

Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER

Dear Fellow Birdwatchers,



This issue is a collection of articles and notes on rare and endangered birds, many of which are listed in the Red-data book. Birdwatchers have been monitoring and accumulating vital information on vulnerable species across the country, and sending them to us from time to time. Our aim is to make available such information to help maintain the overall momentum and to provide a fillip to bird conservation movement. We are confident that in due course, the data thus pooled would become an invaluable tool for all concerned with the well being of the birds and the environment.

Witch's Brew and the Black-bellied Terns

Many wetland habitats that were once bursting with vitality and teeming with waterfowl are currently reeling under a Witch's brew of pollution, deforestation, flash-floods, intensification of agriculture and excessive fishing. This brew is further fermented by the free flow of caustic ingredients such as urban sewage, industrial effluents and pesticides into the aquatic habitats. Hunting, unregulated tourism and badly managed pilgrimage are incessantly affecting the nesting cycle of many endangered waterfowl and has forced some species to a twilight zone. Thus the combined impact of this deadly recipe is taking a heavy toll of the habitats and the waterfowl alike.

Black-bellied terns, designated as flagship species have backtracked from their traditional sites and a few terns are still winging here and there at some isolated habitats. But there is no mistaking the emphasis on their plight and ordeal, as has been made out by Prof. Bhatnagar and Shukla. They have made considerable efforts to understand the plight of the terns. This is a welcome relief, as the Wetland International has designated this bird as vulnerable and data deficient and estimated the global population of this bird to be < 10,000 individuals. Dr. Taej Mundkur, an acknowledged Asian wetlands and waterfowl expert, had paid adequate attention to this bird some 15 years ago and sounded alarms about the imminent threat to this bird, ("*Black-bellied Tern - Time to pull the alarm chain?*" *NLBW 28:9-10*), Prof. Bhatnagar and Shukla's input has come at a time when the birds are being outflanked in their own habitat. If we cannot seize the initiative and go for their rescue, then we will have no one else to blame but ourselves. Now that we have some inputs, we have to initiate action, so that the terns can win a reprieve and possibly postpone their ecological kiss of death.

In Search of the birds listed in the Red-data Book

Birdwatchers are discovering that it is still possible for the birds listed in the Red-data book to somehow eke out a living, despite grave survival problems. Sadly, in many areas there is not so much left of either the habitat or the endangered species to destroy, and years of neglect has continually affected the living conditions of the surviving members. But this has not dampened the enthusiasm of Pranab Patar and his friends who are exploring

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Mohan are vital for the investigators who are searching for a needle in a haystack. The sight records from India will help the investigators to focus their attention on the wintering grounds. This will also assist the BirdLife International sponsored project, to neutralise the effects of a number of factors that are pushing the birds to a point of no return. Then there will be a ray of hope for the Sociable lapwings to leave behind their days of despair, braze through their ordeals at the wintering grounds and return unscathed to their breeding grounds in Russia and Kazakhstan.

Crossing Continents in Search of the Parrotbill

For some, birdwatching is a veritable hobby of sighting and ticking one box or the other. For others, it could be a cheerful and genial escapade, acting like a much-needed tonic. For yet others, it could be a treacherous cross-continental trip in search of a rare, elusive bird such as the Blackbreasted parrotbill (*Paradoxornis flavirostris*), that will bring them a spirit of elation and fulfillment of their avowed passions. These avid birdwatchers are prepared to undertake perilous and fearsome cross continental trips to remote northeastern parts of our country, which are interned with serious insurgency problems for decades. They come to check out as to whether this corner of the world is still fine for the birds like the parrotbill. Furthermore, local birders like Arnob Bora are at hand not only to provide firsthand information about an astonishing number of birds, in a geographically more representative habitat like Assam, but are also too happy to accompany the international bird enthusiasts, in search of such enigmatic and elusive species. For Bora and his friends, it was a refreshingly different sort of outing, with pre-recorded cassettes containing the songs of this bird. After considerable effort, they could watch the parrotbills at a close range, as they emerged safe and sound from the grassland habitat. Indeed an enviable triumph for any birdwatcher, by any yardstick!

A Stranger from Antarctica

The habitats are full of surprises. More so in the coastal areas. But nothing that happened in July 1964 could have been more astonishing than the hallmark arrival of the Antarctic Skua (*Cathercta skua*), blazing a trail of thousands of kilometers all the way from Antarctica. Harshavardhana Bhat recounts the puzzling discovery in a remote hamlet on the west-coast. Nobody would have given a second look at this bird, save for the likes of Madhwaraj and Gopalakrishna Nayak, who took the honours of identifying this pirate of the high seas. The skua had obviously made a desperate attempt to escape the caprices of the monsoon, but had landed at Udyavara in a dazed condition. The chance discovery has kept the birdwatching spirit alive and bantering, even in an advanced era of computers and cellular phones.

Birds and Tobacco Addiction

Dr. Mamata Rawat of Jodhpur has sent to us a shockingly honest narration of the Bank Mynas getting addicted to tobacco. This surely is food for thought for any birdwatcher. Ms Rawat has opened up a new sphere of ornithology, to chew over a distinct problem, which is not a very desirable thing today. Our social evils are subjecting innocent birds to the violent process of tobacco addiction. Has the addiction affected their breeding cycle? Are they feeding their young with fine-chewed tobacco titbits? All birdwatchers who have not been fine-tuning for a while, should pay attention to this problem and suggest ways of eliminating this disgrace ushered in solely by our fellow beings. Attendant circumstances suggest that this type of addiction may be prevalent in other areas as well, and some other species might have already become infatuated to tobacco. We expect birdlovers to respond

In Search of the birds listed in the Red-data Book

Birdwatchers are discovering that it is still possible for the birds listed in the Red-data book to somehow eke out a living, despite grave survival problems. Sadly, in many areas there is not so much left of either the habitat or the endangered species to destroy, and years of neglect has continually affected the living conditions of the surviving members. But this has not dampened the enthusiasm of Pranab Patar and his friends who are exploring nooks and corners of Deobali area in Central Assam and have documented 109 species of birds including 10 listed in the Red-data book. This is where the significance of their findings lies. The absence of an apex plan to study endangered birds in their habitats has deprived the scientific community of exhaustive data, which is crucial for initiating species-revival programmes. Despite these earnest efforts, public opinion continues to swing a little more away from the conservation priorities, dashing the hopes of all nature lovers. The process of conservation is long and arduous and we have to win over the indifferent attitude of the general public who consider the conservation efforts as a sheer waste of money and time. Therefore, their participation should be ensured for the success of any conservation project.

Sociable Lapwing: A Migration of Hope

In a few days, rivers and lakes across the vast Russian plains and Kazakhstan will begin to freeze. The peaks will start to clad themselves with snow, glaciers will brim the meadows and a feeling of winter will be in the air. Hundreds and thousands of birds of every description will get ready to beat the cold and migrate to warmer regions. Some fifteen years ago, more than 50,000 Sociable lapwings were falling in line with the other migrants. But lamentably this year less than 400 individuals will undertake this arduous journey, for the simple reason that 95 % of the Sociable lapwing population has been wiped out in the intervening years. The Indian wetlands, much touted, as safe havens can no longer offer the customary red carpet welcome to these avian guests. For the lapwings, the severity of the ecological problems is alike at the summer and winter grounds and both have become their virtual battlegrounds. It is in this context Iyer Mohan's article on Sociable lapwings is timely and noteworthy. It seems painfully evident that Sociable lapwings are flustered by the combined impact of habitat loss, pollution and hunting. A host of other adverse factors are also rupturing their niche and undermining their survival prospects.

BirdLife International began work on compiling an International Action plan for the Sociable lapwings under the African Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA), which was developed in conjunction with ACBWC (The Association for the Conservation of Bio-diversity in Kazakhstan), with additional support from NABU (BirdLife International, Germany). The investigations have led to the discovery of two small breeding colonies of Sociable lapwings in Central Kazakhstan Tengil lakes region. Efforts are also on to study intensively the crucial habitat needs and the reasons for their decline. BirdLife International will use the results of the study to develop a larger scale conservation project in a bid to understand and halt the global decline of Sociable lapwings. The Asian Waterbird Census has reported the sighting of only 21 individuals in Asia in five years (1997-2001). The Wetlands International has estimated the Asian population of this bird to be between 200 and 600. This bird is listed under Appendix II of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) and Wetlands International has listed it under the category 'vulnerable' and data deficient. In these circumstances, dossiers like the one sent by

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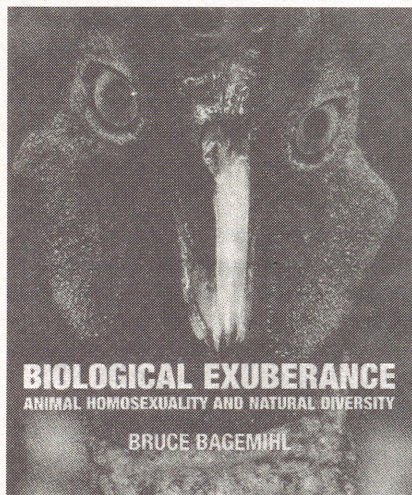
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with a down-to-earth account like the one provided by Ms. Rawat. The clarion call for banning tobacco in all its form has an additional justification in the instant case. It is needless to say that the situation calls for more; not less respect for the environment, birds and animals alike. A sustained campaign for a tobacco-free world would be a very desirable thing in the light of this discovery.

Owl Exuberance

Discerning birders do not fail to notice an abnormal bird behaviour. Raju Kasambe has noticed and reported an unusual mounting behaviour of a pair of Spotted Owlets. Such weird animal behaviours are engaging the attention of researchers for well over two centuries now. A caution must be maintained for one thing; there could be a mix up with the identity of the sexes of the owls, since researchers have reported the existence of homosexuality among a wide range of animals and birds. Gorillas, Swans, Gulls, and even lizards belong to this category! But as a matter of conscience, human perceptions and inferences could be misleading at times, and no one can sit in judgment, when it comes to giving a ruling on aberrant animal behaviours. Dr. Robert Trivers, had observed homosexual behaviour among Green lizards (*Andis garmani*) and long term lesbian relationships in five monogamous species of gulls, including the Western Gulls (*Larus occidentalis*). Dr. Trivers even noticed some female gulls showing such normally male behaviour as courtship feeding,

mounting and attempted copulation. But he did not find the abnormal behaviour as intense as in the heterosexual pairs. Trivers had believed that when the adult ratio is biased in favour of excess females as in the case of gulls, lesbian relationships permit some females to achieve reproductive success they otherwise would not. In the five species of gulls studied, he noticed lesbian couples were found at frequencies



as high as 10% of the breeding pairs, and their reproductive success was lower than the heterosexual pairs. Trivers had suggested that 10% of the eggs of the lesbian pair were fertile, which evidenced the fact that lesbian couples were some times copulating with opportunistic males. Bruce Bagemihl has published a book entitled "Biological Exuberance" which is a compilation of curious facts about animal homosexuality and natural diversity. The book deals at length with all types of non-reproductive sexual behaviour ranging from same-sex courtship to transvestism. One reviewer had summed up Bagemihl's work as "Thrilling, dense with new ideas and scandalous animal anecdotes, in other words an ideal bedside read!" Cynics may prefer to censure Kasambe and advice him to allow absolute privacy to the owl pair that indulged in a little unnatural affair in a secret corner. But as long as such studies stay clear and the birds are undisturbed, we see no reason to discourage such studies.

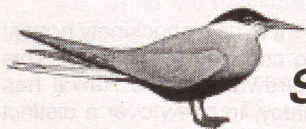
Owls and Olympics

In a different context, the owls are making headline news all over the world this August. It all began some 2400 years ago when the Greeks decided to pay rich tributes to the owl and its patroness by naming their capital as 'Athinai', which is now popularly called as Athens. Greek legend has it that 'Athena' the goddess of wisdom and warfare, was born in full-grown form and dressed in Armour, from the forehead of Zeus, the King of gods. Athena represented the planning, and intellectual aspects of war and therefore worshipped by the Greeks. According to Greek mythology, the gods were pleased by a gift from Athena and as gratitude for her gesture decided to name the city as 'Athinai', with 'Athena' as the city's patroness. Athena's chief symbol was an owl and the Greek also worshipped the owls. Thus the owls under the genus 'Athene', including the spotted owl (*Athene brama*) are immortalised by the Greeks. In many parts of the world, owls are regarded with a mixture of fear, superstition and anathema, but in Greece owls are revered, respected and worshipped, right from the very day the cradle of civilisation was set to rock back and forth. Though the large Indian contingent is returning with only a silver medal from the Olympics at Athens, the real winner is Athena, the Owl.

Thanking you,
Yours in bird conservation
S. Sridhar
Publisher, NLBW



Study of the Status, Habitat, Distribution, Behaviour and Breeding Biology of the Black-bellied Tern, *Sterna acuticauda* in Inland Saline Sambhar Lake Wetland Ecosystem, Rajasthan, India



Prof. S.P. Bhatnagar and Satish Kumar Shukla, Flamingo Research Station Anasagar Lake, Ajmer 305006, Rajasthan, India E-mail : spbhatnagar2002@yahoo.co.in

Introduction

Sambhar lake is one of India's Ramsar Sites, known for the Flamingo and is the largest inland saline lake in India.

Sambhar lake (26°52' - 27°N, 74°54' 75°54'E) is shallow, elliptical in shape with its long axis running east-northwest to

southwest. At full capacity of (363 m contour) it covers an area of 190 sq km to the north and north east of the Lake. Most of the lake basin lies in Jaipur and Nagaur districts and a small portion in Ajmer district of Rajasthan.

The lake has an extensive catchment, spread over 7560 sq km, most of which lies to the north and northeast of the lake extending

up to Sikar district. It is fed by four ephemeral streams Mendha, Rupangarh, Kharian and Khandel, besides numerous rivulets and surface runoff.

River Mendha, the largest feeder stream originates in Sikar district and runs southwest and west before entering the lake from the north. The river drains an area of about 3600 sq km. (about half of the total catchment area of Sambhar Lake) most of which is sandy, undulating plain, framed to the north, west and east by residual out crops.

River Rupangarh (=Rupangar) rises in the Aravalis Range in the south near Ajmer city and runs north - north east to enter the Sambhar lake from the south. Its catchment is spread over, approximately 625 sq km and is mostly rocky. The Kharian is a smaller stream, entering the lake from the northwest, while the Khandel, another small ephemeral stream, drains a limited area to the east of the lake before debouching into the Sambhar Lake basin.

The Black-bellied Tern, (*Sterna acuticauda* J.E. Gray (1831) belongs to Order: Charadriiformes: Family: Laridae). It is a near threatened tern in the World with the population of less than 10,000 birds (Rose and Scott, 1997).

Status of the Black-bellied tern in South-East Asia

It is known from southern mainland China (previously regular in Yunnan, now very rare), Pakistan (frequent in northern Sind and Punjab), India (widespread) and locally fairly common. It declines in Gujarat, Nepal (locally fairly common), Bangladesh (previously common, now a local breeder), Myanmar (previously abundant, now a scarce to uncommon resident, apparently fewer than 25 pairs surviving), Thailand formerly resident in the north-west, now very rare and probably extinct as a breeding species, Laos (previously bred in large numbers along the Mekong now very rarely recorded), Cambodia (in the 1960s, apparently fairly common along the Mekong but very few recent records) and Vietnam (formerly occurred regularly in Cochinchina and occasionally in Annam, but no recent records (Ali and Ripley, 1978- 1999, Del Hoyo *et al.* 1996, Grimmett *et al.* 1998 and Robson, 2000). It is found in large rivers (usually breeding on sandpits and islands) and marshes, occasionally in smaller pools and ditches, up to 730 m lowlands (but not on the coast) (Inskipp and Inskipp, 1999). There has been an extremely rapid decline in South-East Asia and now it is more or less extinct in the region. Nevertheless, the suggestion that the world population could be below 10,000 birds (Rose and Scott, 1997) may be an over-cautious estimate.

Status of the Black-bellied tern in India

Kumar *et al.* (2003) has reported that it is nearly threatened, resident and locally common.

Status of the Black-bellied tern in Rajasthan

Vijayan, (1994) and CEE- WWF, (1995) have reported about it from Keoladeo National Park. Bharatpur in the aquatic habitat and have declared it as a winter visitor and uncommon.

So far no systematic studies have been carried out on the ecology and behaviour of the Black-bellied terns in Rajasthan.

The present study is the first attempt to gather information on the ecology and behaviour of the Black-bellied terns in the Sambhar lake as in the brackish water ecosystem in Rajasthan, India. A systematic study was undertaken from April 2002 to March 2004.

During the survey, various aspects of their ecology and behaviour were covered.

Objectives

The main objectives of this field study were :-

1. Assess the status and abundance in ecosystems of diverse ranges.
2. To study the population seasonally, their habitat utilisation and preference.
3. To study the foraging behaviour, feeding ecology and assess their food composition from pellet analysis.
4. The behaviour of the Black -bellied terns during the breeding and non-breeding seasons.
5. Their inter and intra-specific interactions.

Study areas

Sambhar, Degana, Kuchaman, Deedwana, (Semi Arid Saline Marshes - inland drainage system) Anasagar and Foy Sagar (Freshwater Marshes - inland drainage system), Luni, Khari, Jawai river basins, Banas basin and Ghaggar river marshes were covered.

Black-bellied tern habitat

Black-bellied terns at Sambhar, Degana, Kuchaman, Deedwana Anasagar, Foy sagar, Luni, Khari, Jawai and Banas remained frequently in boggy marshes, streams and pools and rarely ventured away from water. The freshwater and saline water pools are shallow with very soft mud at the bottom. Local Black-bellied terns were found to be influenced by habitat variation.

Physical Characteristics of Black-bellied tern

Widespread resident, crow size - 33 cm; (Ali and Ripley 1977- 1979), smaller than river tern, with orange bill (with a variable tip) in all plumages. Adult breeding bird has grey breast, black belly and vent and long outer tail feathers. Adult non-breeding and immature birds have white underparts, black mask and streaks on crown.

Field Identification

Adult Breeding: Identified by black belly .

Adult Non-breeding: show some diagnostic dark mottling on the belly except immediately after the post - breeding moult (Kazmierczak, 2000).

Methodology

The population was assessed by directly counting the Black- bellied tern along the transects. Density was estimated by *Line Transect Method* (Emlen, 1971). Food and feeding habits were studied by the micro - histological examination of the droppings.

Field observations were made using Binoculars (20 X 50 ZCF) and a Terrestrial Telescope (36 X to 225 X). Photographs were taken using a D=100 mm /F= 1000 mm; and by telephotography. Photographs also were taken using a 35 mm Canon Camera and standard telephoto lenses.

Observations mainly conformed to the Focal Animal Sampling Method (Altmann 1974) and the "Scanning Method" was adopted for studying the activity pattern. Observations were carried out in natural condition. "Repeated Standard Field Observation", described by Hartley (1948) was followed.

The immigration chronology and micro-habitat use pattern were studied by visiting all parts and habitat types of the study site at least 4 to 6 times a week. Species diversity was calculated using Shannon - Weiner Diversity Index (1963).

Weather data was recorded by direct observation and by maintaining a Meteorological Station. Sound recordings were made of the display rattle using a Sony walkman (professional) and an unidirectional microphone timed by a stop watch during breeding and non breeding behaviour.

The data were subjected to various appropriate statistical analysis. Standard deviation and Correlation Coefficient 'r' was calculated and significance at 5% level using students 't' Test was determined.

Results

The findings are summed up as below:

Habits

- Locally common tern of Inland waters, and called 'kooiri'.

Vocalisation

Calls: Shrill, not unpleasant, *Krek, kreka rapid kek -kek-kek*. The calls, uttered in flight, are a sharp, harsh "creek-creek".

Flight: Gliding type of flight. Gliding involves sailing on outstretched motionless wings taking advantage of the wind currents. It may be compared to 'Free wheeling' or coasting downhill on a bicycle. Typical gliding terns have rather narrow and long tapering wings without outstretching 'fingers at the tip'.

Food and Feeding Behaviour

Many of the activities of an animal are oriented towards the procurement of food. (Thorington, 1970). According to Simmons (1970) food supply play an important role in determining a 'species' breeding biology, dispersion pattern and social system through natural selection.

Food : Fish, crustaceans, tadpoles and water insects are eaten. Observations of the feeding habits were made and gut contents of some four individuals were observed under the microscope. The results of these examinations are given in detail in Table 1 below.



Breeding Biology

Information on the breeding biology of terns is scanty. Ali (1979) described nesting season in River Tern, *Sterna caudata* Gray. Nesting season - chiefly March to May.

Breeding Seasonality

Breeding biology of Black-bellied tern were subjected in the area of Anasagar Lake (Freshwater habitat) and Sambhar Lake (Saline water habitat) for successive breeding seasons (2002-03 and 2003-04). Same method was applied in both the seasons. The breeding seasonality was studied in two different habitats. Breeding season of Black-bellied tern in the Anasagar Lake (Fresh water habitat) was from March to June and in Sambhar Lake (Saline water habitat) was from March to July. This study reveals the salient features of the breeding seasonality of Black-bellied terns due to environmental factors in summer when maximum temperature rises to about 40°C and extreme temporal variability in precipitation occurs.

Black-bellied terns have an extended breeding season at Sambhar Lake (inland Saline wetland ecosystem). During the extensive study it was noticed that almost all the Black-bellied terns completed nesting activities before it started raining heavily.

Ali (1979) described in River Tern, *Sterna aurantia*, eggs 3, greenish grey to buffy stone blotched and streaked with brown and purple. They laid eggs on bare ground on sandy banks of large rivers in colonies.

A total of 335 nests with eggs were recorded during this period. The peak breeding was from March to June in 2003. For the first time Black-bellied tern *Sterna acuticauda* was recorded breeding in Rajasthan. River terns also nested in the area on bare ground on sandbanks of Banas river and River Rupangarh in colonies. Nest building is shared by both male and female and is done between 0700 and 0900 hours.

Black-bellied tern has one peak while River tern has a staggered pattern with one or two peaks. Number of the Black-bellied tern decreased with the monsoon in July. Humidity and temperature were found to be the key factors determining breeding seasonality.

Table 1 Diet of Black-bellied tern

Date	Place	Gut content
Nov.2003 to March 2004	Ajmer and Sambhar	Fish (<i>Apocheilus lineatus</i>), <i>Puntius sarana</i> Ham. <i>P. sophore</i> (Ham.) and fingerlings of <i>Labeo calbasu</i> , (<i>L. gonius</i> H. and <i>L. bata</i> H. post larvae and smaller juveniles of <i>Macrbrachium rosenbergii</i> . De man, Tadpoles of <i>Rana tigrina</i> and <i>R. hexadactyla</i> and water insects (<i>Notonectus</i> ; <i>Anisops</i> , <i>Laccotrephes</i> , <i>Rantara</i> , <i>Cybister</i> ; <i>Hydaticus hydrophulus</i>)

The Black bellied tern prefers to forage in fresh water swamps, rivers and lakes. Anasagar lake has shallow wetlands, surrounded by tall grass. Here they foraged by tactile and by visual technique. The feeding sites of Black-bellied tern were shallow water bodies.

Methods of feeding

They capture prey (Fish, Crabs, etc.) by scooping it up from the surface, in flight and diving vertically from the air and going under water momentarily. The Black-bellied terns are more agile and are opportunistic feeders and forage in both the fresh water and saline water habitats subject to food availability.

The abundance and seasonality of non -breeding and breeding Black- bellied terns followed a similar pattern at Sambhar Lake and Anasagar Lake.

Breeding biology like nest building, clutch size, incubation periods and parental care were studied. History of juvenile and breeding success were thoroughly investigated. Juvenile plumage was observed in live Black -bellied terns and specimens and conclusions were drawn.

Adult breeding has grey breast, black belly and vent, long outer tail feathers. Adult non-breeding and immatures have white

under parts, black mask and streaking on crown. On the basis of above mentioned observations it is concluded that the river tern does not resemble. Based on such characters, the age structure of the population of Black-bellied tern can be estimated in the field.

Nesting habitat of the breeding birds commonly seen in the study site was recorded. Both sexes take part in nesting and incubation. The incubation period recorded was 30 days. The chicks were brooded for about a week by the adult and they were not fed for four days. The chicks were young and vulnerable; so the parents were with them upto 33 days after hatching. Two accessible nests were selected for intensive study. Black-bellied terns were monitored daily in the morning and evening.

The Black-bellied tern pair was very sensitive and remained in the nest until chicks were several weeks old. This was mainly to protect the chicks. As the young ones gained strength to stand (7-8 weeks) the time spent by the parents in the nest gradually diminished. A six week old chick can defend itself and at this stage parents choose to be away from the nest even at nights. The focal pair spent only 0.775 of its time in reingesting the food which was regurgitated for the chicks. In all the Black-bellied terns spent 4.8% of their time feeding their chicks but the male spent a little longer than the female.

Black-bellied tern began their reflocking activities after the breeding was complete when they gathered at the regular foraging grounds.

Threats

1. Threats include destruction of breeding habitats and increased cultivation in river beds and sand pits.
2. Collection of eggs for food by local tribes.
3. Flooding of nests during heavy rains.

The above threats are in agreement with Collar *et al.* (1994).

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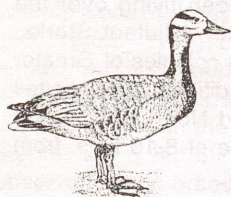
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Studies on the Wintering Status and Ecology of the Bar-headed goose, *Anser indicus* from Anasagar and Foyasagar lakes in and around Ajmer Environs, Rajasthan, India

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Bar-headed goose, (*Anser indicus*, Latham,1790) (Class Aves : Order Anseriformes : Family : Anatidae) has been recorded from Rajasthan previously, Saxena, 1975, Abdulali and Pandey (1978), Vijayan (1994) and CEE-WWF (1995) from Bharatpur and Tehsin,1989 from Fateh Sagar Lake, Udaipur and Vyas and Singh, 1997 from wetlands of Kota, Bundi, Baran

and Jhalawar (Districts). It is known as '*Bhatya*' throughout *Rajasthan*.

So far Bar-headed goose has not been reported or recorded from Ajmer environs. Now, it is being reported for the first time in the fresh water ecosystem.

Results

Bar-headed goose is migratory and is a permanent winter visitor to these lakes. It is found in flocks in lakes in and around Ajmer environs of wheat, barley and gram fields. The population was assessed by direct count method. It flocks in small parties of about 20 to 24 individuals, to feed grams, wheat, barley fields and on the corms of marsh plants (*Cyperus rotundus* L.) locally known as 'Narsida'.

They prefer to forage in freshwater lake swamp. The population varied from 4 to 24 in winter season; as the summer approaches the population declined to 2, as they disperse for breeding. The winter population has a high correlation with the total biomass.

The most preferred habitat are the gram fields and grass patches of *Typha*, *Cyperus* and *Cynodon*, they seem to be not very selective as it has the largest niche size. However, seasonal variation in the food consumed was observed.

Significant variation in the time budget was noticed. They were seen actively feeding during the nights and resting for long duration in the afternoon.

Threats

1. A detailed analysis showed that the Bar-headed goose is

more threatened due to hunting. Farmers shoot these geese for their meat.

2. Sewage disposal into the Anasagar and Foyasagar lakes.
3. Establishing brick "kilns".
4. Collection of edible fruit *Trapa* '(singhada)' from the lake.

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Sighting of Species listed in Red Data Book in Deobali Jalah, Central Assam, India

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Deobali Jalah (Jalah in Assamese means Wetland) is a proposed important bird area covering an area of around 15 sq. km. It lies between latitude 26°15" N and longitude 92°32" E Nagaon district of Assam. This low-lying flood affected grassland is interspersed by a number of nalas, rivulets and swamps; besides 29 other significant water bodies.

Studies undertaken for the past three and half years by GREEN GUARD Nature Organisation (a NGO working for nature & natural resource conservation in various parts of Assam) has enabled them to enlist 109 species of avifauna, out of which 10 species are recorded in Red Data Book. This magnificent avian habitat has already been visited by scientists from Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) and representatives from BirdLife International, UK.

The species of Red data book recorded from Deobali are as follows:

1. Asian Openbill-Stork (*Anastomus oscitans* Boddeart):
Collar, et. al. (1994) notified Asian Openbill-Stork as a Globally Threatened species. Openbill-Stork usually forage in flocks, as many as 147 numbers were found congregated in the marshes of Deobali in search of snails, their favourite food. Though their number varies from time to time, they were observed between December and February.
2. Lesser Adjutant-Stork (*Leptoptilos javanicus* Horsfield):
Lesser Adjutant Stork is listed as vulnerable by BirdLife International (2001). In the grassland of Deobali Jalah. One

can often sight these birds foraging in solos and sometimes in groups at irregular intervals. Perhaps availability of abundant food material in this region has resulted in the formation of new nesting colonies in adjoining areas; so far seven colonies of Lesser Adjutant Stork have been recorded by birdwatchers of Green Guard.

3. Greater Adjutant-Stork (*Leptoptilos dubius* Gmelin):
This stork species has been notified as Endangered by BirdLife International (2001). Greater Adjutant Storks freely forage in smaller groups (2 to 4 numbers) are an occasional sight in Deobali. At times, they are seen flying over the grassland of Deobali along with Lesser Adjutant Storks. Though there are no records of nesting colonies of Greater Adjutant Stork in adjacent areas, two traditional nesting sites have been recorded in Lakhinagar and North Haiborgaon areas of Nagaon town within a distance of 8-10 kms. from Deobali.
4. White-eyed or Ferruginous Pochard (*Aythya nyroca* Guldenstadt):
Ferruginous Pochard has been listed as Near Threatened by BirdLife International in 2001. During the months of December to late February, this migratory bird can be seen in large groups in the waterbodies of Deobali. These wetlands also serve as communal roosting sites even during day hours for Baer's Pochard, Tufted Duck along with Ferruginous Pochard. Thick grass covers of Deobali also serve as hideouts for these aves.

5. Baer's Pochard (*Aythya baeri* Radde):
Baer's Pochard was notified as Globally Threatened by Collar *et al.* (1994) and as Vulnerable by BirdLife International (2001). One can locate Baer's Pochard very easily (relatively in small numbers) within the mixed feeding parties (Ducks & Pochard) in the water bodies of interior Deobali area.
6. Red-necked or Red-headed Falcon (*Falco chicquera* Daudin):
Collar, *et al.* (1994) list Red-headed Falcon as Globally Threatened species. Sighting of Red-headed Falcon in Deobali region is an interesting record; its presence signifies the availability of ample amount of food in the form of small birds and lizards. Nesting has not been recorded so far in the adjoining areas.
7. Swamp Francolin or Partridge (*Francolinus gularis* Temminck):
Swamp Francolin has been notified as Vulnerable by BirdLife International (2001) and as Near Threatened species by Collar *et al.* (1994). Although, distribution of Swamp Francolin once common in Terai swampy grasslands of Brahmaputra valley has now become restricted to a few pockets, a few pairs of Swamp Francolin have been sighted under the thick reed cover of Deobali. Its mild *qua-qua* calls were quite commonly heard during the nights.
8. Manipur Bush Quail (*Perdica manipurensis* Hume):
Manipur Bush Quail has been listed as Near Threatened by Collar *et al.* (1994) and as vulnerable by BirdLife International (2001). A pair of Manipur Bush Quail was sighted only twice under the thick grass cover in this swampy land but interestingly, these birds were found to be attracted to food-grains (cereals) provided by the birders of Green Guard.
9. Jerdon's Bushchat (*Saxicola jerdoni* Blyth):
Jerdon's Bushchat was identified as Globally Threatened species by Collar *et al.* (1994). Grassland of Deobali also provides shelter to this particular species of Bush Chat, found

usually as a solitary bird perching on the stems of tall grasses, especially on reeds and thatches. Individuals making a low 'chirr' call quite audible during winter. The migrants start arriving at Deobali by late December.

10. Bristled Grass Warbler (*Chaetornis straitues* Jerdon):

Bristled Grass Warbler was listed as Near Threatened by Collar, *et al.* (1994) and Vulnerable by BirdLife International (2001). This camouflaged bird species moves so fast through the tall grasses; only its rhythmic call helps one to identify the bird with ease.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to express their sincere thanks to Raj Phukan, Kandarpa Bordoloi, Prasanta Goswami, Sachidananda Bordoloi and Diganta Goswami of Green Guard – Nature Organisation for their excellent contribution to the preliminary ecological study of Deobali.

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Miscellaneous Breeding Information of Collared Falconet *Microhierax caerulescens*

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Little is known about breeding of Collared Falconet, *Microhierax caerulescens* (del Hoyo *et al.* 1994; Ferguson-Lees and Christie 2001; Naoroji 1997). Breeding of Collared Falconet in the Indian territory was first reported by Naoroji (1997), who discussed some of his preliminary observations on breeding behaviour. During our bird studies in the Buxa Tiger Reserve (26° 30' & 26° 55' N and 89° 20' & 89° 55' E), West Bengal we made some scanty observations on breeding falconets.

Two nests were seen during June 2001. One was in Pukri hill (26° 43/08 N & 89° 36/07 E) and another was near 23rd Mile Tower (26° 38/17 N & 89°35/37E) of Jainty Ranges of the Reserve (Seen on 8th and 12th June respectively). Nests were located with almost full-grown nestlings. In 40 minutes of observation, parents attended the nest 10 times with butterflies and small insects. Once a chick was observed moving backwards to the nest hole entrance to excrete, shows that the nest sanitation is well maintained by the species as seen in other raptors.

Nests were in hollows, found in huge *Schima wallichii* (Tree height-30m, Nest height 12m, Girth of the nest tree at chest height (DBH)-211cm) and *Cinnamomum ceddodaphne* (Tree height-35m, Nest height-20m, DBH-415cm) trees. We are not sure which primary nest-cavity makers made these holes. However, available literature says that the Collared Falconets use old nest holes of barbets (Ali and Ripley 1983), woodpeckers (Grimmett *et al.* 1998) and occasionally holes in buildings (del Hoyo *et al.* 1994). The nest seen in Pukri was a *Shorea robusta* dominated forest in a gentle hill slope (MSL=c 150m) surrounded by teak (*Tectona grandis*) plantation. Another nest tree was situated in a dense Tropical Moist Semi-evergreen habitat. The nest tree in Pukri was 10 m away from a footpath and one in 23 Mile Tower area was 2 m off the unmetalled forest road.

Two fledglings with their parents were seen on 10th July, 1998 and four fledglings with parents on 22nd June, 2001 on Rajabathkawa-Jamty road (c. 7 km north of Rajabathkawa) in Rajabathkawa Range. The fledglings were with uniform black on

upper wings like adults. Abdominal region was pure white instead of pale rufous as in adults. The chin and forehead were rufous instead of white in adult and the beak was rufous tinged yellowish, which was slaty black in adults. The fledglings were perched on some vantage points to look for food. Whenever parents were observed with prey, fledglings immediately approached them with rapid begging calls. The one, which got the prey reached a leafy branch to avoid disturbance and was seen discarding unwanted materials like wings, legs etc., to feed upon the edible portion. Because of theS inexperience they struggled a lot to handle the prey. Parents delivered food 18 times during our 120 minutes of observation in 2001. The prey delivered consisted of butterflies, *Cicada* sp., and small insects (n=11, 1 and 6 respectively). The same flock was observed on 25th June, 2001 and 1st July, 2001 in the same area. All the times the fledglings were fed by parents. On 18th July we noticed a lone juvenile which successfully caught a prey in the Pana hills of Buxa.

The nests and all the fledglings were seen in well-wooded natural forest. However, there were open areas such as road and small open patches around the sites, which were used as hunting ground by breeding birds. Eggs were seen during mid-April in the Burmese (Myanmar) race (*M. c. burmanicus*) (Baker 19351). Nest building and incubation have been recorded during mid April and mid May respectively by Naoroji (1997). We have seen almost

full-grown nestlings and fledglings during June and July respectively. These observations show that the peak breeding season of the species falls between April and July.

Acknowledgement

We express our sincere thanks to U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (1998-2000) and Forest Department, West Bengal (2000-2001) for financial support and Elbert Sangma, driver, Raja Sen and Dillip Roy, field assistants for their help in field studies.

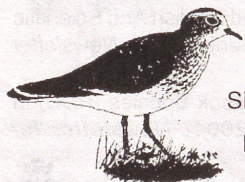
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Status of Sociable Lapwing (*Vanellus gregarius*) : A Report

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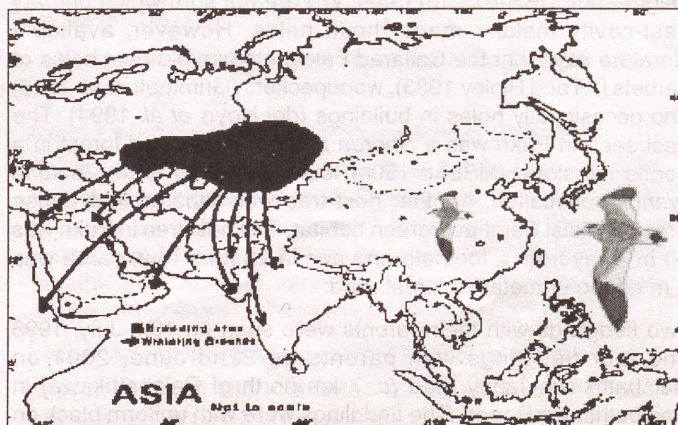


Size: 27-30 cm

Description:

Adult breeding has dark cap, white supercilia, yellow wash to sides of head and black and maroon patch on belly. Non-breeding and immature have duller head pattern, white belly and streaked breast. (Grimmett et al., Pocket Guide to the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent)

The Sociable Lapwing, also known as Sociable Plover (*Vanellus gregarius*) breeds in Kazakhstan and south-central Russia between 47° and 53° N. Breeding is scattered in this large region and the numbers are fast declining, particularly in the second half of the 20th century and certain estimates put their numbers



to about 10,000 individuals (Collar *et al.* 1994 and Tucker and Heath 1994), which is considered to be a very optimistic estimate. Currently, there are not more than 1000 breeding pairs in the total range of the species (Khrokov 2000; BirdLife International, 2001).

On its migration it has been reported from a large range of countries of Middle, Central and Southern Asia. Countries of importance in terms of its wintering grounds are India, Pakistan, Israel, Eritrea and Oman. Its wintering range is restricted between South-western Asia and North-eastern Africa in the zone from 10° to 30°N. The birds are at their breeding grounds between May end and June and by July the first fledglings have been observed. By mid-September, the birds leave their breeding grounds and reach their wintering grounds in India, Pakistan, Israel and Iraq. It is a regular visitor to India and more of a wanderer in the Asian region.

In India, the main wintering range lies in the north and west of the country, with stragglers being reported from as far as Kerala.

It has been reported from the Simla hills in Himachal Pradesh, in October 1932 (specimen BNHS). Ludhiana, Murinda and Arniwala in Punjab, Ambala (1865-1868), Darazpur (1968-1996), Sirsa (1861, 1931, 1933) and Sultanpur (1876-77, 1984, 1988) and up to 25 birds in February 1993 (Holman 1993), 55 birds, February 1993 (K.D. Bishop).

There have also been stray sightings from Uttar Pradesh (latest in Meerut, October, 1898 and Lucknow, December 1898-99) and Madhya Pradesh (6-7 birds, December 1990, January, 1991,

Saxena, Shrivastav 1992). Stragglers have been reported from Maharashtra, Karnataka, Kerala and Bihar.

In Rajasthan, recent record of five, October-1999 (Sangha 2000), 15, January 1996 and 11, February 1988 (Sangha 2000). 22 birds seen at Bharatpur in 2002 (Bikram Grewal, posted on the net).

In Gujarat, Deesa in October 1875 (BMNH, Butler 1875-1877), Kutch (Stoliczka 1872), Wadhwan, 1870 (Lloyd 1873) Gondal 1870 (Lloyd 1873), and Thol lake 7 birds, November 7, 1999 and 38 birds, November, 21, 1999 (Singh, H.S. Geer report, June 2002). It was again sighted at Thol lake on three occasions, 11 birds October 15, 2000, 18 birds, October 22, 2000 and 2 birds, October 26, 2000 (own sightings).

Habitat: In its breeding areas the sociable lapwing has a sporadic and irruptive pattern of semi-colonial breeding mainly in the transition zones between *Stipa* and *Artemisa* grassland steppes where bare saline areas near water bodies are preferred. Nesting has also been reported from grazed or heavily grazed areas with low vegetation cover.

In the wintering grounds it prefers dry plains, sandy wastes and short-grass areas often near water (Collar et al. 1994, Tucker and Heath 1994). In South Asia the bird prefers dry cultivated or uncultivated plains, sandy plains and areas of short grass often adjacent to water (Adam-1873, Hume-1972-73, Butler 1875-77). But in contrast Baker (1922-30) stated that the birds preferred cultivated or semi-cultivated tracts rather than stony or sandy wastes and deserts. Ticehurst 1922-24, states that the species usually avoids marshy places, and frequents wastelands, ploughed fields with tender wheat and similar habitats.

Food: Birds feed in typical plover fashion picking up food from the ground, at times probing between clods and around the base of small plants (Roberts 1991-92). In its breeding grounds it feeds almost entirely on insects (*Coleoptera* and their larvae), grasshoppers (*Orthoptera*) and moth larvae (*Lepidoptera*) (Cramp and Simmons 1983). Butler (1875-77) had found similar contents along with freshly sown grains of wheat and green caterpillars in specimens taken by him.

Threats: Threats include various factors starting from human activities principally at its breeding grounds. They are:

Habitat loss arising from over-grazing, reduced grazing, agricultural intensification, afforestation, drainage, irrigation, and oil and gas extraction and its transport.

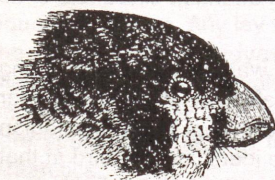
Hunting, pollution (use of Chemical fertilizers and pesticides), desertification, urbanisation, tourism, industry, roads and railways. High incidence of predation by Rooks (*Corvus frugilegus*) and foxes (*Vulpes*) in its breeding grounds.

In India, this bird favours open areas and fallow land but these are fast disappearing. In particular, grassland is being taken over by *Prosopis juliflora* (Sangha, 1999). Also large tracts of land in the dry areas of Gujarat and Rajasthan are being brought under cultivation which might be a cause for its further decline, although the species has often been reported in cultivated fields.

Conclusion: Northwest India, and in particular Gujarat and Rajasthan have been regions that have been favoured by the Sociable lapwing for its wintering grounds. Recent records from Gujarat (November-1999, 3 sightings, 45-48 birds and October-2000, 3 sightings, 31 birds, Thol lake, Kadi Taluka, Mehasana district) are a welcome sign and it becomes very necessary that all sightings be published in the major newsletters. It has been mentioned in the past that important sightings are often not shared on the national level. This only adds to the dearth of information that exists on such threatened birds. Sightings regularly published also helps one in determining the range extension/reduction of a particular species.

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It was 23rd February 2004 and the morning was foggy and cloudy but sunshine was anticipated in the late hours of the day. Our team consisted of four foreign tourists, a local NGO worker, a forester, a friend of mine and myself. We were to see the very rare 'Black breasted parrotbill' (*Paradoxornis flavirostris*) in the heart of the 'Dibru Saikhowa National Park'. This park harbours one of the most endangered birds in the world; the 'white winged wood duck' (*Cairina scutulata*). The black breasted parrotbill is no exception, being enlisted in the Red data book. We looked forward for a good sighting of this endemic and vulnerable species.

The Dibru river marks the border of the park. The water current was slow and hence we travelled upstream aboard a motor launch. A few Gangetic dolphins proceeded in a series of leaps ahead of our boat. Little and large cormorants were everywhere along with Egrets, Ruddy Shelducks, Common pochards, Red crested pochards and a few Black headed gulls.

After the Blackbreasted Parrotbill

Arnob Bora, Gillapukhuri Road, Tinsulia 786 125, Assam

We got off the boat and after a short walk entered a tall grassland following a frequently used 'bovine path'. A male tiger seemed to dominate the area as the pugmarks were found everywhere. An abrupt pandemonium kicked out in the thickets. Blended clucking notes revealed the presence of Babblers. Two elegant Chestnut-capped babblers (*Timalia pileata*) showed up among the reeds. Moments later, a low pitched clucking resonated through. This time it was a Jerdon's babbler (*Chrysomma altirostris*). After a short display it retreated into the thickets. The callback device which we set for the parrotbill produced no desired effect. Our frustration was apparent and the other grassland birds were hitherto unnoticed. The marsh babbler (*Pellorneum ruficeps*) and Jerdon's bushchat (*Saxicola jerdoni*), which are also present, were not seen.

"There goes the devil we are looking for", someone uttered. There was an abrupt loud chattering and something flashed past and

landed a few feet away inside the thickets. We stood still and after a few long wary seconds it showed up; nothing more or less than the black breasted parrotbill. Its rufous brown plumage with a black breast and of course, the parrot-like beak made it unmistakable. There were more of them and as they all hopped among the reeds, our eyes didn't wink even for a fraction of a second and then suddenly they all vanished. Calls were heard until much later in the morning but the only thing that showed up was the Jerdon's babbler.

A grand sight indeed ! That particular area in the park seemed to host a number of these birds. Local villagers claim to have come

CORRESPONDENCE

REPORT OF LESSER KESTREL (*Falco naumanni* Fleischer) FLOCK NEAR THOSEGHAR, SATARA DT. MAHARASHTRA
SANJAY THAKUR¹ and APARNA WATVE², ¹Bhoi Ali, Ghorawadi, Talegaon. ²Agharkar Research Institute, Pune 411 004.

On 17th January 2004, we were on a lateritic plateau near Thoseghar, Satara District, Maharashtra. Our aim was to record vegetation on a plateau which has been developed as a large windmill farm. At 10 am, the sky was clear and the windmills were rotating with high velocity wind. At this time we sighted 16 raptors hovering and swooping over the dried, half burnt plateau. We stopped to have clear and closer look. The birds seemed to have flight like Falcons [common kestrel] but were smaller in size. In flight they appeared chubby, with a short and rounded body ending suddenly at the vent. They had pale throat and grey sides. Underwings were less barred with dark tips and grey greater coverts above. The grey tail had broad black-band tipped with white. After hovering, it used to suddenly swoop to catch some prey and perch immediately.

We were lucky to have a good look at the male, perched on an electric pole. Back of its head was dark grey. It had dark brown iris, yellow cere and orbital skin and was without dark moustachial stripe. Its back was spotless rufous with grey upperwing coverts and tertials. The wing tips were reaching close to tail tip. Suddenly it turned in our direction and we could see its streakless pale rufous belly, paler throat, feet yellow with whitish claws. The bird keyed out to be LESSER KESTREL - *Falco naumanni* Fleischer as per Grimmett et al. (1998).

Lesser kestrel is known to be widespread in old world, breeding from Siberia and North America throughout central Asia and eastern China, and wintering chiefly in sub Saharan Africa (Zafar-ul Islam & Rahmani, 2002). It is mainly a grassland preferring bird which hunts crickets, grasshoppers and beetles in dry open areas. In India it has been recorded in many states as a rare winter visitor (Ali and Ripley, 2001) and is known to be a passage migrant. According to recent estimates of its population throughout the world, it is declared as having vulnerable status (BirdLife International, 2001). Large flocks have been recorded in the past around Sholapur by Davidson and Wenden in 1878 (Prasad, 2003). But recent reports in Maharashtra are of a few birds from Western Ghats as well as eastern region.

The flock seen on Thoseghar plateau, had seven males and the rest, females and juveniles. Our record confirms that flocks still

across this bird frequently for a long time but infrequently in recent years. It's probably because of the decline in grassland areas due to heavy siltation and erosion during flood. Very few authentic reports of this bird has been recorded despite it being a resident species. But even a little publicity is enough to attract flocks of foreign and Indian tourists every season. We hope regular interactions with man won't alter the habitat of this shy bird, which has successfully concealed itself and survived in this region. The black breasted parrotbill seems to be flourishing in this part of the globe and a few more steps in the preservation of its grassland habitat will ensure its survival.

migrate through Maharashtra in winter. Presence of extensive windmill farms on the passage route may affect the migration of this vulnerable species. Further research needs to be carried out regarding other threats along the passage routes.

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JULY 1964 - A STRANGE VISITOR FROM ANTARCTICA,
K.S. HARSHAVARDHANA BHAT, 3rd Main, 3rd Cross,
Hayagrivanagar, Indrali, Udupi 576 102

It was a day in July 1964. A strange duck-size bird was spotted by a villager in a water tank at Pitrodi in Udyavara. The bird, tired and hurt, was taken to the ice factory of Madhwaraj of Malpe, who was a very popular man being an MLA at that time. At Malpe this dark coloured bird attracted much attention since one of its legs was banded with a ring!

The bird perhaps, was an accidental waif storm tossed during heavy monsoon gales. But it was fortunate to be alive. The popular local daily "Navabharath" reported the arrival of this rare pelagian bird. The only person who would have identified this bird at that time was Sri. Pangal Gopalkrishna Nayak of Katpadi. He was informed about the arrival of the bird by Kochikar Raghuram Pai's brother who had a sketch of the bird sent to him. On hearing the news Mr. Nayak first went to S.L. Bhat of the "Rayabhari". There he quickly identified the bird as a Skua - a bird resembling a Sea Gull in appearance but with brown plumage. Predatory in habit, Skuas spend most of their time in the vast open sea in search of fish and shrimps. They also eat eggs and young ones of other birds, and sometimes adult birds too. Mr. Nayak referred to the book "Birds of America" brought to him by his younger brother Dr. Pangal Sitharam Nayak who still lives in the United States. It was difficult to identify the exact species of Skua because several species of Skuas were depicted in the book. So Mr. Nayak went to Malpe to see the bird as well as to identify it on hand accurately. Another birdwatcher Acharya Dwarakanath joined him at Malpe.

The bird was gasping. After examining the characters of the bird, Mr. Nayak identified it as Antarctic Skua, also called Maccormick's Skua (*Cathercta skua maccormicki*). The imprint on the ring of the bird's leg revealed, "U.S. Fish and Wild life Service 647-27146". Mr. Nayak asked the bird to be kept close to ice since it was a visitor from the cold place. But unfortunately after three days the bird died. At this stage Mr. Nayak says no one believed it to have migrated from Antarctica.

Mr. Nayak took the dead specimen to Dr. S.S. Godbole, Emeritus Professor of Anatomy, Kasturba Medical College, Manipal and briefed him on sending the specimen to BNHS, Bombay Natural History Society, Bombay, after stuffing. Even though Dr. Godbole was reluctant to stuff the bird in the beginning, Mr. Nayak explained that the bird appeared to be an outstanding specimen and since it travelled all the way from Antarctica, he felt the bird deserved preservation. After a thought Dr. Godbole replied "O.K. young man, I will do it for you".

The stuffed specimen was sent through Pyloor Laxminarayana Rao by Indian Airlines flight, including all the details of the bird to deliver it to the BNHS at Bombay. The BNHS was quick to rule out the possibility of this bird arriving from the South Pole region. It said there were no earlier records of the bird migrating this far. It was Jerry Serrao, a researcher at the BNHS, a native of Udupi district, who sent the details of the bird and its ring to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at the Smithsonian Institute. Here an astonishing fact was revealed by the Americans. They had banded this Skua at their base in the Antarctic Peninsula! Date of Ringing: 5.3.1961, ringed by the United States Research Programme (U.S.A.R.P.) Bird Banding Project, Antarctica. Place of ringing: Gonzales Videla Base, Antarctic Peninsula (c. 64.49.S, 62.51.W). The closest landmark for this base is the southern tip of Chile! The Americans confirmed the identification of the bird in India by Mr. Nayak as positive. The National Geographic Magazine featured an article on their project in Antarctica in which there was a reference to Skuas being ringed and freed from their research bases.

In recent years there are instances of some Skuas reaching equatorial waters. Any lay man would have mistakenly identified the Skua found at Udyavara for an ordinary eagle, but for Madhwaraj, says Mr. Nayak, who acknowledges the keen interest shown by him on what is now known to be the only record of the rare species of this bird for the Indian seaboard from distant Antarctica.



SIGHTING OF PAINTED STORK, ORIENTAL WHITE IBIS and FERRUGINOUS POCHARD IN CHHATTISGARH. RAVI SHANKER KANOJE, 84- Digvijay Marg, Rajnandgaon, Chattisgarh 491441 and M.A. AZIZ, Kikabhai M.A. Husain, P.O.Box 4 Rajnandgaon, Chhattisgarh 491441.

Painted stork *Mycteria leucocephala*, was a common resident once distributed throughout India, now rarely seen and is a near – threatened bird. On 27th, February 2000 we observed a pair at Bargahi Tank near Ghumka village. We saw 7 individuals on 17th January 2003 at Badhaitola Tank near Khairagarh town in Rajnandgaon District.

Oriental White Ibis *Threskiornis melanocephalus*. This species was a common resident found throughout India which is now

near threatened. We observed a pair regularly at Manohar Sagar Dam on River Bagh from 2000 to 2002 and at Bargahi Tank near Ghumka on 27th Feb.2000 again at Badhatola Tank near Khairagarh town on 17th January, 2003.

Ferruginous Pochard *Aythya nyroca*. This duck winters throughout India (Ali S. 1979) It is patchily distributed in central India excluding Chhattisgarh (Kazmierczak, K.2000). On 20th February, 2003 we were looking for the same migratory water birds in the Jungle Bandha, the twin tanks in the forest near Sirpur an ancient village famous for its archeological monuments and temples in Mahasamund distt. of Chhattisgarh State. We observed a pair of dark chestnut coloured ducks. After careful observation we were thrilled to conclude this was a Ferruginous pochard. The drake had a white iris.

The painted stork, oriental white Ibis and ferruginous Pochard are regarded as globally threatened (Kazmierczak K.2000) and near threatened in India (Islam M.Z. & Rahmani A.R.2002).The occurrence of these birds in Chhattisgarh is therefore worth recording.

We are grateful to Mr.Chabilal Banjare, Forest Guard, who accompanied us during our field visit at Sirpur.

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RANGE EXTENTION OF INDIAN PITTA. RAVI SHANKER KANOJE, 84, Digvijai Marg Rajnandgaon Chhattisgarh 491441

On 20th May 2002, I noticed one Indian Pitta (*Pitta brachyura*) in the courtyard of my quarters in the forest colony in the noisy town of Pithora (21 14' N and 82 31'E). Later on I saw one more Indian Pitta in the nearby jungle. The Indian Pitta is a summer visitor in Northern and Central India including the western half of newly constituted Chhattisgarh state. The occurrence of this Pitta in the eastern part of this State is clear evidence of its range extention.

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TOBACCO ADDICTION AMONG BANK MYNAS. Dr. MAMTA RAWAT, Department of Zoology, J. N. V. University, Jodhpur 342005, Rajasthan, E-mail: rawatscorner@rediffmail.com

Birds, the most cryptic creatures, their dazzling colors, appearance and their bizarre habits, have always fascinated me since my childhood.

During my Delhi visit, on January 22, 2003 at Palam Bus Stand, I observed some unusual and interesting behavior of Bank myna, *Acridotheres ginginianus*. Bank myna is adapting to human environments and is a familiar sight around village teashops picking up littered food. But these medium sized passerines were busy engulfing the saliva grimed snippets of tobacco and gutkas,

spewed by the public after chewing. Seeing this I was really taken aback. Their addiction was so severe that they were fighting over those repugnant rags. Taking into consideration the episode, it took me no time in gathering the fact that the fellows have become the aficionado of human toxicants. I also noticed similar behaviour in Jodhpur, Rajasthan on February 2, 2004 near a teashop at some distance from the J. N. V. University. These two observations are constantly perturbing me that, on the one hand we are talking about conservation and on the other we are the root cause of declining population of our beautiful neighbours.

I would like the readers to bring it to the attention of all nature lovers, that these addicts are not only harming themselves but are also roping in these innocent birds into a vicious circle of tobacco addiction.



RANDOM NOTES. P.K. RAVINDRAN, Vallisery, P.O. Avinissery, Thrissur 680 313, Kerala

These notes are based on observations made by the author over a number of years, mostly in the Kole Wetlands of Thrissur and Malappuram Districts, Kerala. The salient observations on birds were jotted down.

White-winged black tern *Chlidonias leucopterus*

The bird was first seen on 12,13, and 15th September 1998 at Enamavu area of Thrissur District. I have seen this species on several occasions at different parts of Kole Wetlands, since 1998. Once seen on 25th March 2000 on the Purathur estuary near Ponnany of Malappuram District. Upto ten birds were often seen perched on electric wires or flying over the inundated paddy fields, usually in company with Whiskered terns *Chlidonias hybrida*. In March and April most of the birds were seen in adult breeding plumage. I have seen all stages (immature, partial breeding, winter and summer plumages) of this bird.

White tailed lapwing *Vanellus leucurus* (Lichtenstein)

An adult bird was seen intermittently on December 5,6,8,14 and 25, 1998 at Enamavu area of Thrissur District. One was again seen on 27 October 2002, by Paul. P.M.K. He even heard a subdued call "Pee-wick" or "Chee-Viz".

Greyheaded lapwing *Vanellus cinereus* (Blyth)

This rare winter visitor was seen on seven dates in January, February and March 1999 at Enamavu area of Thrissur District. Its presence was later confirmed by the sighting on 21 January 2000.

Later two birds were seen on 25 January 2003 at Maranchery area of Malappuram District. All the individuals were adults with pectoral bands.

There are no previous sighting records of these three species from Kerala. Six more rare species were also recorded in this area during the last Mid-winter Waterfowl Census. They are;

1. Painted stork *Mycteria leucocephala*
2. Common teal *Anas crecca*
3. Spot billed duck *Anas poecilorhyncha*
4. Comb duck *Sarkidiornis melanotos*
5. Black tailed godwit *Limosa limosa*
6. Black capped kingfisher *Halcyon pileata*



Acknowledgement

I wish to thank P.O. Nameer, C.P. Sethumadhavan, N.K.Sathyan, Paul. P.M.K. and P.P. Sreenivasan, who accompanied me during the field trips.

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SIGHTING OF GREATER ADJUTANT STORKS IN THE WETLANDS OF NORTH BIHAR. D.N. CHOUDHARY and T.K. GHOSH. Mandar Nature Club, Bhagalpur, Bihar 812007

During February 2002, while surveying some wetlands of Bihar under the SACON project, the team consisting of Dr. T.K. Ghosh, Dr. D.N. Choudhary, Mr. Arbind Mishra, Dr. T.K. Pan, Dr. G.R. Dutta and Dr. Sunil Kumar Agrawal came across some threatened bird species.

The team sighted the greater adjutant stork *Leptoptilos dubius*, adjutant storks *L.javanicus* and other wetland birds like little and large cormorants, open bill storks (OBS), black and white ibis in large numbers.

We sighted seven lesser adjutant storks in the wetlands in Kishanganj district. We saw two greater and seven lesser adjutant storks in between Baldia chaur and Baghar bill, situated in Katihar district. While crossing the National Highway - 31 we observed two greater and three lesser adjutant storks in Madruni chowk. We also observed one greater and five lesser adjutant storks in the wetlands adjacent to Highway near Kursela in between Kursela Bridge and Kursela Bazar.

On Feb. 20, 2002 we saw three greater and seven lesser adjutant storks between Bihpur and Pasraha (Khagaria district) together with a significant number of Openbill storks.

On 16th of Feb. 2003, we sighted two greater adjutant storks near Gopalpur but there were no lesser storks.

Later, on the 2nd of March 2003 we came across a flock of seven greater adjutant storks with two lesser adjutant storks foraging separately near some roadside ditches. When we approached the birds took off and they settled on top of a silk cotton and peepal (*Ficus religiosa*) trees respectively, located at a distance of about 2 kms., east to Pasraha Rly. Station.

Local villagers report that these large adjutant storks, which are commonly known as 'Dhonk' or 'Garur' started visiting this particular area in the last few years.

Our frequent birding trips between Naugachia and Khagaria suggest that sightings of lesser and greater adjutant storks are common during January – March around Pasraha whereas they are rarely seen in the wetlands of Katihar and Kursela (in Katihar district), though lesser adjutants are sometimes found in small numbers.

We shall remain vigilant about the number and other activities of the adjutant storks in these areas.



NIDIFICATION AND SITE FIDELITY OF THE BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT HERON, (*Nycticorax nycticorax*).

P. SATHIYASELVAM, Research Fellow, Chilika Lake Project, Chandraput, Orissa.

Black-crowned Night Heron, *Nycticorax nycticorax* is a common, resident species in India. It is gregarious, crepuscular and nocturnal in habits (Ali & Ripley 1983). This colonial breeding bird was nesting at Kalijai area in Chilika Lake (190 28' and 190 54' N, 850 05' and 850 38' E.) Orissa, before the onset of the migratory season in September and October 2002. A total of 195 nests were recorded amidst a dense vegetated area, mostly dominated by *Ficus benghalensis*, *Ficus religiosa* and *Azhadirachta indica*. I recorded the clutch size of 30 nests and 60% of the nests were found with 3 eggs (3 eggs in 18 nests and 2 eggs in 12 nests). The weight of the eggs varied from 27g to 40g and the average weight of 30 eggs was 30.37 g. Later it was noted that most of the eggs had hatched successfully. In the same area, the Black-crowned Night Heron had its nest during April and May 2003. In all 127 nests were recorded out of which 25 nests were marked for recording clutch size. Out of the 25 nests 14 nests (56%) were found with 3 eggs, 10 nests with 2 eggs and one had a single egg. Fledglings were recorded in most of the nests around May. Within six months, a colony of Black-crowned Night Herons had successfully produced two broods in the same area. It seems that the species has strong site-fidelity in spite of slight decrease in the number of breeding pairs recorded in the following year (April and May 2003).

Ali & Ripley (1983) described the breeding season of the species as April-May in the Valley of Kashmir; June-July to September in North India and December to February in South India. Whereas in Chilika Lake they had two successful broods, one in the months of September-October and the other in the months of April-May. Most large birds and almost all non-passerines raise only a single brood in a season, because the incubation period and duration of parental care are generally longer in larger birds, so they have less time to rear a second brood (Lack, 1968). Even though we have records of Barn Owls (Bunn *et al.*, 1982), Bronze-winged Jacanas (Toothe, 1903) and Short-eared Owls (Witherby *et al.* 1952) having two broods are available in the literature, no such information exists for Black-crowned Night Heron. Since we do not have any published information about the nidification of the Black-crowned Night Heron its habit of having two broods in a year is interesting.

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UNUSUAL MOUNTING BEHAVIOUR OF A FEMALE SPOTTED OWLET (*Athene brama*). RAJU KASAMBE, Wildlife and Environment Conservation Society, M.R. Colony MIDC Bye-Pass, Amravati 444666

Spotted Owlet is the commonest owlet species in Amravati district. I know of a roosting pair of Spotted Owlets, since last 3 years, in Rohidas Colony, which is very near to my house. Last year this pair reared two chicks successfully. We have collected the pellets for one year from this pair. The pair roosts in an ancient Peepal *Ficus religiosa* tree, where one more Peepal tree and ancient *Ficus bengalensis* (Vatavriksha) tree also stands. After coming back from Melghat tour to study the enigmatic Forest Owlet *Heteroglaux blewittii* I got interested in knowing more about my neighbouring owlet friend.

From second of March, along with young birders, Vishal Gawali, Kishor Dudhe and Mukul Gawai I started taking time budgets of the pair of Spotted Owlets in the evening 1800 hrs. onwards till we lost contact. First day itself we were rewarded with sighting of mating thrice at 1830, 1832 and 1836 hrs. The duration of mating was one, two and four seconds respectively.

During mating one bird produced a fast *kak kak kak* sound whereas the other bird produced a fast *chil...chil...chil* sound.

One bird (male ?) which is perched on a higher branch directly mounts on the other (female?) bird. After mounting the male (?) flies off to another perch. There is courtship display after mounting which includes touching of bills and preening of each others chests and napes. Mounting was observed one to three times for durations of one to five seconds. After the mating 'the two birds sit in front of each other and sing a duet with simultaneous bobbing of heads as if wishing a "Good morning" to each other! Our 'time budgets' were going on and we expected nothing but some statistical data regarding the breeding behaviour of the owlets. But that was not destined for us. And on 11th March it happened!

At 1830hrs, as soon as the male dismounted the female after mating, the female mounted the male ! We were shocked with what we have just seen and could not believe our eyes ! We decided to watch the owlets with utmost care and precision. We did not have to wait. Only after 11 minutes, it happened again. As the first bird dismounted, the other bird mounted the first one! Now everybody was sure, it was happening! Though it was beyond the understanding of all of us there. This phenomenon might be missed by us probably because of four reasons:



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1. similar sexes (little sexual dimorphism); 2. darkness; 3. frequent changing of perches by both birds and; 4. it is unexpected. Mating behaviour was observed in the pair from March 2nd upto April 6th 2004. Some of the observations are listed here:

1. Spotted Owlets start their day (night) at around 1810 to 1845 hrs. This is delayed with the progression of summer (i.e., increase in day length) and the presence of a predator like a Red-necked Falcon *Falco chicquera* here.
2. Total number of days of observations were 26. Total number of mountings observed was 42. The bird prefers to mount directly rather than first sitting near and then mounting.
3. From 16th of March, when the probable male attempted to mount the female, the female just slipped to a nearby perch, thus avoiding mating.
4. The female mounted the male 3 times after 16th of March.
5. In total the female mounted the male on a minimum of 7 occasions. Since the owlets change perches it becomes difficult to follow which one was first or second, or rather male or female. That means on at least these 7 occasions, the female mounted the male immediately after the male demounted her.
6. Nearly every day the pair sings a duet after mounting and before losing contact. The songs are something like 'chivivivik...chivivivik...' and 'kak...kak...kak...' with simultaneous bobbing of heads. Though in any aesthetic sense the song cannot be termed as sonorous, the presentation is undoubtedly superb!
7. During mounting one owlet produces guttural 'kak.. kak ...kak..' sound whereas the other produces a 'chi...chi...chi...' sound.
8. Only once on 10th of March, the male brought a morsel, called 'kwaak' once, then 'chivivivik' four times. As the female did not turn up, the male consumed the prey itself!
9. Courtship includes touching of beaks and touching and preening of each other's chests and nape.
10. For the owlets the day (night) begins with yawning, stretching of wings and legs, cleaning of talons, and pruning of feathers.
11. Twice the male directly flew to the nest hole after mounting, on 27th and on 30th March as a nestling called.
12. When the Red-necked Falcons were around, the owlets restricted their activities and hid in the dense foliage of a nearby tree or in the nest hole.
13. Everyday at around 1845 to 1900 hrs. the owlets watered on a domestic sewage outlet and then flew to a nearby field, lamp-post or a playground.

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14. Indian Robin *Saxicoloides fulicata*, Brown Rock Chat *Cercomela fusca* nested in the temple in ruins and a Coppersmith Barbet *Megalaima haemacephala* nested in a hole in the same Peepal tree.
15. When the owlets went for watering and then for hunting, Black Drongos *Dicrurus macrocercus* mobbed them and a Bay-backed Shrike *Lanius vittatus* created much ruckus.
16. Five-striped Squirrels fearlessly roam around the owlets.
17. The owlets were always curious about the movements of a domestic cat which moved about nearby.

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DUST BATH BY ORIENTAL PIED HORNBILL (*Anthracoceros albirostris*), IN KATERNIAGHAT WILDLIFE SANCTUARY, BAHRAICH U.P.). ABDUL KALAM, M.Sc. (Final), Department of Wildlife Sciences AMU, Aligarh, U.P., Pin 202002, E-mail : Kalam_a1 @rediffmail.com

The house sparrow can be seen taking a dust bath in dry, powdery earth in the vicinity of human habitation. I have observed two Oriental Pied hornbills (*Anthracoceros albirostris*) taking a dust bath on the forest road in the scrub type forest in Katerniaghat Wildlife Sanctuary (28°15' N-81°61' E) on 4th March 2003. I was in Katerniaghat for our M.Sc., dissertation project work. Katerniaghat wildlife sanctuary is located in the Bahraich district of U.P. I was working on bird community structure in Katerniaghat from 31 Jan 2003 – 8th March 2003. In the evening, on 4th March, while I was monitoring birds on my transect in scrub type forest, two Oriental Pied hornbills suddenly came on my transect, and started taking dust bath. They were some 50m ahead of me. I observed them for about 15 minutes as they made a depression in the soil, bathed and played around. This activity is carried on by the birds not only to get rid of the pests but also to keep their plumage in good condition. I have observed this type of activity in Oriental Pied hornbill first time. This type of activity is also found in fowls, larks and game birds. I have observed this type of activity in Red Jungle fowl (*Gallus gallus*) in Katerniaghat Wildlife Sanctuary also.

The other species of hornbill I sighted were Great hornbill (*Buceros bicornis*) and Indian Grey hornbill (*Ocyrceros birostris*). The oriental Pied hornbill is quite common, especially at the edge of grassland and forest, but the Great hornbill is rare. I have observed 4-5 flocks of Oriental pied hornbill consisting of 12-16 individual in the sanctuary during my study. All the flock were seen near the grassland.

Cover: **Lesser Whistling Duck (*Dendrocygna javanica*)** is a choicely coloured bird of maroon-chestnut and pale buff. This duck signals its arrival at a wetland with a shrill musical whistling note. After nightfall, it dabbles along the shores and draws out aquatic weeds, tender shoots, and grain. It has included snails, worms and small fish in its menu. It nests in natural cavities of trees or in abandoned nests of herons or cormorants. On hatching, the ducklings jump off the nest and are escorted by the parents to the water. But its cousin, the American Wood duck (*Aix sponsa*) prefers to carry its ducklings to the water in its mouth, as a cat carries its kitten!

Photo S. Shreyas