreds of sparrows from a large area gather.

There is a certain procedure by which the birds move to the roosting tree. The birds first collect (usually at about 5 p.m.) in small groups at various points, on various trees in the nesting area, the Amla tree (*Embllica officinalis*) being the "collecting point" for the birds from our house; they then pour into the main tree from all directions. They do not at once settle down, but keep flying in and out for about an hour, accompanied by deafening twitterings. Some birds move away from the tree somehow. Hen birds also share the roost except when they are breeding.

There is a common display amongst sparrows which D. Summers-Smith terms "communal display". This consists of three or four cocks courting a single hen in an extravagant manner. They suddenly burst out from somewhere amidst noisy twitterings and drop down on to the ground. The cocks circle around the hen and go mad with self display while the hen tries to get rid of them. She pecks any cock which approaches too near, and sometimes seizes the bird by its head feathers. The Newsletter once published a report from the U.S.A. of a similar instance in which the hen held the cock dangling from her bill. The communal display usually occurs when the birds wander outside the houses, and it was often seen amongst

the roosting birds in winter. During early summer this year (1966) we did not observe any such activity. But from the beginning of July we could see it again. Now (at the end of July) this has become frequent. June-July is also a good time for observing their social behaviour as the breeding ceases and the birds are free. At that time we noted how the sparrows (about half-a-dozen or more pairs) colonising in our house formed a single group and foraged in the compound. If one bird stops feeding and becomes busy preening itself the rest follow suit, as they do when one leading pair stops and return to its nest.

N.B. :- THE NATURE STUDY CLUB, GUNTUR INVITES, AND WILL BE GRATEFUL FOR, COMMENTS ON THE OBSERVATIONS RECORDED HERE.

BIRDWATCHING AT SAYLA

BY

Ialsinh M. Raol.

It is surprising to see how confiding such wary birds as Cranes can become. As is well-known, Common and Demoiselle Cranes are cautious birds. But I saw hundreds of Demoiselle Cranes resting quite unperturbed hardly thirty feet away from women washing their clothes, on a lake in the outskirts of Sayla, a small town in Surendranagar Dist. Though there were about a thousand Demoiselle Cranes resting in groups, I could not find even a single Common Crane there during my birdwatching of two days on the 10th & the 11th March 1967.

It was my long pending desire of watching birds on that lake. I therefore seized the opportunity of doing so in March this year. But I was a little late for it. I should have gone there in January, for the number of migratory birds on the lake had decreased considerably, particularly this year, as reported by my cousin who practises there.

The lake at Sayla is an old one and much of its area is now shallow due to years of silting. This provides a favourable feeding ground for many of our surface feeding ducks, migratory as well as resident. There is no such other lake nearby. So, many species of migratory birds are attracted by it. As the lake is right on the outskirts of the town, only a dare-devil could afford to shoot the game birds and thus to incur the wrath of the predominantly vegetarian population of the area. Hence birds enjoy comparative protection from the so called trigger-happy sportsmen. As a result, birds were not scared by the hustle and bustle of the busy little town.

I could see Spotbills and Garganeys swimming leisurely only twenty feet away from where I was watching them. Sunlight being favourable, it was a pleasure to watch drakes and ducks of various species from such a short distance with the help of a pair of field glasses. Fine details of their markings and delicate shades of their colours were really captivating. Equally attractive was their apparently effortless gliding in the water. Somehow, the sight of ducks swimming in water has great attraction for me.

Dabchicks were conspicuously absent. Not a single one was found on the lake where they were in good numbers some days back as was reported by my cousin.

The difference in food-getting habits among the ducks was strikingly apparent. Diving ducks like Pochards & Tufted Pochards were frequenting the comparatively deeper portions of the lake, which Pintails, Spotbills, Common Teals, Garganeys, Shovellers, Wigeons and Cotton Teal were spread over the shallower portions.

Snipe and Purple Moorhens were common but the Moorhens could not be sighted there by me. I was delighted to see Spotted Redshanks, as that species was a new addition to my list. Ruddy Shellducks have been reported on that lake but were not seen on my visit.

Among the birds of prey I saw a Short-toed Eagle and a female Marsh Harrier. Another eagle I saw there could not be identified as it was sitting on the dried up portion of the lake far away from me.

One dead Demoiselle Crane, floating on the water, was dragged out by two local boys. It had received injuries on the nape. As reported by those boys it was killed by an eagle on the very morning some time before my arrival.

This lake at Sayla is really a very good place for observing ducks, waders and other waterbirds at close quarters.

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BIRD NAMES

By

S.V. Nilakanta.

It is, of course, accepted that each species of bird should have its own distinctive name so that we can identify them in speaking or writing about them. This seems to have been achieved with some difficulty in the English language. When it comes to various Indian languages, several birds go by the same name and a vast number of birds which are strangers to the region are not named at all.

However, this need not bother us as each species and sub-species has been given an international Latin name by experts on the subject. One would expect these names to have been chosen with great care, so that the very name would immediately suggest the bird. Unfortunately this is not so. For instance the 'Purple Sunbird' is more suggestive than Nectarinia asiatica. The distribution of this bird seems to be over such a vast area that a reference to it seems to have no particular significance. On the other hand, 'the Purplerumped Sunbird', which is again a good English name is known as N. zeylonica as though it is confined to that island. The worst of all is Loten's Sunbird (N. lotenia) which is named after a person when its distinguishing feature is its bill which appears to be so disproportionately large. The epithet macrorhynchos, (used for the Jungle Crow), although coarse sounding, would perhaps be more descriptive.

In fact, so many of these scientific names are anyhow meaningless to a person like me unless a scholar like Mr. McIlhish explains them. One just has to memorize the names like memorizing numbers. Perhaps each bird has been given a number so that computers can easily accept them. Once again these numbers while providing positive identity will be a very dry and non-descriptive way of naming and as such either never learnt or quickly forgotten by an average person.

In the end it is found that it is more convenient to remember the English names which are often extremely apt and conjure a vision of the birds so named. Consider, for instance, Blackbellied Finch-lark and Pied Crested Cuckoo. In other cases we are a little misled, especially when we are prone to jump to conclusions.

A few weeks back we had paid our first visit to the nearby hill stations of Matheran. One evening an all black bird flew up and sat on the gate post of our compound. At first it appeared to be a diminutive male Koel as its entire attitude was rather furtive. The bird did not appear to be bothered by us but by something else which soon came around the gate post in the shape of a cat. Even in the poor light it was noticed that the bird had a red eye, again, similar to a Koel's. The bird was nowhere

near the size of a Koel and flew off with a high pitched screech. Then, we suddenly recognized it as the Malabar Whistling Thrush. It was the first time we had seen this bird but somehow we had made up our mind that it belongs to Malabar and such far off places that we were not willing to recognize it when seen in Matheran.

Last winter when we were gazing across Juhu swamp we saw vast flocks of waders. The shorter legged ones were close to us and the longer legged ones like Blackwinged Stilts were far away. We had seen these so many times that we had already made up our minds as to what we were going to see. It is only when somebody else pointed out we were able to notice a group of Avocets among the Stilts.

Coming back to names, I have decided that I will lightly pencil my own version of the birds name, where I think it is more apt, on the pages of my bird book. The Malabar Whistling Thrush will also be known as the Blackbilled Whistling Thrush to distinguish it from the Yellowbilled Himalayan one. Such descriptive names, I hope, will enable me to identify Sandpipers in the field.

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ON THE FOOD OF THE WHITEBACKED MUNIA
Lonchura striata (Linn).

By

N.G. Pillai.

Seeds and grains of various kinds form the principal food of munias. So it came altogether as a surprise to me to see a party of whitebacked munias feeding from a patch of green algae on the bed of a ditch from which rain water had nearly dried up.

On the morning of 9.9.1967, I was crossing a rice field in the eastern outskirts of Ernakulam, not far from the Caltex Oil Installations. Actually it was no rice field at all, since large quantities of sand and earth were being dumped into it to raise its level for conversion into a housing site. The ground was all churned up and deeply rutted with the wheel-tracks of the wagons which brought the earth and humps and ditches and hollows lay everywhere. There was rain water in these depressions and some were drying up exposing a moist bed matted with green algae.

As I came upon one of these hollows, a small party of whitebacked munias, suddenly flew down from their perch on the nearest telegraph wire and settled on the muddy ooze. Just as I froze in my tracks, to disturb them as little as possible, I saw them peck at the algal patch and from where I stood hardly 6 feet away, I could clearly see a strand of green filament going down the beak in the bird nearest to me. The other birds hopped about and seemed to enjoy themselves immensely. But the sound of approaching footsteps soon put a stop to their activities and sent them scurrying from their meal.

My first impression was that the birds had hopped down to the hollow to slake their thirst or enjoy a bath on that sunny morning. Had I not seen the green scum being pecked at and a green strand actually going down the beak of one of the birds I would have taken them to be only drinking, even though there was only a trace of water in the hollow. Perhaps they were, only the alga was swallowed inadvertently. But nearby there were also other depressions which still held water, where the birds could have had their drink free of the annoying weed. Or, do they have a liking for an algal diet on occasion?

As I turned homewards with these thoughts in mind, I could not help recalling how on an earlier occasion (21.10.'66), I had come upon a pair of Blackheaded Munias, Munia malacca (Linnaeus), on the bed of

one of several channels on the southern foreshore which emptied into the Cochin Harbour. As it was low-tide then, the stream was no more than a trickle and its exposed bed was black and encrusted with mud. The birds were on the ground, fairly close to the water's edge and seemed just resting. The ideal haunt for a sandpiper or a large pied wagtail, the spot looked to me rather unusual for a munia to be in, but I had assumed them to have come down for a drink. However, disturbed by my presence, they had taken off and flown into a sea-holly patch that stood in a swamp by the road farther up. Here were several more of their comrades whom they joined and I had watched them for a few minutes before they finally disappeared into the depths of the swamp. That the exposed bed of the streamlet had a streak of green alga then flashed into my mind. Had the muniyas come in quest of this weed?

Dr. Salim Ali in his *Birds of Travancore & Cochin* (P.151) refers to the swamp loving nature of this munia which I can confirm, but in the case of the whitebacked munia where it is stated that it is not addicted to sumpy ground, my experience is that it may be met with occasionally in this type of terrain too. The Spotted Munia - *Lonchura punctulata* (Linn.), another species occurring in this area, was also noted in the same locality as the whitebacked munia - a water-logged place bordered by homesteads and the haunts of pond herons and sandpipers. This munia was building in the heart of a screw pine standing on the edge of a pond and on 3.6.'67, there was a nest about 6 feet above the level of water. Has the swamp loving nature of these muniyas anything to do with their fondness for an occasional diet of green algae? The algal slime found in the puddles was identified as a species of *Sprogyra* with an admixture of diatoms by Professor R.S. Iyer, Head of the Department of Botany, Maharaja's College, Ernakulam, to whom my grateful thanks are due.

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THE HIMALAYAN PIED KINGFISHER
(*Ceryle lugubris*)

By

Dr. J. Allison and E.W. Ramble

Very little appears to have been written about the Himalayan Pied Kingfisher in any of the popular handbooks of Indian Birds.

Readers would perhaps find our joint observations of some interest and we would be glad if other observers could add to them in the Newsletter.

The bird could be described as a large, grey kingfisher, the size of a rock pigeon generally to be seen sitting on rocks, overhanging trees, roots projecting from river banks or masonry along canals.

At rest the bird regularly cocks its short square tail and raises its crest which is clearly double when fully erect.

It is normally a silent bird but sometimes utters a single sound ... "KICK" accompanied by an upward flick of the tail.

The flight is very fast and straight, within two feet of the water. They splash into the water from this height to catch small fish; then shaking themselves they fly to the rocks where they proceed to beat the little fish and subsequently swallow it. Occasionally, but not very often, we have observed them to hover like the lesser pied kingfisher. Their fishing generally is straight off a rock, from about two to three feet, or from some other convenient perch.

We have not observed the bird to feed on insects off the land, all food being taken from the water.

It appears to resent the lesser pied kingfisher in its territory and can often be seen harrying its smaller cousins, robbing them of their prey or merely chasing them about.

It is not a timid bird and it is possible to approach and watch it from quite close provided no sudden movement is made.

While Salim Ali and Whistler rather infer in their books that the bird is to be found more or less about 2500 ft., it is not uncommon in the Doon on the rivers Jumna and Ganges. We have seen them as far down as the western Jumna Canal at Tajewala which must be a good ten miles from the Himalayan range and four miles south of the Siwaliks. On the Ganges they have been noticed as far down as Raewala and in the Iacchiwala forest bolck above Hardwar.

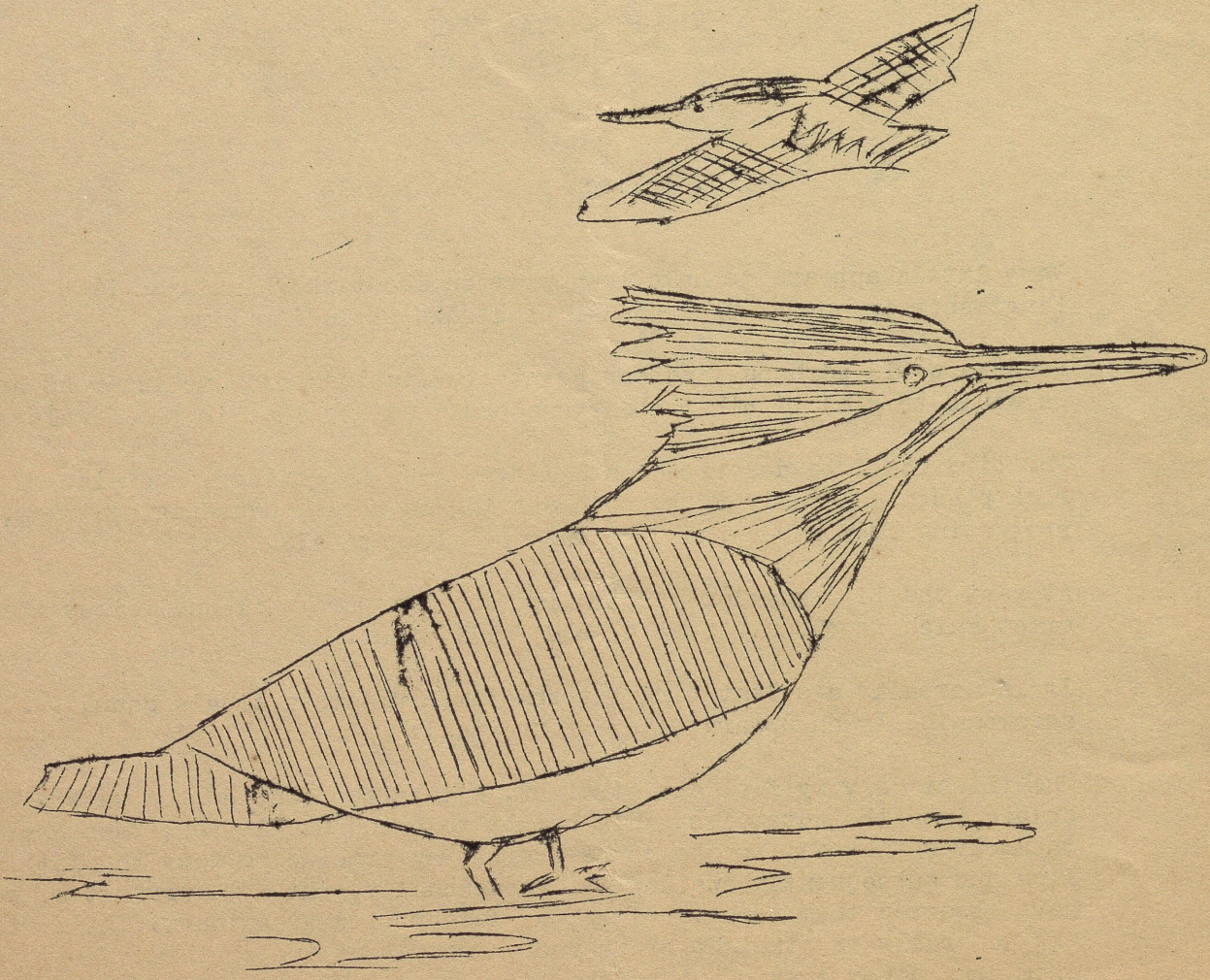
It can thus be affirmed that they are found as low as 900 ft.

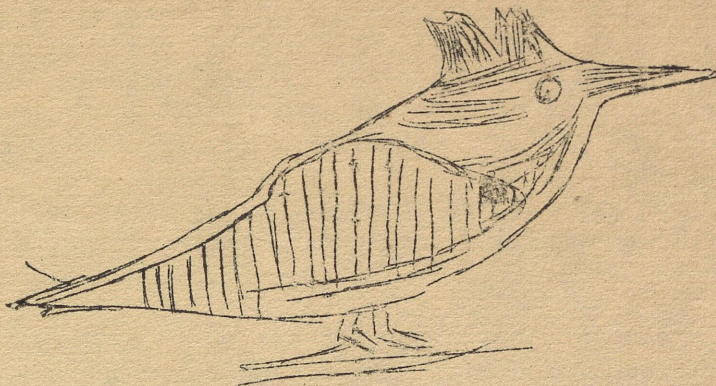
They nest, like other kingfishers, in holes on the river bank. They have been observed emerging from nest holes in March at Khulal where the Jumna passes through the Siwaliks.

There is one point which needs to be established. Are they resident in these areas and at these low altitudes or are they merely down for the colder months? Other river bank dwellers like the white capped redstart and plumbeous redstart come down from November to April and as our observations have not covered the summer months it is possible that the Himalayan Kingfisher has similar habits.

The fact, however, that they do nest in the area tends one to believe that they are resident throughout the year.

Could any reader kindly throw more light on the subject?





Ceryle lugubris

Himalayan Pied Kingfishers.

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CORRESPONDENCE

Brown Shrike - Ianius cristatus cristatus LINNAEUS:

Dr. Salim Ali in his Book "The Birds of Travancore and Cochin" has recorded, as the last date the bird was seen before its departure to its breeding ground, as 27th April. I have been keeping a close watch over this bird for the last three years, but could not succeed in seeing the bird after 27th April. Sri K.K. Neelakantan in "Birds of Kerala (Malayalam)" has stated that a few birds can be seen even in May. Mr. G.H. Henry in his "A Guide to the birds of Ceylon" also states that the bird leaves to its breeding ground in April-May. Therefore there is every possibility of some birds being with us even after 27th April. I would like to have information from the readers on the last date the bird was seen in Kerala before its departure to its breeding ground.

K.N. Nair
Kerala.

In Dr. Salim Ali's book "Indian Hill Birds", it is stated that the Nilgiri Wood Pigeon occurs as far north as Mahabaleshwar. However, I have seen these Wood pigeons here from about the 20th of September in varying numbers. Do these birds often wander north during the monsoon? They often feed close to the ground on lantana and other bushes.

Many birds flock to our garden in search of ripe figs. A Common Grey Hornbill is a regular visitor. But it is often accompanied by two other hornbills of the same size and colour and with a similar voice. But they just have a small knob on the bill where the casque ought to be. Are these Malabar Grey Hornbills or young Common Grey Hornbills?

Today morning I saw a kite which appeared rather different from the Pariah Kite. It was soaring in company with two Pariah Kites, so the differences were quite clear. It appeared slightly longer and had a curious pole head. The upper surface of the tail appeared bright chestnut when the bird banked in flight. The tail also appeared more deeply forked. Its flight was similar to the Pariah Kites. I think it was the Common Kite (*Milvus milvus*). Please let me know if my identification was correct and whether it has been recorded from Poona before.

Sudhir Vyas
Poona.

Mr. N.M. Mistry writes to say that 'the Victoria Gardens Zoo is in a sorry state' and requires a lot of improvement, particularly in the birds' section. Name plates at the cages are inaccurate and incomplete, and an information board at the entrance gives misleading information about several species. Mr. Mistry adds, 'Our Municipal authorities spend large sums of money on acquiring rare birds and animals (from other countries). Why then, can a small sum not be spent on acquiring interesting Indian birds, which are sadly absent in the Zoo?'.
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I have to apologize for two errors in my Bharatpur article in the last issue. The Mir Shikaris generally use a kind of hemp torch, not 'lanterns'. And the sketch of the Pied Bush Chat should not have had a cocked tail. Alternatively, readers may interpret it as an Indian Robin with a wrong label.

Shama Futehally.

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