

NEWSLETTER

FOR BIRDWATCHERS

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A Flamingo-hunter's Journal: Part One

By

R. A. Stewart Melliush

It is some years now since I added the Lesser Flamingo, Phaeniconaias minor, to my private little list of unusual vagrants to be on the watch for. Since I live on the south-east coast and my hunts through the published literature have brought no southern records to light it must be admitted that I am absurdly optimistic in matters of this kind. We apparently have to go back ninety-odd years to the ninth volume of Stray Feathers for a notice of the bird's occurrence anywhere near my haunts, and even then Hume's correspondent found it no further south than Secunderabad. But flamingoes are known to be great wanderers, and I persuaded myself that there was no reason why some of the smaller species should not take it into their heads one winter to roam south for a change, and exhibit themselves there to my view.

I felt a lot less stupid about all this when I uncovered the fact that the Bombay Natural History Society's team which visited Chilka Lake in January 1967 had obtained specimens of minor. (It is deplorable that no report of this potentially interesting jaunt has yet been published.) Chilka is even further away than Secunderabad, but this record encouraged me greatly. It demonstrated that the species knew of the existence of an east coast and, what is more, had gone to the trouble of visiting it recently. The actual latitude it attained (to the knowledge of observers) did not seem to me anything like as important as the mere fact of its having reached the coast at all.

Early this year, to my great delight, I found Lesser Flamingoes for myself, on an expedition to Point Calimere in Tanjore district, Madras, and so justified my years of optimism. What follows is lifted from my journal. There is a lot of irrelevant surplus stuff here, mixed in with the phaeniconaiascopy, I am afraid; in fact the flamingoes only come into the picture occasionally. But a diary is a diary and it reads poorly if you meddle with it too much.

12 FEBRUARY 1968

... After Karaikal, via Nagore, Nagapattinam, Tiruturaipoondi, to

Kodikkarai (that is, more or less, Point Calimere). Arrived in time for a walk along the shore at sundown. Two Terek Sandpiper, a Turnstone, Whimbrel, Kentish and Little Ringed Plover.

The light of Calimere lighthouse seems to flash three times, once a second, and then pause for four seconds.

Thambooswamy cottage (the rest-house at Kodikkarai) has noisy fellow-occupants, policemen of some sort. But attempts to give the place a face-lift have fortunately not spoiled it yet. There are ugly curtains, and ugly new furniture, and a rostrum in the lavatory for committing a nuisance into, which supercedes the old enamel bucket arrangement; and whitewash has been splashed around; but these are trivial 'improvements'. It still has no electricity, which is a relief. Its real era of decadence will set in only when it is filled with fluorescent tubes.

13 FEBRUARY

Set off, none too early, on a two-day expedition into the swamp zone. Purpose, if any, threefold: to probe westwards into the heart of the swamp, because I've never got very far in before; to look for traces of birds breeding; and to count the flamingoes (roseus). Two haversacks and the rubber boat have to be lugged the whole way. The boat is a help only when there is enough water to float it properly. I had hoped this would be so for most of our journey; but the tide is out or the rains are over or something, and there is only a miserable thin layer of water over the mud, about three inches in most places. Where it gets a little deeper we can float the boat with the haversacks in it, which is useful; but most of the time the boat, as well as the haversacks, has to be carried. PJ (my companion) and I 'share' the boat-carrying; which means I muck about with field-glasses and telescope and notebook and try to look as if I am too busy to bother with boats, and PJ plods along with the boat on his head.

A rickety-looking casuarina-scaffold tower supported with guys of cable belayed to palmyras etc. now totters on the first islet. Looks horrifying from a distance, but less so at close quarters. A twin totters miles away in the haze to the west. Some hydrographer's game? A Brahminy Kite sits on the top of it.

A much worse development are the fishing-men and their huts which have appeared all over the beach. The beach now has human traffic along it all the time, much more than ever before. A fat lot of use it'll be hunting for Crab Plover's nests on that particular stretch of shore any more.

Fifty Golden Plover, four or five terek, some Herring Gulls, and ten Greenshank occupy the shallows at the first crossing-place.

Great expanses of sand and mud. I walk out over the mud to a dead turtle, horribly decaying and decapitated but still offering tiffin to what I take to be a young Scavenger Vulture -- a pale buff bald face and yellow beak, feathered nape, flesh-pink legs and feet, The rest of it is brown and dirty-white and very scruffy. Pale buff on back and wings.

The turtle's carcass lay at the end of so long a wavering trail of footmarks and dragged-belly marks it was a melancholic sight, and put me in mind of Alan Moorehead's Cooper's Creek.

Lunched, and napped, on the beach under the rubber boat propped up on its paddle. PJ has towed it round by sea, through the breakers. Prospect for birds seems unimpressive. Drifts and smokes of birds distantly in flight, and rows of spots on shimmering mud, but even when I approached these in the morning they weren't very exciting. Little Stint, Little Ringed Plover, Lesser Sand Plover, Terek Sandpiper, Redshank, Greenshank, Grey Plover and Golden Plover; also Ashy Reef Heron, Grey Heron, Large Egret, and Flamingo. Of the terns the most numerous are Whiskered. Next

come Gullbilled, then Caspian, and then a very few — three or four only — Little. These Little Terns have pink or flesh-coloured legs. The Gulls are brunnicephalus or Herrings. That is the morning's bag.

The nap took quite a long time. On waking I had to decide whether to pursue a course as originally intended along the shore westwards, skirting the swamp, or whether to strike north-west into it immediately, and hope to spend the night on one of the low sandbanks or islands which have been quivering like mirages on the skyline all day. Chose the latter, because of the fishermen on the shore. And so began an abominable long trudge through the ooze, which was of the stickiest variety.

After an extravagant demonstration of energy by PJ with the kit we reach one of the mirages just before sunset. It has several disadvantages, and is not at all romantic. It is not an island. It has a smelly body on it. It has goats, and a goatherd with a little hut. And a boatload of fishermen make a talkative landing there at nightfall. But it will have to do. I cross to a neighbouring islet, prospecting, but another portage of kit isn't worth attempting, says PJ, so I do not stay there long. This islet has a lot of birds' mess and feathers all over its sandbanks; but no bits of shell, so it is probably no more than a roost. Two Great Stone Plovers are disturbed there, and rise calling klweeee.

A not unhappy, but somewhat cold and fitful sleep in the green tent. Watched Jupiter a long time before turning in.

14 FEBRUARY

It was a relief when dawn came, and with it warmth and activity. We breakfasted in the shade of a thorn near the tent on bread, mashed groundnuts, cheese and oranges and nothing like as much water as we wanted. Silly not to have brought more. Then I think I fell asleep again, for some time. I remember staring upwards at a lark circling above me singing frenziedly, and how I marvelled at his energy.

There was nothing else to do today but to return the way we had come. We had brought provisions for only two days and a night, and the going through the water and mud under the hot sun had proved too hard for any more ambitious escapade on this second day. We had reached as near to the middle of the swamp as we could every expect to with barely six inches of water in its deepest parts, and we had to be satisfied with this. Up till now the swamp had always been a mystery to me: it had just wobbled off into the haze, and its fringe was a mirage and who could tell what really happened in the middle of it? Now I did at least know that nothing happened. Moreover I had for the first time got into the middle of the zone where the flamingoes were. I could count the bulk of them this morning, and there was no sign that this swamp was a flamingo breeding-ground, as someone once assured me it was.

The view on all sides around us in the morning light was bedecked with Great Flamingoes paddling in the shallows. They were as beautiful and extravagant-looking as ever, but in numbers few. I counted only 750. Quantities of small waders were settled on the shore of our own island, and nine Blacktailed Godwit flew high overhead. I watched them till they stopped being even specks over the tower far away to the southeast.

At about ten we set off, retracing yesterday's plod. There was a lot more water, though, and the going was much easier. We put the haversacks in the boat and pulled it along behind us, and sat on the edge of it when we felt like a rest.

To our south I spotted fifty flamingo in a tight-packed group which I had not noticed before. I at once suspected them of being Phaeniconaias minor. They were extremely pink, and extremely small, and their beaks appeared to be darker than those of the common flamingo. They were not feeding while I watched them, as the other flamingo were, but just standing, some asleep, others preening and fidgeting in the usual manner of idle water-birds. When the true phoenicopters mingled with them or passed in front and behind them I could see that their backs were lower than the phoenicopters' bellies. It

was hard to think what else they could be but Lesser Flamingo. My field note made at the time reads, ' Strong impression of much blacker beak than the ordinary birds'. 'The phoenicopter has a pink beak with a black tip; these creatures' bills were visibly darker than their neighbours', though I was too far away to describe the pattern of bill-colour precisely. Were they black, or black and dark red?

I walked towards them in great excitement, but before I could observe them at all closely they rose, still in a compact flock (unlike the rest, which were strung around loosely in every direction), and made off northwards. Be it noted that no phoenicopter moved with them: they left for their own reasons independently.

Though I was beginning to feel increasingly confident that these birds were minor I was sorry to lose sight of them before I could examine them closely. They had flown to a distant part of the swamp and when they settled they looked like mere quivering salmon-pink blobs. If we had had a little more liquid on board we should have gone after them. As things were, this wasn't to be thought of, and we could only struggle on, regretfully, in yesterday's tracks....

These excerpts from a
Flamingo-hunter's Journal will
be continued in the
December issue of the Newsletter

Field Identification: Swifts, Swallows and Martins

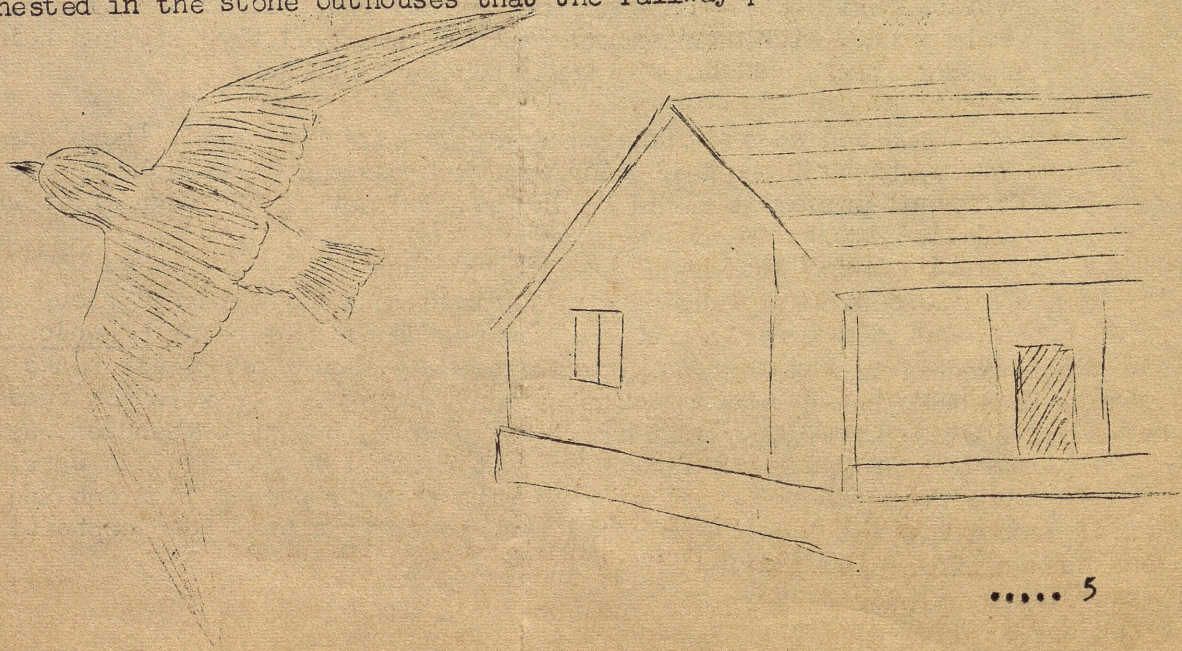
By

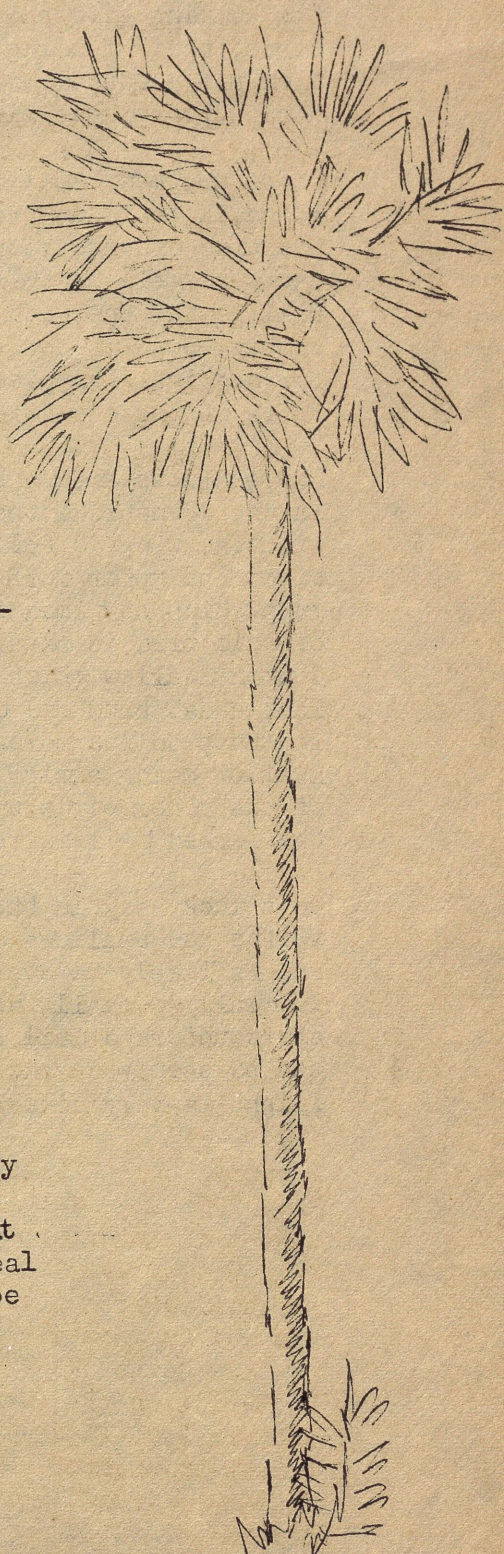
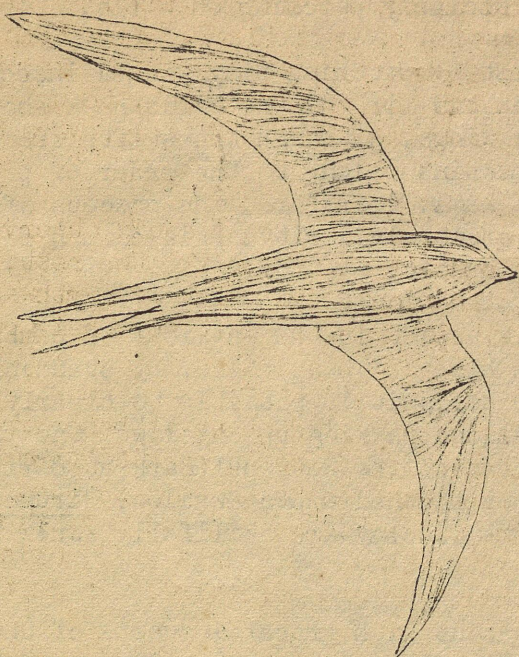
S. V. Nilakanta

The slow train had stopped again at the wayside station. I started out of the carriage window. A small sooty black bird with crescent shaped wings plunged in from my right, skimmed along the rails parallel to the train and disappeared from view.

I opened the offside door and stood in the doorway to have a better look. The bird came in again from my right, skimmed along the rails, banked and made a climbing turn to the left and went over the station roof. It was followed by two other birds at ten metre intervals. This performance was repeated over and over again. The momentum acquired during the power dive was put to good use in the zooming climb over the roof.

The white on the rumps of the birds was quite conspicuous as they banked and wheeled. Their tails were short and not particularly noticeable. Looking carefully a little white could be seen on their throats when they flew in from my right. They were obviously House Swifts, Apus affinis and probably nested in the stone outhouses that the railway provided.





The train moved on and was soon on an embankment with rice fields on both sides. There were innumerable Tad Palm trees dividing the fields. Here I could see many Palm Swifts, Cypsiurus parvus circling and soaring with great ease, well above the palm trees. The wings were beaten with a slightly stiff up and down motion and held out to form a crescent. The birds soared wheeled and glided, fluttering the wings to maintain speed and altitude. One very noticeable feature was the longish tails which were forked. The fork was spread out a little every time the bird banked or turned and again closed as soon as this manoeuvre was completed.

The general coloration of the birds was sooty brown. It was difficult to see the backs of these birds unless I was on a high embankment and until a bird flew low and banked to reveal its back. There was definitely no white to be seen at all.

Like in most birds or animals the back is darker than the belly but even so the back is brown and not black.

Obviously these Palm Swifts nested in the Palm fronds on which they were so dependent. The fact that Weaver Birds and Mynas also nested in the same tree did not seem to bother them.

The way to remember the identification of these two swifts is to think of the Palm Swift as the swift with the forked tail, the forked tail being forked like the fronds of the Palm Tree on which it lives. The House Swift is distinguished by its white rump but cannot be called the Whiterumped Swift for that would be another bird belong to the Himalayas and which I have not seen.

All along the railway lines ran the telegraph lines but neither House Swift nor Palm Swift perched on them. All four toes being directed forward the birds could only cling to the rough surfaces of stone walls or palm fronds. In case one sees a swift-like bird perching on wires one can be absolutely sure that the bird is not a swift. On the other hand the Common Swallow, Hirundo rustica, which is a migratory bird is prone to perching on wires.

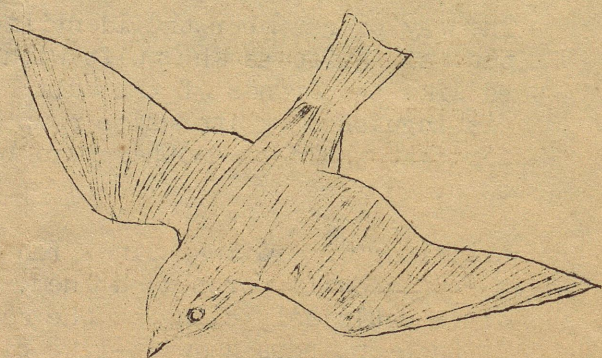
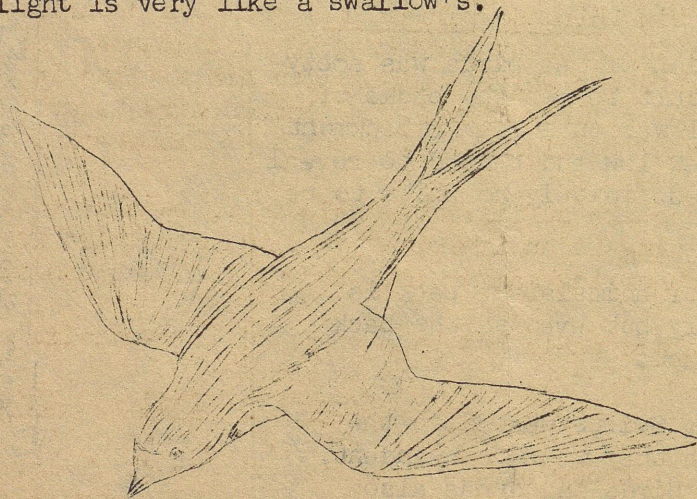
At times many hundreds may be seen sociably perching on wires.

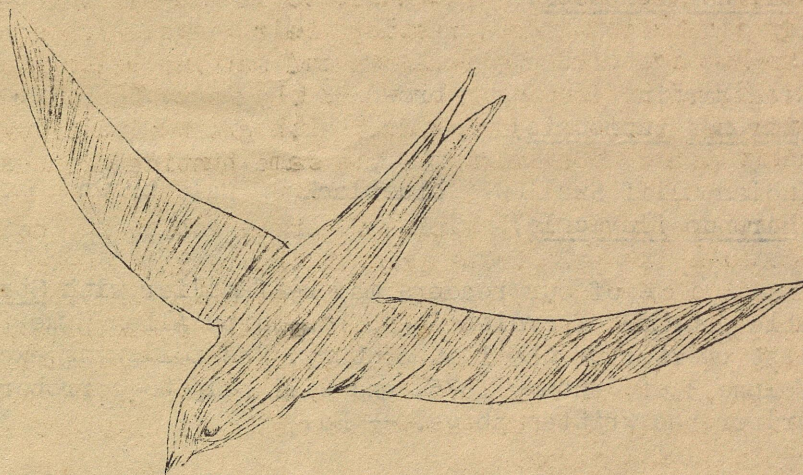
All swifts, swallows and martins exist by catching tiny winged insects in mid-air. The insects are swallowed in mid-air and the birds hawk about and fly for hours without resting their wings. Although the swifts are akin to the humming bird and swallows and martins belong to the order of perching birds, their feeding habits are the same. Therefore, the process of evolution has produced end product with great similarity. This common feeding habit draws these birds to the same hunting grounds.

There are many small hills of barren aspect in the environs of Bombay and Poona. A few palm trees grow at the base of these hills. By standing at a position of vantage on one of these hills it is possible to clearly see the backs as well as the bellies of swallows hawking up and down. One very good hill is the one with the Kanheri caves at the National Park at Borivli, Bombay. Some of the caves are used by the Redrumped Swallow, Hirundo daurica for nesting. The pitcher-shaped nests of clay are skillfully stuck to the roofs of the caves.

The swallows are to be seen flying about with graceful sweeps of their wings. In the downstroke the wings are distinctly swept back. A few easy strokes with the wing is followed by a glide. The long forked tail is also distinctive. The upper surface of the bird is a glossy blueblack with a chestnut rump which at times is a faded colour. The entire under surface of the body of this bird is a pale pink colour and serves to distinguish it from the Common Swallow which has a chestnut throat (sometimes faded) followed by a black chest band and then the pale pink belly. The Common Swallow lacks the red rump on its dorsal surface but has the same blue black wings. The Common Swallow being a migratory species is able to fly with greater ease than any of the other birds under our immediate consideration. In the best of specimens the forked tail is really magnificent.

On a lucky day in the winter months one can come across a large number of swifts and swallows and in the thrill and confusion that this sight offers one is likely to overlook a few Dusky Crag Martins, Hirundo concolor. This is really a small swallow of sooty brown aspect both above and below. Its short unforked tail has white spots at the end of most feathers and these can be seen when the bird fans out its tail for banking and turning. Its flight is very like a swallow's.





Dr Salim Ali says in his The Book of Indian Birds, ' In winter the migratory Crag Martin (Hirundo rupestris) is also found in association with our resident birds. It is slightly larger and paler, and is readily distinguishable by its whitish underparts.

Mention must be made of the Wiretailed Swallow (Hirundo smithii) which is easily identified by the long wire-like appendages to its tail and by its very white underparts. The Indian Cliff Swallow (Hirundo fluvicola) is a very small swallow of martin-like appearance. The back of the bird is blue-black with a chestnut crown. The whitish underparts and the pale brown rump are identification points.

For the purpose of identification, it will be very useful if the observer can locate the nests of these birds. Often the nests are built in large colonies and each bird builds its distinctive type of nest making use of mud, feathers and saliva.

The Indian Sand-Martin (Hirundo paludicola) which is described in detail by Hugh Whistler makes its nest by burrowing into sandbanks. The earthy brown colour of its back and the whitish underparts are similar in general aspect to that of the migratory Crag Martin. The Indian bird is much smaller, however, and is found in the vicinity of streams and sandbanks.

One day I hope to acquire sufficient knowledge to be able to draw all the nests. As nest building is an inherited quality, each bird is able to produce its own type in an unerring manner without any previous training.

Meanwhile, the attached table has been prepared to summarize our observations.

<u>Bird</u>	<u>Back</u>	<u>Rump</u>	<u>Tail</u>	<u>Underparts</u>
House Swift (<u>Apus affinis</u>)	sooty black	white	short (Remarks: white throat)	sooty black
Palm Swift (<u>Cypsiurus parvus</u>)	sooty brown	..	forked	sooty brown
Redrumped Swallow (<u>Hirundo daurica</u>)	blueblack	chestnut to faded buff	long and forked	pale pink
Common Swallow (<u>Hirundo rustica</u>)	blueblack	..	long and forked (Remarks: chestnut throat)	black chestband; pale pink

<u>Bird</u>	<u>Back</u>	<u>Rump</u>	<u>Tail</u>	<u>Underparts</u>
Dusky Crag Martin (<u>Hirundo concolor</u>)	dark brown	..	short (Remarks: white spots on tail)	brown
Crag Martin (<u>Hirundo rupestris</u>)	brown	..	short	dirty white
Indian Cliff Swallow (<u>Hirundo fluvicola</u>)	blueblack	pale brown	..	white (Remarks: chestnut crown)

[Some of our readers may be familiar with Stray Feathers, the remarkable journal of ornithology, edited by Allan Hume for many years in the last quarter of the last century. The following excerpts are copied from Volume 3 of January 1875, and will help to corroborate or add to what the writer has written above. — Ed.

The Swallows and Swifts of Berar

By

James Aitken

I have never observed the English House Swallow, H. rustica (which is so abundant in Bombay throughout the whole cold season), in Berar.

The Wire-tailed Swallow, (H. filifera.) [Now: Hirundo smithii]

This species supplies in Berar the place of rustica, which it so strongly resembles in its habits. It seems to be even fonder of water, indeed it rarely leaves it, skimming over the surface with a speed matching that of the Swift, its metallic colours flashing in the sun. It is a permanent resident, and breeds from February till June. The nest is a mere shallow saucer built under a rock or wall, sometimes even an earthy bank at the water side, and it exhibits in the construction all the forethought and patience of its English relative. The first nest I watched took four weeks to complete, a narrow layer of mud being added cautiously each day, and left to dry. When this part of the business was complete, a lining of fine grass was added, then one of feathers, and on this were laid three long-shaped eggs, of a white colour, well spotted with dark reddish brown. I confess to having been guilty of the cruelty of taking two of these for my collection, but the faithful little bird continued still to sit, and I had afterwards the satisfaction of seeing the remaining egg hatched and the young one fledged. Long after they are able to fly, the young are fed in the air by the old birds exactly after the manner of the English Swallow, parents and young circling round and round, and then, with a complacent twitter, clinging together for an instant, during which the mouthful of insects is transferred from the one to the other.

The Mosque Swallow, (H. erythropygia.) [Now: Hirundo daurica]

This is one of those birds which seem highly to appreciate the advantages of civilisation, and to think, like Cowper's cat, that men take a great deal of trouble to please them. In Berar they have almost discarded the mosques which gave them their name, and have betaken themselves to the culverts of the roads, which are now being constructed all over the country. Wherever a road is made, some of the culverts are sure to be taken possession of, as soon as the rains commence, by pairs of these Swallows, which may be seen darting in at one end and out at the other, or hawking about for flies over the pools of water at the road side; their flight has, however, nothing of the extreme rapidity of that of the Swifts or Wire-tailed Swallows. During the cold season the young often assemble in large flocks, but these all disperse, or perhaps migrate, as the weather gets warmer, and only a few pairs remain to breed during the monsoon. The nest is of mud, with a prolonged entrance running along the wall, and is lined with coarse grass and feathers. The eggs are long shaped, and pure white, without spot of any kind. In the subterraneous situation in which the nest is so often placed, and with the

air still further excluded by the long neck, it is a marvel how the young escape suffocation.

The Cliff Swallow, (H. fluvicola.)

The smallest of our Swallows, and much less familiarly known than the other species, as it lives in colonies, and is strictly confined to certain localities: at Akola there is one of these colonies, which build their nests under a broken portion of a wall which stretches out into the Moorna; the nests are retort shaped; a few stand apart, but the majority are attached together, the tubular necks all standing out from the wall, and presenting a very peculiar appearance. With the first heavy showers of the monsoon the river comes down in a flood, and washed the whole place clean; as soon as the rains abate, rebuilding commences, and the bustle in the early morning is prodigious, the birds hurrying from all quarters with their bills full of mud. They are much persecuted by sparrows, who take possession of the egg cup of the nest before the neck is added, and a single pair will cause several nests to be deserted before they suit themselves. As soon as the nests are finished the eggs are laid, and when hatched the birds simply throw the eggshells into the water instead of carrying them to a distance, as is done by most birds, aware, apparently, that the stream will carry them away. I have noticed this also in the case of the weaver bird. The second brood is in February, during which month they swarm about the nests like bees about a hive, while every now and then splash into the water goes some too fragile neck, breaking even under the light weight of the little owner. These breakages do not, however, interfere in the least with the process of incubation, but appear to be repaired even while the mother bird is sitting. The eggs are two, sometimes three, in number, of a white colour, spotted with faint red; I have seen some, however, pure white; they vary greatly both in colour and size. After the young quit the nest, they associate in a large flock, playing about over the surface of the water, and drinking frequently as they fly. The old birds do not by any means confine themselves to the water, but spread freely over the country, and sing much on the wing. Their flight is comparatively feeble.

The Dusky Crag Martin, (Cotile concolor.) [Now: Hirundo concolor]

The natural habitat of this Swallow is amongst rocks, and on the faces of cliffs, and in such situations it may always be found, but it readily avails itself of the windows and porches of houses, even nesting among the two-storied houses in native towns. I have also known it make its nest on the side of a well. The nest is open all round, merely attached to the wall by one side, and is very neatly lined with feathers. The eggs are more round than those of any of our other Swallows, and are minutely speckled with brown, especially about the thick end; the usual number is, I think, three. They are persecuted while building, and occasionally driven away by the Sparrows, but their open nest not being adapted to the wants of these birds, they do not take possession of it. Though capable, from their length of wing, of great speed, they are no travellers, but may generally be found flying about their chosen cliff or building in a very leisurely manner; the young continue about the spot for some time, but I never saw the old ones feed them upon the wing after the manner of the Wire-tailed Swallows.

The Indian Swift, (Cypselus affinis.) [Now: Apus affinis]

This bird is of course abundant, and its rushing flight and shrill cry often strongly recall summer evenings at home. Its habits are indeed but a feeble copy of those of the English bird, the same circling near their nests, always screaming as they pass them, and the same, assembling in numbers high in the air in the evening, though they fly low much more frequently. They breed once in February, and again during the monsoon. The nests are probably better known than those of any other Indian Swift or Swallow; they are generally built under roofs, sometimes in a crevice between the wall and the roof, but often attached to the roof itself. In the latter case the straws of which the nest is composed are so firmly agglutinated that it tears like a piece of matting; and it is generally ornamented without, as well as lined within, with feathers. Two or three long, white eggs are laid. The young, like those of the English Swift, never become perchers, but take boldly to the wing whenever they leave the nest, returning to it when fatigued until they acquire their full powers. Numbers take possession of the porches and verandahs, where these

are high enough, of the cutcherries and other large buildings now erected all over the land, and fly backwards and forwards, building their nests, or tending their young, totally regardless of the crowd that may be moving below. It is no uncommon thing to see the top of an archway covered with their nests, all closely packed together; but where there is ample accommodation, as in a cutcherry verandah, each nest usually stands apart.

The Palm Swift, (C. batassiensis.) [Now: Cypsiurus parvus]

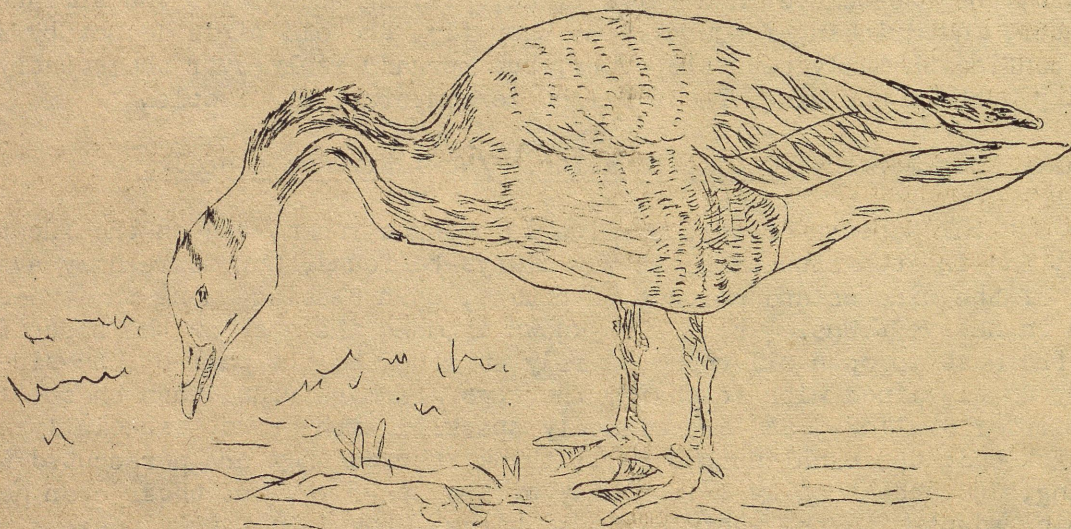
Palm trees are scarce in Berar, but wherever a solitary one rears its head there may be found the Palm Swift flying round and round it. I once, and once only, saw several of these birds flying about a grove of mango trees where there was not a palm tree within miles. As is well known, it attaches its nest to the leaf of the cocconut or toddy palm, but I have never succeeded in procuring either the nest or eggs.]

The Barheaded Goose (Anser indicus) in captivity

By

T. J. Roberts

Readers might be interested to learn something more about the sketch of two Barheaded geese which has recently appeared on the cover of the Newsletter. They are a pair (the two sexes are almost indistinguishable) out of four which were captured during the winters of 1964/65 and 1965/66 on the Chenab river just upstream from the MARALA BARRAGE which is within sight of the magnificent snow-capped Pir Panjal mountains.



Judging from the written accounts of explorers and travellers in the high deserts plateaus of central Asia where the Barheaded Goose breeds, temperatures of up to 104 F (Carruthers, D. Beyond the Caspian, 1949) do occur during the short summer. Khanewal where these geese are kept, has a hot desert climate with very little monsoon influence and except for its longer duration and severe intensity, I do not suppose the summer climate here to be markedly different from that prevailing in some of the areas where the Barhead breeds. In this respect they must be better adapted to withstand heat than the Siberian breeding species of Grey geese which comprise the rest of the Anserinae visiting this subcontinent in winter. Nevertheless, when a friend gave these geese to me twelve months ago, it was with considerable apprehension that I viewed their spending a summer in Khanewal and I am relieved to be able to report that they have passed the summer in apparent excellent health and conditions.

As a protection against jackals and Jungle Cats, both common in the vicinity, the geese are penned at night in a completely wired in aviary. By day they graze on one of the lawns. They drink water freely throughout the feeding period, and besides grass, they are fed unhusked rice and sorghum (Bajra) and they also relish chappatis. As has been observed elsewhere, a rigid heirarchy or pecking order is soon established and one individual Barhead

always claims first access to their food when it is filled, as well as bathing rights in their pond.

By the middle of February they become very fat and this is even noticeable in the thickening of their necks. In West Pakistan I have observed that by the end of February they start their northward migration and it is very noticeable that these captive geese completely went off their feed at the end of February and could not be tempted even with new varieties of food. They did not resume eating normally for 2 or 3 weeks and it appears that this behaviour is associated with the physiological changes which accompany the urge to migrate and the need to build up fat reserves before the long northern journey, and that the fasting may also be internally regulated by similar physiological processes.

The once yearly moult is also an astonishing process. In about the second week of July the first primary feathers are shed and within the space of only three days all even primaries on each wing drop out and the birds are completely flightless. Moulting of the retrices and secondaries follow rapidly and in the wild, they must rely upon the inaccessible nature of the marshy fringes of the lakes which are characteristic of their breeding grounds, as otherwise they would be vulnerable to all sorts of predators including wolves which occur in that area. The new flight feathers do not complete their growth until about August 15th so that the Barheaded geese are without the ability to fly for about 3½ weeks.

Experiments (Leshner and Kendeigh, 'Effect of photoperiod on molting of feathers' 1941) have shown that the shedding of the feathers is brought about in some species by the changing length of daylight and darkness and this seems to apply particularly to the Anserinae. Since this effect would be less apparent in the more southerly latitude of their present captivity (Khanewal is approximately 30°N whilst their breeding grounds extend from 36° N to 42°N) it would therefore not be safe to assume that moult in the wild state follows the same time pattern as given above.

Amongst wild birds, the geese are well known for their intelligence and though regrettably my Barheads have paid little attention to my attempts to be friendly, yet they never fail to greet with low calls, my passing mali who is responsible for their food dish!

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Our Club has again sent a subscription of £5/- to the International Council for Bird Preservation. There will be a meeting of the International Council for Bird Preservation in November 1969 just before or after the General Assembly meeting of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. Further particulars about this meeting will be given in our Newsletter in due course.

* * *

The Planning Commission called a meeting in August to consider measures to be taken for Wild Life Preservation during the 4th Plan period. Mrs Usha Ganguli was present at the meeting, made a strong plea for converting Najafgarh Jheel near Delhi into a bird sanctuary because of its rich bird life. We trust appropriate steps will be taken in this direction.

* * *

It is reliably understood that the Department of Tourism (Government of India) is allocating funds for the development of the Karnala Bird Sanctuary. Steps will be taken to put up a couple of hutments with adequate water supply for which a tube well will be dug, and a nature trail leading up to the Fort will enable visitors to get a good view of the Sanctuary and its bird and animal life. It is to be hoped that 'development' will be undertaken in an imaginative way so that the essential characteristics of this beautiful forest are in no way destroyed. The National Park Service of the United States of America has, at the request of the Editor, sent plans and drawings

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of suitable hutments and structures which are designed for National Parks in the United States of America, and these are being followed by the Tourist Department for guidance in putting up structures at Karnala, Tulsi, and other places.

* * *

N O T I C E

of the Annual General Meeting

The 9th Annual General Meeting of the Birdwatchers' Field Club of India will be held at the residence of Mr Zafar Futehally, Juhu Lane, Andheri, at 5 p. m. on Saturday, the 21st December 1968.

It is requested that all those who are in a position to come, attend this meeting and give us the benefit of their views on making the Newsletter and new activities of the Club.

∟ more
interesting

A formal notice of the meeting with the Agenda will appear in the December 1968 issue.

CORRESPONDENCE

The appearance of an Oyster Catcher (?) at Colaba Sea Coast

On 15th September a bird slightly bigger than the Redwattled Lapwing was found on the cement bund facing Nariman Point feeding on the fish spread to dry in the morning sun. At times it took rest standing on one leg. On closer approach I observed water drops forming at the tip of its beak, sometimes falling down unnoticed, sometimes the bird annoyingly swinging off the water drops.

Bill slender, long and straight, coloured orange-red at base, black towards the tip. Forehead and crest roudish. Head, throat, neck and tail black in colour. Underparts and border of wings white; upper portion coffee brown. A white line right on the throat didnt appear to have reached round the nape. Through my glass, legs looked purple in colour. Hind toe non-existing.

Was it a sick bird; if not, what does the water-dripping signify?

T. V. Jose
Colaba, Bombay 5

The Rain Quail (Coturnix coromandelicus)

In the October issue of the Newsletter Kameshwar P. D. Singh has mentioned that his captive birds are heard calling only at night, but these quails also call during the day hours in the wild state and during the rainy season their double note is one of the commonest sounds in the countryside. It is true however that they are most heard at dawn and dusk and throughout the day mainly when the weather is overcast. Possibly in captivity the birds are a little shy and therefore do not call. Of course the crepuscular habits of the Rain Quail make it even shyer in captivity.

This little game bird is very numerous during the SW. monsoon and probably is a local migrant spreading out during the breeding season from areas of concentration where there is more cover and food during the drier part of the year.

The small size and skulking habits of this little bird make it difficult to locate and it is able to find shelter in grass along verges of fields.

Apart from its characteristic calls which reveal its presence in the locality, birdwatcher may largely see it when he accidentally come across it and flushes it by almost stepping onto it.

K. S. Lavkumar

Blackbacked Woodpecker (Chrysocolaptes festivus) in Andhra Pradesh

The most startling discovery of all my time in India has presented itself within the last month, with my identification of a pair of Blackbacked Woodpeckers (Chrysocolaptes festivus Bodd.). They are apparently resident birds — I probably have seen them before, assuming they were golden-backs.

But on August 30, 1968, a pair was feeding (and later the male was chasing after the female) in the mangoes just outside my window, some 20 ft off the ground, affording me an opportunity for close scrutiny. I immediately noted that these birds were different from any golden-backs I had seen before, and I made a sketch of their distinctive features on the spot.

The thing that distinguished the male was a large white 'triangular' patch on its upper back. And the female had a deep golden-yellow crest, not quite so prominent in size as the male's bright crimson one.

I waited for another opportunity to observe them, to make absolutely certain of what I had seen. Then, on September 19, 1968, they appeared outside again, this time in full sunlight, and now there was no mistaking their coloration: both birds had white upper back, black backs, and wings that became golden-yellow only on the central and outer portions; the female had a golden crest — deep, solid golden, without a trace of another colour in it.

They were finally driven from the deadwood top of the large mango they were in by a pugnacious crimson-breasted barbet which was excavating its nest cavity in one of the branch stubs!

As the woodpeckers had black rumps, instead of crimson, as the only other golden-backed species I then knew of have, I presumed they were colour mutants.

The next day, on September 20, 1968, however, quite by accident, I came across Baker's and Inglis's description of the black-backed woodpecker in their The Birds of Southern India (Madras, 1930); and knew then this was the bird I had seen.

A couple of other points of information they mentioned made me wait for another close-at-hand sighting, however; and this I had today: the male I saw just now had a distinctly striped (not spotted) chin and throat, and a whitish forehead — I could not tell if it was composed of large white spots on a brown background, as Baker and Inglis denote. I had previously noted both birds were distinctly striped black-and-white underneath.

This morning I saw the male at what is apparently an old nesting hole about 20 ft off the ground in a nearby coconut palm, pecking vigorously. I do not know if this indicates nesting plans, as I have seen woodpeckers at similar holes before, with no nesting following.

Ripley gives the range of Chrysocolaptes festivus festivus (Boddaert) as 'The Western Ghats strip from the Surat Dangs and Khandesh area in Bombay south to Kerala, east along the Satpura mountain trend through central India, north to Dehra Dun in U. P., Bihar, and West Bengal.'

I am pleased to report this range may now be extended to include northern Hyderabad district, Andhra Pradesh.

George F. Neavoll

'Treetops', Medchal, Hyderabad Dist,
Andhra Pradesh

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' Image Intensifier '

Apropos of the ' Image Intensifier ' mentioned by Yuvraj Shivrajkumar in the latest issue of Newsletter [Vol. 8(10)], I wonder whether he could furnish more details of the source of his information. Being in a profession where one has to keep abreast with latest developments in science and technology, I would like to know more about it.

There have, of course, been some recent developments in infra-red and ' heat ray ' photography where special cameras have been used with films sensitive only to thermal radiations. Pictures taken in total darkness have shown silhouettes of heat radiating objects (including human beings) against a dark background. However, these are still in the experimental stage and nowhere near commercial production. They might even get ' classified ' for security reasons. LIFE magazine published some ' heat-ray ' photographs a few months ago.

But I am not quite sure that the device described by the Muvraj, particularly the miniature variety that could be fitted to binoculars, isnt still in the realms of science fiction.

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