

NEWSLETTER

FOR BIRDPWATCHERS

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THE ASHY MINIVET, PERICROCOTUS CINEREUS LAFRESN.:
AN ADDITION TO THE INDIAN AVIFAUNA

By

Rev. A. Navarro, S.J.

On 31st of January, 1965, I went out to Funnel Hill (Karnala) with some of my friends with the intention of spending the day rambling through the forest there. After a mile or so from Panvel along the Poona Road there is a comparatively new junction road that goes to Goa, Ratnagiri, Mahableshwar, etc. At the beginning the road passes through paddyfields, and only after a short distance from there does it enter and run through a beautiful forest for about three to four miles.

At practically the end of this forest to its left is situated Funnel Hill, with Karnala Fort at the top of it, one of the most picturesque spots you may love to see within sixty miles of Bombay. (Let me add in parenthesis that the charcoal makers and wood-cutters, the wolves of the forest, have for a long time now set their gaze on this beautiful haunt of God's lovely creation, but with an ulterior purpose. That intention is certainly not for the improvement of the forest but to denude the hillsides of its exuberant and beautiful vegetation so that the hill, at the time of the unmerciful monsoon, is

left to the ravages of the rains which will wash clean its soil and leave it for ever a bare hill, lifeless and bereft of all vegetation. Thus they will deprive the cultivated lands of the neighbourhood of these forests and their economic value which this near-by forest stands for!)

The forest consists of all kinds of jungle trees with small scattered patches of jungle teak-wood. The main difficulty with this forest is that from the end of February until the next monsoon there is not a drop of water to be found anywhere in it. Nevertheless this unfortunate condition, in my opinion, makes the spot all the more interesting since it has two definite seasons -- the monsoon season and the dry season. Two different groups of birds visit it -- or to put it in another way -- two different fauna. Many birds will be seen in it during both seasons; and for a certainty, some birds inhabit it in larger numbers during one season than the other.

At the beginning of the monsoon last year we saw plenty of shamas, Whistling thrushes, and Blackbirds. This group cannot easily be seen during the dry season. It is not my purpose here to give a list of all the birds that I have observed in my visits to Funnel Hill; we may leave that for another occasion. Yet we may mention a few which are of some interest, viz.: on more than one occasion I have seen the Heart-spotted Woodpecker, the Emerald Dove is pretty common, about six varieties of flycatchers have I counted on some occasions. The small sunbird, Nectarinia minima, is very common in the place where I have seen the best specimens. On my last visit there I saw for the first time the Bronzed Drongo.

However, let us now delve into the main object of this article. It must have been around 11 o'clock when I was almost at the top of the hill, on the right side of the road, when suddenly a noisy party, made up mostly of Warblers, Flycatchers, and some birds of another variety, were enjoying themselves in a delightful cacophony in a very thick patch of the forest. My attention was called by a pair of birds calling to each other incessantly. Their calls were altogether unfamiliar to me as much as their colour was. I sat down on the ground for almost ten minutes observing. Finally I was convinced that the birds I was observing were something I had never seen before. So I decided there and then to secure at least one specimen of them.

Luckily I did secure one of them. After examining it with some care I placed it, not without some misgivings, in the group of the Pied Shrike of the genus Hemipus. Later in the evening at the foot of Funnel Hill two more pairs came my way as they flew through the thickest part of the forest. Once I got home I examined the specimen more carefully and saw that it was the Ashy Minivet.

Consulting the SYNOPSIS OF THE BIRDS OF INDIA AND PAKISTAN I got all puzzled as to why Dr. Ripley had omitted the Ashy Minivet from his SYNOPSIS. The next day Mr. Daniel, the Curator of the Bombay Natural History Society, confirmed that my identification was correct and pointed out that the geographical distribution of this minivet given by Stuart Baker on the FAUNA OF BRITISH INDIA is entirely out of the Indian Union. The distribution given in the FAUNA is as follows:

"Breeding in Japan Amus and most possible Northern China -- Indo-Chinese countries, Philippines, Sumatra, Borneo, Malay -- entering south Burma as a very rare straggler only."

Hence we came to the conclusion that the specimen collected con-

-stituted a new addition to the Indian Avifauna.

Thanks to the staff of the Bombay Natural History Society, I can reproduce a few quotations from well-known ornithological papers. It is curious to note that all unanimously considered the Ashy Minivet to be not only a rare bird, even within their geographical status, but also the most outstanding and conspicuous species within the genus:

THE BIRDS OF THE PHILIPPINES, Parts III and IV, by Hachisuka, p. 367: 'This is a Palaearctic breeding bird wintering in the Tropics and appears in the Philippines during migration only and is, as a rule, very rare. It is at times however in considerable numbers.'

The Ibis, 1877, Vol. I, 4th series, p. 19: R. Bowdler Sharpe writes: 'This is the first accorded occurrence of the species in Borneo (probably January 1877) shot in the early part of the NE. Monsoon.'

FAUNA OF BRITISH INDIA, Birds Vol. II, p. 334 E.C. Stuart Baker says: 'This is the most migratory of all the minivets.'

Gould's BIRDS OF ASIA, Part VII-XII, states: "The Greg Pericrocotus is unquestionably the rarest species of the genus, there being few museums in which an example is to be found. In its structure and the general disposition of its markings it is in every respect a typical member of the genus, while in the total absence of red or yellow colouring in either sex, it differs very conspicuously from every other that is at present known. A marked difference occurs in the sexes; the female being destitute of the white forehead and of the jet black back of the head and nape of the male; the sides of his breast and flanks are also more strongly washed with light grey; but with the exception of these distinctions they are very similar.

'It is a native of Luzon and the Philippine Islands.'

CHECK-LIST OF BIRDS OF THE WORLD, Vol. IX, footnote to p. 268, states: 'Pericrocotus divaricatus divaricatus (Pericrocotus cinicus) -- Ashy Minivet -- Some consider P. divaricatus a subspecies of P. roseus, but I prefer to treat the two as together comprising a super species.'

As any morsel of information that can enlighten and be helpful to know more about this rare species of Minivets may be useful, I will state my brief observation at Funnel Hill.

On the two occasions I saw the Minivets, I noticed that they move in pairs and in patches of thick forest in the light foliage canopies of trees about 20 feet in height. In spite of the birds being noticed to be moulting the conditions of their flying feathers revealed that they have covered a very long distant flight.

If the Ashy Minivet is considered to be one of the most rare species of the genus for its remarkable change and its coloration with absolute absence of red in the male and yellow in the female, certainly it is not less remarkable in its geographical distribution, for it seems to have abandoned the usual geographical distribution occupied by most of the Minivets careering from north and south China, Indo-Chinese countries, Malay, Burma, Assam, Sikkim, Nepal, and India in general. The geographical area covered by the Ashy Minivet appears to have centred around the Pacific countries -- from Japan, the Philippine Islands, Borneo, Malay and Sumatra in the Indian Ocean. If it enters into the mainland or the Indo-Chinese continent it appears in its migratory flights.

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A PEAHEN NESTS ON A ROOF

By

(Mrs.) Usha Ganguli

On August 25 1964, Mrs. Bani Das Gupta my neighbour reported that a peahen had laid eggs on her roof! I went to see the nest. A wide ledge on her roof with a 15 inch high wall round it was practically covered by the creeper Bignonia venusta and the peahen had laid three large dull white eggs on one side of it. Mrs. Das Gupta told me that the first egg was laid on the 21st evening and the others followed on alternate evenings. She said the hen did not come to the nest at night and left them exposed for long hours during the morning. She covered the eggs from about two in the afternoon and left some time in the evening. While the hen was away, Mrs. Das Gupta covered the eggs every day with a newspaper which the hen removed every afternoon before she sat down to her nest.

A total of five eggs was laid. I do not know when the hen began to incubate properly but once she started to do so she sat very closely leaving the nest only for about fifteen minutes every morning. Mrs. Das Gupta mentioned that every time the hen left the nest she called a loud ghank and was answered by another bird from the Ridge nearby!!

Even when it rained heavily she sat stoically looking quite bedraggled.

Mrs. Das Gupta sometimes threw some rice and green leaves, but the hen didnot touch the food which attracted other birds which ate it sitting within a few inches of the hen.

A few days later one egg was discarded by the hen. It had a hole in it.

On September 24th, Mrs. Das Gupta telephoned at about 7.30 a.m. to say that the eggs had hatched early in the morning. I went there immediately and saw that the hen was sitting quietly. Two little chicks were sticking out their heads from under the mother's wing. One by one all four came out. They were quite wobbly, though their legs were well developed. Each was showing the dully whitish egg tooth over the bill. The chicks were pale buff underneath and dull dark brown on top including the back of the neck and the crown. The sides of the face were pale buff. The wings were practically the same dull brown colour as the back with two thin double white bars and black dots inside each double whitish bar. These dropped now and then exposing the buff flanks and the buff sides of the dark back. Each bird had a tiny cone of dark feathers at the back of the head -- just the beginning of the crest. The bill and legs were flesh colour -ed and the dark eyes had buff rings round them.

After about ten minutes of toddling about they disappeared under the hen who lifted her breast slightly to accommodate them. Then the chicks came out every fifteen minutes or so, walked about 5 to 10 minutes and went under the hen's wings or breast and peeped now and then from under the wings. The hen stood up a little after 9 a.m. Then I saw that she was covering the broken egg shels. She walked on the wall of the ledge, watched, and seemed to listen carefully turning her head in all directions. In twenty minutes she sat down covering the egg shells. She stood up once more an hour later, walked about the ledge for a few minutes then sat a little forward but still covering the egg shells.

Meanwhile the chicks had become quite active in the last three hours. They started taking little jumps and shaking their tiny wings by way of exercise. One of them went up the hen's back. Several times one jumped right over another. On two occasions while three chicks rested under the mother's wings (invisible to me) one chick sat beside the mother with its legs folded under it.

They had started pecking from 8.30 a.m. They pecked the floor; little sticks, leaves of the creeper, the hen's bill and body, anything that they could touch with their bill. Twice I saw the hen tear a few leaves off the creeper and eat them. Once the chicks tried to snatch a leaf from the mother's bill. The hen never once tried to feed them with leaves, insects, or any -thing. The chicks pecked at everything, but I did not see them eat anything except once when I thought a chick picked up perhaps a tiny insect and ate it. After 11 a.m. a kite swooped on the chicks but they ran under the hen who did not move or try to defend them in any way. By 12 noon the chicks were taking jumps at least two feet in height! One chick jumped on the mother's neck and as she turned her face towards the chick, it started to peck her eye! The chicks were completely silent all the while. The hen called only one -- the deep ghank call. I waited till 1 p.m. and my sister was there till 3 p.m. but the hen did not move much nor did it feed the chicks. She stood up two or three times, walked about for a few minutes but most of the time she sat in the glaring sun, pushing her head occasionally under some overhanging branches of the creeper. She stayed the night on the ledge with the chicks.

I could not visit the hen till 8.30 a.m. the next morning. She was still sitting there but the chicks were not visible. Soon they came out from under the hen's wing. They were very active by now. One of them jumped on to the 15 inch wall of the ledge. I thought it would jump down to the garden below, but it jumped down to join the other chicks on the ledge. Now they were jumping on to the hen's back, tail, and neck, walking a few steps on her back and slipping and sliding down her body. They were pecking vigorously at everything, but no food was there to eat.

I returned by 9.15 a.m. It had started to drizzle by 9.30 a.m. Suddenly I heard the loud call of the peahen -- ghang-gho, ghang-gho. I looked up and saw the hen on another neighbour's roof. I went back immediately and learnt that one chick had jumped down the ledge on to the garden below (about 10-12 ft.) and disappeared among the bushes. At this the mother immediately left the other chicks to look for the chick in the garden. She could not find it and was terribly distracted, walking about on the lawn, going from roof to roof and then on to a tree on the lawn, and back again to the ledge where the rest of the chicks were wandering about. She was completely oblivious of the people who had gathered round the garden, and was calling frequently. After each loud ghang-gho she would call a short soft, kuk kuk, a call I had not heard before. Could this combination of two calls be a special call of despair? Thus it went on -- the frantic search and the loud and soft call of despair. She had lost complete interest in the other chicks. They had ceased to exist for her. Two of the chicks had got entangled in the grape-vine growing over the porch. They were rescued and brought back to the ledge. Now they started making a soft cheep, cheep noise and called almost continuously. Sometimes they walked on the low wall of the ledge. The hen came back to the ledge again and again and the chicks ran under her tail, but she ignored them and walked up and down the wall craning her neck, peering anxiously over the wall for the lost chick. Thrice she absent-mindedly put a foot over a chick while walking and only at the cry of the chick lifted her foot.

She did not seem to recognize them and looked quite demented. Ultimately, by late morning or forenoon she left the garden, never to return.

The chicks were put in a cage. Mrs. Das Gupta fed them on chopped earthworms, chopped spinach, millet and boiled egg. They liked the food and thrived on it. They became greatly attached to her and followed her everywhere. Some weeks later one of them was scalded by boiling water and died. Another was caught between a spring door and one of its wings was badly damaged. This same chick was caught by a mongoose but was rescued in time. At four months age they are now the size of domestic chicken sporting an inch high crest. There is a faint greenish sheen in the neck feathers. The top of the head is dark sooty brown. I am told that they often dance lifting their short tail coverts. They are fed on raw minced meat, millet, spinach. They have a great liking for raddish and Nasturtium leaves from the lawn. They are let out for some time every day. They take sand baths everyday. They peck the walls regularly for lime and will peck everything, shoes, saries, bare toes, anything that they can lay their bill on. I cannot make out their sex, but perhaps both of them are males.

Mrs. Das Gupta told me that she has developed a severe cough lately, and when the chicks are out in the garden, every time that they hear the harrowing cough they run to the veranda and hide under a chair! Perhaps the sound reminds them of the Peahen's kuk, kuk call which was a distress signal.

Last year a peahen laid eggs in another neighbour's garden and when the chicks hatched she lead them to Mrs. Das Gupta's garden where the chicks were chased, and two were caught. The next day I saw the hen for a moment in my garden with a lone chick. She had lost all the others.

In 1962 a peahen had nested under a neem tree (Azadirachta indica) whose base was covered with bushes and wild grass. This tree was on the road in front of Mrs. Das Gupta's house. As soon as these chicks hatched, she flew up the neem tree and began calling ghang-gho, ghang-gho and never came near the chicks. I wonder if it is the same peahen that has been nesting in this neighbourhood for the last three years.

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BIRDS IN A CALCUTTA GARDEN

By

J. N. McKelvie

Soon after my wife and I arrived in Calcutta in early April 1964, we moved into a house in Ballygunge and began to make a record of birds seen in, or flying over, our garden. My earliest record is dated the 11th April and in the period up to 31st July the following 40 species were observed:

Jungle Babbler (Turdoides somervillei), Bluethroated Barbet (Megalaima asiatica), Coppersmith (Megalaima haemacephala), Redvented Bulbul (Pycnonotus cafer), Redwhiskered Bulbul (Pycnonotus jocosus), Little Cormorant (Phalacrocorax niger), Common House Crow (Corvus splendens), Indian Jungle Crow (Corvus macrorhynchos), Pied Crested Cuckoo (Clamator jacobinus), Indian Darter (Anhinga melanogaster), Spotted Dove (Streptopelia chin-

ensis), Black Drong, or King-Crow (Dicrurus adsimilis), Cattle Egret (Bubulcus ibis), Indian Pond Heron, or Paddybird (Ardeola grayii), Whitebreasted Kingfisher (Halcyon smyrnensis), Common Pariah Kite (Milvus migrans), Koel (Eudynamys scolopacea), Bank Myna (Acridotheres ginginianus), Common Myna (Acridotheres tristis), Jungle Myna (Acridotheres fuscus), Pied Myna (Sturnus contra), Blackheaded Oriole (Oriolus xanthornus), Spotted Owlet (Athene brama), Blossomheaded Parakeet (Psittacula cyanocephala), Green Parakeet (Psittacula krameri), Tree Pie (Dendrocitta vagabunda), Blue Rock Pigeon (Columba livia), Magpie Robin (Copsychus saularis), Indian Roller, or Blue Jay (Coracias benghalensis), Brown Shrike (Lanius cristatus), House Sparrow (Passer domesticus), Purple Sunbird (Nectarinia asiatica), Purplerumped Sunbird (Nectarinia zeylonica), Common Swallow (Hirundo rustica), House Swift (Apus affinis), Tailorbird (Orthotomus sutorius), Grey Tit (Parus major), Whitebacked Vulture (Gyps bengalensis), Forest Wagtail (Motacilla indica), Golden-backed Woodpecker (Brachypternus benghalensis).

Most of these 40 species have been resident throughout the summer months and many of them are of relatively frequent occurrence; the migrants include the Forest Wagtail (one record only, on 20th April), the Brown Shrike (seen on half-a-dozen occasions between 12th April and 28th April, but not recorded in May, June, July or August), and the Common Swallow. The cormorants and darters, cattle egrets and paddybirds were seen flying over the garden, usually in the evenings, the first two heading west, the latter generally flying eastwards at that time. My wife and I also saw flights of duck (Whistling Teal?) between the 16th and 21st April and what looked like geese (Nukta?) between the 13th May and 3rd June, in every case at or near sunset, flying east.

Of equal interest to the writer are the birds he has not yet seen in his garden. These include the Green Barbet (Megalaima zeylanica), Golden Oriole (Oriolus oriolus), Common Green Bee-eater (Merops orientalis), Brahminy Myna (Sturnus pagodarum), Neophron (Neophron percnopterus), Nightjar (Caprimulgus asiaticus), Crow-pheasant (Centropus sinensis), Common Hawk-Cuckoo (Hierococcyx varius), Hoopoe (Upupa epops), and the Indian Robin (Saxicoloides fulvicata).

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ATTACHMENT TO WINTER QUARTERS IN A
BLUE ROCK THRUSH

By

S. S. Saha

Bird Section, Zoological Survey of India, Calcutta 13

The quadrangle enclosed within the main building of the Indian Museum in Calcutta, consists of geometrically patterned stone walks, archaeological statues, flower beds, and residual patches of grass.

Some time in March 1961, one day I noticed an unfamiliar, dark-coloured bird in this quadrangle, perched on the corner of the first floor cornice, from where it dived now and then to the flower beds and grass below to pick up insects. Viewed through field glasses, it looked like the Blue Rock Thrush, which observation was later confirmed when it was identified as Monticola solitarius pandoo. It was seen there every day

till April 1961, after which it was seen no more. However, early in October that year, the bird reappeared at the same place, that is, in the quadrangle of the Museum. On 6 March 1962, it was trapped in a mist net, banded with a red plastic ring round the leg, and released. It stayed in the quadrangle till the end of April 1962. Since then this particular bird with the red plastic ring, has been regularly seen in the Museum building from September/October till following March/April. And, as I write this note, it is still there.

Every day it is seen in the quadrangle from early morning hours till late afternoon when it leaves for its roosting site. In the morning, before the Museum opens to the visitors, it is seen busy feeding in the flower beds and grass. One can, during this time, hear its melodious call also. Later in the day, however, it rests most of the time in some corner of the cornice, once in a while coming down to pick up an insect or flying from one corner to another.

This is the fifth year in succession that the same individual bird has been seen in the same spot every year during September/October to March/April.

Blue Rock Thrush is known to winter in Calcutta area, but so far I have not seen any except the present bird in built-up locations. From this point of view, the present case is of some interest. Furthermore, this case shows that Blue Rock Thrush also returns to the same spot on migration.

REVIEW

CONSERVATION AND YOU. By Allen S. Hitch and Marian Soresen. pp. 126. D. Van Nostrand Company Inc. Price \$3.50.

This is a beautifully produced and illustrated book which attempts to tell the American citizen in a serious but simple way how his country has been despoiled in the past and what he can do now to make the future safe. It is seldom that the blurb on the cover of a book accurately describes its contents but in this case the blurb is so excellent, that I think the best way to describe the book would be to quote it in full.

"In 1620, it is said, America's virgin forests were so vast that a squirrel could travel through the treetops from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mississippi River without once touching ground. A mere 300 years later man had destroyed forever one third of the mighty forests, stripped away one third of the top soil, turned once lush and fertile valleys into barren lifeless deserts and racked up an incredible toll of mass wildlife slaughter.

... "The authors cite vivid historic cases to show how ignorance (and greed) has brought ruin and desolation since ancient times (e.g. many Biblical lands, as well as Greece, which were obviously rich and fertile are now barren) and they give warning that today we face grave problems if we are to preserve not only our wildlife and wilderness areas but also the delicate balance of nature on which our own survival depends."

"The coming decade will present a crisis in conservation, showing the effects of today's air and water pollution, manufacturing wastes disposal of radioactive materials and widespread use of dangerous pesticides...."

The book is thoroughly practical and it tells the individual what he can do to conserve the resources of the country. The lesson is something every Indian can usefully take to heart for we

too are busy abusing and despoiling our countryside with both our hands.

L.F.

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Karnala and the Ashy Minivet

Rev. Br. A. Navarro, S.J., whose article appears in this issue, is to be congratulated on his discovery of the Ashy Minivet in Karnala. Those of you who have not visited this area must do so soon for the woodcutter's axe unfortunately is in action, and this lovely evergreen forest may soon lose its basic character. Some months ago Dr. Salim Ali and Mr. Horace Alexander were roughly handled by members of a liquor gang who were obviously afraid that birdwatchers might come across things less innocent than birds during the course of their stroll.

Karnala is pre-eminently suited for being converted into a sanctuary for birds and animals. It is still completely unspoilt. It is a historic spot, and is accessible by road, and it still harbours forms of life which have vanished from neighbouring areas.

The Bombay Natural History Society, the Ornithological Zoo, Dhrangadhra, our own Club, and all others who have the least affection of our countryside must work for this objective. Would some of our more active members suggest a course of action.

CORRESPONDENCE

Newsletter stirs boyhood memories.

I enjoyed reading the December issue of the Newsletter and yet was sad to read Mrs. Usha Ganguli's article about the birds she saw at Ooty. It stirred so many happy boyhood memories and made me thoroughly homesick for dear India.

S. K. Reeves,

18, Eastwick Drive, Gt. Bookham,
Surrey, England

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Birdlife in Delhi.

Although we have no pear trees in our garden, we have a brace of Grey Partridges. Although our garden is in the middle of New Delhi, with much used roads on two sides, the birds seem quite unperturbed by traffic.

We get called, by them, daily between six and half past. And once or twice a week they come and have tea with us in the afternoons between 5 and 6.

On 18th March we had a small teaparty on the lawn. The pair had theirs 35 yards away, taking no notice of us. We had welcome visitors. They did not. Each time a crow swooped down at them, one or the other would make a rocket-assisted V.T.O.L. take-off, 4 to 5 feet high, straight at the intruder. This happened about half a dozen times in as many minutes.

: 10 :

The Skimmers are with us, down on the Jumna, and will soon be nesting. I spent an amusing 15 minutes the other day watching the courting antics of one couple. I recommend them as entertainment to my Delhi colleagues.

W.D.C. Erskine Crum,
New Delhi

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The habit of the Koel.

I heard the koel calling day before yesterday (3 February). It stopped piping exactly on 5th December 1964. This means that summer will be early this year. A peculiar thing that I have been watching for the past two months is that every morning a host of sparrows, a few bulbuls and sometimes a myna come and drink the dew drops on the leaves of my (sic) inspite of it being very cold. They only drink these dew drops and not the water anywhere else. This is peculiar and I wonder if anyone else has noticed this.

A. David,
Delhi

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