

# NEWSLETTER

FOR BIRDPWATCHERS

Volume 5-1965 May

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NEWSLETTER  
FOR  
BIRDMATCHERS

Vol. 5, No. 5

May 1965

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A VALLEY IN THE ORISSA JUNGLE

By

L. A. Hill

It is easier to get down the bank now, from the road to the valley bottom -- a contractor's lorry with a drunken driver recently went over the edge, and a rough track had to be made to pull the vehicle up again. It is only a little valley, named Panposh, densely timbered, running down from the jungly hills; it is not steep-sided where the road crosses it, but 200 yards further down, outcrops of iron ore border the small clear stream. Just above the level ground at the foot of the range, the stream used to cascade down a series of falls in a narrow gorge which was in some places only 10 feet wide but a 100 feet deep, the sides of the gorge being solid iron ore.

There was a little temple in a cave there, and a holy man lived in another cave nearby. Every year, in January, there was a local holiday, and the people used to climb up the gorge and do their pujas in the temple cave, and there would be a fair with singing and dancing and sweetmeat stalls in the flat meadow on the level ground below.

We had to fill the gorge to make a road across for the heavy Euclid dumpers, which carry the iron ore, 27 tons at a time, from the opencast workings to the crushing and screening plant,

and we built a new temple near the village, and holy men came from Puri to consecrate it, and to move the holy relics from the cave in the gorge.

The valley above the gorge is still quiet and peaceful; the modern mechanical sounds of the 6 inch drills and the heavy engines of the shovels and dumpers and bulldozers only just permeate the quiet old-time stillness of the jungle, and the noise of the blasting is quick and loud and sharp and soon forgotten again.

The other day, I walked down the valley to see a little dam we have built a hundred yards above the gorge, from which water is piped to reservoirs above the main haulage road. The water tankers fill up from these reservoirs, and water the road to keep the dust down. The last time I walked down the valley, I slipped on a loose boulder and damaged my binoculars; so I took greater care this time. Some of the trees are huge and grand; wild mangoes and simul and sal -- the majority is sal, -- which thrive in iron ore. The simul flowers have just finished, and the trees are bare, and the wild bee hives stand out black and blotchy -- wild bees seem to like simul trees. The Flame-of-the-forest creepers are brilliant now, and I saw a flock of Grey Mynas in a sal tree covered with this creeper. I stopped to watch them through the glasses and was rewarded by seeing four or five Purplerumped Sunbirds also busy amongst the flowers. As I stood there, I heard the drumming of a woodpecker, followed by the queer strident screeches of the Goldenbacked Woodpeckers as a pair flew to a near-by tree. They looked lovely with the sun shining through the trees onto their golden backs, and the black and white underparts stood out boldly -- the male with its big crest bright red and the female's spotted black and white.

Before I moved on, I noted from that same spot several Crested Tree Swifts fluttering in wide circles uttering their cries which are not unlike those of a minor bird of prey. (I have never managed to have a really good look at one of these swifts, though they are constantly landing on the bare branches of trees); a pair of Large Green Barbets, with their brilliant green backs and thick ugly brown heads; a flock of Blossomheaded Parakeets zig-zagging at speed through the branches, with their sweet plaintive cheeps ringing loud and clear; a blue-black Drongo flashing after flies, with its wings looking ashy coloured in flight; and a Blacknaped Blue Flycatcher. The latter's body is a lovely blue, but the black nape always looks a little incongruous; like a black cap which has slipped.

Walking on down the valley, in the deep dappled shade, and cursing at the eye flies with their annoying habit of hovering just in front of one's eyes or buzzing in a frenzied high-pitched sort of way right inside one's ears, I paid little attention to the Redwhiskered and Redvented Bulbuls, which are so common there, but stopped to watch a flock of a dozen White-eyes, tiny dainty little birds flitting busily hither and thither, and a Greyheaded Flycatcher doing aerobatics. Fantailed Flycatchers are also very common there, and are always a joy to watch, as they flirt about: they have a narrow white stripe under the chin, and white 'eye-brows', and the whole of the underparts is a uniform sooty-brown; I don't know which species they are.

A busy bustling crowd of Jungle Babblers flew on ahead of me -- heavy flapping, awkward looking birds with no colourings to commend them. The single Grey Wagtail that I saw, skipping along the stones in the stream, seemed doubly trim and elegant in comparison.

I spent a good ten minutes watching a flock of Scarlet Minivets. They might be Shortbilled Minivets for all I know but the joy is in the looking, not the exact identification. (Actually, I wish I could identify them!). From underneath, with the light on their bright scarlet underparts and jet black heads, the males are a breath-taking sight; a flock in flight, the scarlet and black of the males and yellow and black of the females, is one of the most brilliant sights of the jungle.

Just before I reached the little dam, I caught a glimpse of a Shama, and later, as I was watching two men clean out the silt-ed mud from behind the wall, I heard the tuneful human whistling notes of a Fairy Blue Bird but didnt actually see it. I have seen them there before on several occasions -- they look black in the shadows but when the sunlight shines on them, they are a joy to behold.

On the way back, I had stopped to watch a Velvetfronted Nuthatch running up and down a tree trunk, when my eye was caught by the movement of a large bird in the undergrowth: it was like a crow-pheasant in shape, and with the same habits of jumping from branch to branch, but smaller. I had, on a previous occasion, caught on unsatisfactory glimpse of what I later thought must have been a Malkoha so I sollowed this up with care, praying I would get the chance of having a long and careful ook. I final-ly managed to do so, and wrote the following down immediately in my note book:

"V. good view. Dull green-blue back, wings, and tail. Tail graduated with white terminal blobs. Head, neck and chest, grey with large red eye-patch. Long down-curved beak - Malkoha?"

I hurried back to my jeep, paying only a little attention to a couple of Hill Mynas with their loud cheerful note (which is slightly reminiscent of an Oriole's, although to say so is to malign the Oriole), and drove straight home to consult Salim Ali and Whistler. The former does not note the Malkoha in his THE BOOK OF INDIAN BIRDS, but the latter, in the POPULAR HANDBOOK OF INDIAN BIRDS has a description and a black-and-white picture on p. 328. There I read that the Small Greenbilled Malkoha is found in Orissa, and has the bare skin round the eyes 'sky-blue'!!! The very similar, but larger, Greenbilled Malkoha has the eye patch crimson . . . but is found in the Central and Eastern Himalayas, Assam, Burma and further east" -- no mention of Orissa! I reckoned I had either made a mis-taken identification, or else a name for myself as perhaps one of the first to observe Rhopodytes tristis in this State! I say, "one of the first" as some friends who spent a week in this locality over Christmas had told me previously that they had had a good view of a Malkoha. I therefore went along to see one of them, Mr. J.H. Benthall, last week when in Calcutta, and asked for his views, the main question being, of course, 'red patch or blue patch?'. He and his brother, and their wives, had come across the bird in wooded country (about 6 miles away from my valley, so it obviously was not the same actual bird that I saw) and had watched it for several minutes. They had Whistler's book with them at the time, and so had a good opportunity of comparing the bird in sight with the description in the book. All four were convinced that the skin round the eye was red and not blue.

As far as I am concerned, I shall have to try and have another look for this bird -- which appears to be out of its normal habitat -- and must go and check up once more, in the near future, on our little dam in Panposh Valley!

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### FERGUSSON HILL

Poona is blessed with a number of small hills on its outskirts. One of them is Fergusson Hill which overlooks a number of educational institutions, the Deccan Gymkhana and a number of houses with their compounds and orchards. A road passes along one flank of the hill and a cart track branching off from the road along another flank. On the toe of the hill, between the road and the track, are water reservoirs which overflow a little every time the water is pumped into them.

Fergusson Hill can boast of only one small tree growing on one side. Otherwise the hill is barren. Among the outcroppings of rock there is just a little earth for growing some dusty grass. There is always a breeze blowing over the hill.

The foot of the hill presents a busy aspect with hundreds of students cycling at breakneck speed and hundreds of colourful villagers proceeding in noisy groups along the neem-tree bordered cart track.

However, a walk along the lantana edged paths of the bungalows to the toe of the hill and up the hill, past the water reservoirs, to the very top is most rewarding to a birdwatcher. The whole walk can be done in ten minutes without effort but an average birdwatcher will take an hour and still feel that he has not given enough time for the birds he sees in the mere five hundred metres of a pleasant stroll.

The hedges are full of Tailor birds and Ashy Wren Warblers. Red-vented Bulbuls are frequent visitors to lantana berries. House Sparrows are as common as in any large city but the stonefaced houses lend themselves to accommodate the nests of large numbers of House Swifts. The flowers are a source of delight to sunbirds.

The availability of fruit and berries seems to attract a large number of koels which are easily spotted in spite of somewhat stealthy behaviour. Their larger and more ungainly cousin, the crow-pheasant is a common resident of Poona gardens. Here this bird is not at all shy and probably is very largely responsible for controlling the smaller birds from multiplying. Although the koels must be keeping the crow population in check, I do not know to what extent the crow-pheasant is capable of destroying crows' eggs. Whatever it is, the crows, pigeons, and parakeets are not so overwhelmingly plentiful as in Bombay.

Common mynas as well as brahminy mynas can be seen in numbers jauntily walking around or picking fruit off various bushes. The flashy sight of magpie robins is also guaranteed.

Although golden orioles and ioras are plentiful, attention to them is drawn only when they make their characteristic sounds.

As the foot of Fergusson Hill is approached, the terrain suddenly changes. Here it is grassland with thorny Acacia trees, affording very little cover from view, except for one large banian tree.

Here the magpie robin is replaced by the Common Indian Robin. Once when I disturbed a fierce fight, the bundle of feathers sorted itself out into two young male shamas. This is also the haunt of the Kashmir redstart in winter months. Every now and then a raucous wrangling noise announces a party of jungle babblers flitting from acacia bush to bush.

Here I have seen a pair of the Little Maharatta Woodpeckers,

searching assiduously for insects among the acacia thorns. They were so close that the binoculars could not be focussed. Mynas which want to vary their fruit diet with insect fare also seem to find plenty of life in the grass. In this amazing place, I have often seen not less than fifty birds of the same species at a time. The activity of fifty bulbuls or fifty mynas having a feast should be seen to be believed.

Flocks of Whitethroated Munias may be seen rising out of the grass and flying away.

The overflow from the reservoir on Fergusson Hill provides sufficient water for birds to drink and bathe. Bulbuls have been seen to bathe and dry their feathers carefully and come in for a second dip, dry and preen their feathers again.

Over the road there is a set of telephone wires on which a few drongos and rufousbacked shrikes perch. But the species making the maximum use of this perch is the common bee-eater. Many of the insects which rise out of the grass are quickly nabbed after an aerobatic display. The insects are de-winged before swallowing, the wings gently floating down.

As the climb up the hill is commenced patches of dusty sand are noticeable. The smooth conical pits of 'ant-lions' which trap ants are many. Even though the hill gets progressively barren it seems to support a lot of insect life and therefore a number of skinks and other lizards.

Swallows, crag-martins, and swifts hawk for small insects continuously on the flanks of the hill. This is also the haunt of the blackbellied finch-larks. A great number of these can be seen on the hill. The males are so conspicuous and the females so self-effacing.

A number of pariah kites and scavenger vultures take advantage of the up currents of wind created by the hill and use the same for soaring aloft without effort. Here I have seen a Common Hawk-Cuckoo being chased by a crow and a Shikra-hawk scanning the ground for prey. But for this difference in behaviour, I would have never been able to tell them apart.

Sitting down on the hill and watching, the birds are presented at an all together different angle to the observer. The sun now shines on the birds and brings out all the true colours. It is also easier for our necks and eyes to look slightly downwards. Most birds like bee-eaters and rollers are more brilliant on their dorsal surfaces. Hardly anything can move, in the wide field in front of us, without being spotted. Hoopoes may be seen probing with bills in the College playgrounds.

It is here that I saw the blue rock thrush for the first time. Even as I watched this bird with my glasses it pounced down on a skink and caught it. The skink was bashed on a rock and swallowed.

From here I saw the only kestrel in my life sitting on the only tree on Fergusson Hill. As I approached cautiously, the bird glided down on outspread wings. I ran down the hill to get a closer look and again the bird took off to reach its original perch.

The neem trees on the cart track accommodate about fifty or so bee-eaters. In the evening after much jostling for positions they roost together. They sit in groups of 3 to 8 birds,

huddled together so close as to resemble the compound leaves of the neem. At the time of observation the bee-eaters were a very bright green and the neem leaves were an olive drab colour, otherwise the birds would have been totally unnoticed.

The journey down the hill is again equally interesting. Birds which perch on extreme tree-tops like the coppersmiths and white-breasted kingfishers have no advantage over the observer. The hill is taller than any tree.

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BIRDWATCHING IN THE FORWARD AREAS: THE HIMALAYAN  
GOLDEN EAGLE, Aquila chrysaetos hodgsoni Ticehurst

By

Capt. J.C. Mahanti

The first time I came to know about this bird was when Indian Air Force introduced it in their Crest. I was not then interested in birdwatching and remembered the name casually. In March 1963 I was sitting with Mr. Prakash Krishan, the then Commissioner of Uttarkhand Division at BIREHI Dak Bungalow and while waiting for the lunch, I was discussing with him the birds he saw in his tour to the interior of Chamoli District. Suddenly he walked out of the verandah and pointing to the sky said 'Look, Golden Eagle here'. The name Golden Eagle created a sensation in me for I have heard a lot about this bird without seeing it. It was flying very high in the sky and was looking almost like a common kite to the naked eye. By the time I borrowed the field glass and focussed them the Golden Eagle had disappeared behind the hills. I felt disappointed, but Mr. Krishan gave me the consolation that these birds were found in abundance beyond 10,000 ft. altitude, and I decided to go trekking one of the following days to see this bird. But work kept me busy and before my plan could materialize I was posted out of that area. The memory of the Golden Eagle remained in my mind.

A few days back, on my arrival in Ladhak Valley I was driving down a hilly road at an altitude of about 12,000 ft., when I saw through the wind shield of my jeep a pair of birds diving down like falcons. In a moment they were on the ground sitting on a big stone about 50 yards from the road. Both of them looked majestic in the bright sunshine of the winter morning against the rocky background slightly covered with snow.

I stopped and went out for a closer view. The prominent chocolate-brown colour with orange-yellow nape and the size left no doubt in my mind that they were Golden Eagles. They sat basking in the sun for quite some time giving me ample opportunity to see them thoroughly. It was a rare piece of luck to see the Golden Eagle on the ground.

Afterwards I saw these birds at altitudes varying from 11,000 and above in the same valley. Though it is a rare species for birdwatchers in the plains, yet it is a common bird here. I have never seen these birds feeding on the ground; as such cannot comment much about their food. But it is quite likely they might feed on chukor, monal, or snow rabbit which are available in plenty in these localities.

These birds build their nests in rock cavities. As the breeding season is approaching, I find them moving in pairs though activities for building nest are yet to commence.

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The Golden Eagle breeds from central Asia south to the Hima-  
-layas as far east as Assam and west to the hills of Baluchis-  
tan. Its habitat consists of open alpine forest and tundra from  
7000 ft. up. -- Ed.]

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A NOTE ON THE BLACK REDSTART (Phoenicurus ochruros)

By

S. K. Reeves

In the March issue of the Newsletter I attempted to answer Dr. N.W. Cusa's question concerning the Indian Ring Dove, Streptopelia decaocto. Since no one has replied to his question about the Black Redstarts, Phoenicurus ochruros, about Delhi, perhaps I may be permitted to try.

The birds which Dr. Cusa saw about Delhi were, of a surety, Black Redstarts and not Redstarts, Phoenicurus phoenicurus which so delight us in Britain during the summer. Of the occurrence of the Redstart in India, Dillon Ripley confines himself to saying: 'Specimens have been collected in northern Baluchis-  
-tan and Chitral at 5500 ft.' (SYNOPSIS). As to why the Indian forms of the Black Redstart somewhat resemble in appearance our Redstart, I imagine it is impossible to say. One is, in fact, obliged to seek refuge in that meaningless cliché 'it is just one of those things.'

The form of the Black Redstart which is seen in Britain is gibraltariensis, whereas the two forms seen in India are phoeni-  
-curoides and rufiventris. The two Indian forms are, I imagine, very much alike in appearance; rufiventris 'having crown and upper parts less grey-fringed'. The male of the British form is very different in appearance from the Indian forms, being almost entirely smoky black with whitish undertail coverts, a trace of white in the wings and a certain amount of rusty-red in the tail. The hens are more alike, the general colour being brown in the Indian forms and a light smoky brown in the British.

The form which Dr. Cusa saw was almost certainly phoenicuroides, as it is found in winter in the plains, according to Dillon Ripley, north and west of a line from Dwarka, in Saurashtra, to Baroda and thence north-east to Etawah. Rufiventris occupies a more easterly range, being found in winter in north-eastern, central, and southern India. Both Indian forms breed, apart from elsewhere, within Indian limits in the Himalayan chain. It is, perhaps of interest to record that Dillon Ripley says that rufiventris has been seen on passage as high as 20,000 ft. on Mount Everest.

Since the boundary line of the winter quarters of the two Indian forms runs, for part of its length, from Dwarka to Baroda, one looks back nostalgically to the occasions when one saw this lovely, demure, little bird in the compound of our bungalow at Nadiad in the Kaira District and wonders of what form they were: they may well have been of either.

The reader may be interested to know that the suitable habitat which was provided in the form of ruined buildings, caused by enemy bombing in the early part of the last war, was the main cause of the Black Redstart becoming established as a breeding bird in south-east England and particularly London. Since then, of course, it has increased its breeding range in this country and has bred as far north as Yorkshire.

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GREY TIT ROOSTING IN A BAMBOO STUMP

By

Joseph George

Prof. K.K. Neelakantan has recorded in the Newsletter for April 1961 his observations on the use of the recess at the top of bamboo stumps by the Small Green Barbet as a roosting place.

A Grey Tit was observed using a similar roosting site in Dehra Dun in February-March a few years ago. The open end of a bamboo standing about three metres away from the nearest tree was the roost. It was about 6 cm. in diameter and about two metres above the ground.

The bird would arrive on the tree in the evening and call steadily for about five minutes before flying into the hollow in the bamboo. The roosting time was about 40 minutes before sunset in early February, but became only about 25 minutes before sunset a month later. In the mornings the bird left the roost at sunrise.

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Nature Conservation

The Planning Commission, Government of India, called a meeting in Delhi on 23rd April to discuss the question of India's fast dwindling wild life. We believe that this was the first meeting called by the Planning Commission for this purpose. A sub-committee is now considering the administrative details of forming a Wild Life Circle at the Centre as a part of the Ministry of Food & Agriculture, and Wild Life Divisions in the States as a part of the Forest Departments. It was also suggested at the meeting that an ecological survey of the whole country be made to assess the status of various forms of wild life in India.

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Bird picture post cards

The Bombay Natural History Society has brought out a set of twelve coloured post cards of birds. Each set is priced Rs2.50, plus local sales tax -- packing and postage extra where applicable. Readers of our Newsletter will probably find them useful for communicating with their birdwatching friends.

They can be had from the offices of the Society,

Hornbill House  
Prince of Wales Museum Compound  
Opp. Lion Gate, Apollo St.  
Fort, Bombay 1. Telephone, 257277

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THE BOOK OF INDIAN BIRDS, 7th edition

The 7th edition of THE BOOK OF INDIAN BIRDS by Dr. Salim Ali has now been printed and is available at all booksellers in the country. Orders can also be placed direct with the Bombay Natural History Society.

## CORRESPONDENCE

Diet of a Purple Sunbird

One evening in February, Mr. Gibson brought me a wounded Purple Sunbird. Crows had been after it. It seemed that, the bird would not survive. One of its wings was broken. Its legs were injured and the main difficulty was a supply of nectar from flowers.

However, I placed it inside a small cage and tried to give as much comfort as was possible. Next morning it seemed a little better. I gave it a few flowers but it did not care to look at them. By the evening I was worried and offered it in a small cup a little water mixed with ordinary sugar. To my surprise it leaned over the cup and drank the contents. Next morning I took the bird in the cage and kept it near the flowers. It has a sharp eye for nectar and it leaned against the cage and drank from the flowers which had nectar and did not bother to move when placed near big flowers like asters, whereas it was very happy when near flox and larkspur. I let it out of the cage to see if it could fly or not. The wing was broken and the legs were still not strong enough. After this, I took the bird out on my hand and I had to move from flower to flower. By so doing I saw that it caught a spider in its slender beak. It swallowed it whole. The spider was one of those small green and white ones which are found amongst flowers. My finger was too thick for its thin legs and so I provided a thin twig on which it could sit comfortably. I could now enjoy its acrobatic feats of reaching the nectar or flies. It would pick up small flies, caterpillars, or small moths with ease. At times it licked the outer part of some flowers, I think, it was for salt.

In the house I gave it twice daily the sugar mixture. However it did not have a big place to move about and so no exercise. It was nearly in perfect health for a month. Thereafter, there was something in his manner which showed that all was not well. It took in the usual way its indoor and outdoor meals regularly, but there must have been something lacking in its diet.

Exactly after five weeks of its coming to my care, it died one evening as suddenly as it had come. However, it gave me a good opportunity to know something about its life and character.

R.N. Chatterjee  
Natural History Society  
Mayo College, Ajmer

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Wild Life of India

Towards the end of January, we had a lecture on the wild life of India by Hari Dang, Esq., a schoolmaster and mountaineer, who is Editor of Cheetal.

He showed us some interesting films and commented on them. The films were made by E.P. Gee and himself.

Though mainly concerned with animals, the films had some very good scenes of white vultures giving away the location of a tiger's kill and close-ups of Redwattled Lapwings and

Sarus Cranes, which according to Mr. Dang are very good eating, but are afforded religious protection.

In a film made in the Corbett National Park, we saw a Purple Sunbirds and a Grey Hornbill. We also saw numerous peafowl, which Mr. Dang told us are displacing the Red Junglefowl and other species with which they compete for food and living space since they were afforded protection.

The next film was made in the Bharatpur sanctuary, which has over four hundred species of aquatic birds. We had a fascinating close-up view of a Darter feeding its young. The Darter partly digests the food which it then disgorges. Its young put their heads and almost half their bodies down the parents' throat to feed.

Like Vedanthangal, near Madras, this sanctuary has a lake with trees standing in the middle and hundreds of storks, cormorants and Black Ibis roost on them.

We also saw what is probably the first ever successful filming of a Sarus Crane approaching and sitting on its nest. It slowly and superciliously approached its nest and folding its knees like a man squatting, sat down with the eggs under its breast.

The Maharajah of Bharatpur sometimes has guests who are allowed to shoot at this sanctuary, and it is on record that some foreign V.I.P. or other once shot 4000 or 400 (it is probably 400) ducks in one day.

Cadet Nandan Nilakanta  
National Defence Academy, Poona

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Little Egret (Egretta garzetta) breeding in Kerala

On 21.3.1965 I noticed a Little Egret by the side of a shallow pond near my residence (Walayar) in the company of two Large Egrets, nine Small Egrets, and 36 Pond Herons. The fact that the Little Egret was breeding was evident from its breeding plumage, especially the drooping crest of two narrow plumes.

There is no breeding record of this bird in Travancore-Cochin as per Dr. Salim Ali's BIRDS OF TRAVANCORE AND COCHIN. The area where the bird was seen is definitely outside the territory covered by the above book, but not far away from it. Similarly the season is also said to commence with May, i.e. the start of SW. monsoons. The above observation compares favourably with breeding season recorded in the FAUNA OF BRITISH INDIA, Birds, i.e. March to May or earlier. These birds are said to breed in Ceylon from December to April according to A GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF CEYLON, by G.M. Henry.

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