

Mr Humayun Abdulali
Hornbill House
Shahid Bhagat Singh Road
Bombay - 400 023

7 June 1982.

Dear Sir;

I am a birdwatcher from Hyderabad. I have recently purchased a copy of the Synopsis written by Dr S D Ripley. After going through this book, I have come to realise the great number of sub-species of birds which exist on the sub-continent. Dr Ripley has very very clearly demarcated the distribution of each subspecies. But I would like to know to what extent one can depend on this distribution of the sub-species of different birds. Is it necessary to write the sub-species of a bird to make it clear, or does the genus and the specie suffice? Would you advise me to write the sub-species of a bird every time I write down its scientific name? Whenever the bird is not in the hand, can one rely on the sub-species described for the area by Dr Ripley?

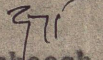
There is another bit of advise I would like from you. I would like to subscribe to a few journals/popular magazines for a favourably good knowledge of the natural history of the world. I am already subscribing to the following journals and popular magazines;

Journals; 1) Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society,
2) Journal of the British Ornithologists' Union - the Ibis
3) Newsletter for Birdwatchers

Popular Magazines; 1) Audubon (commenced this year, but not received a copy yet)
2) Sanctuary

Which others would you suggest to make this a better list? I might add here, that in favour of a membership in the BOU, I gave up my membership of the RSPB and BTO. Awaiting a reply,

Yours sincerely


Aasheesh Pittie

HUMAYUN ABDULALI

Telegram : FAIZCOY
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Res. : 5 3 3 0 0 6

75, Abdul Rehman Street,
BOMBAY-400 003.

17th June, 1982.

Dear Mr. Pittie,

I have received your letter of 7th inst, making several enquiries regarding birds.

It is an accepted tenet of ornithological work that the subspecies is not mentioned, unless a specimen has been collected and/or it is well established that a particular subspecies and that alone exists in that area. If, for instance, you look at my Checklist of the Birds of Maharashtra, which I trust you have, you will see that in some places more than one subspecies is mentioned. This means that one is resident and the other migrant, e.g. Hoopoes, Kestrels etc. Also, most notes, ~~if any~~, offered for publication without collection of specimens relate to a habit ~~for~~ some similar outdoor observations. In such instances, it is not at all necessary to refer to the subspecies. If you are making a list of the birds of a particular area, then you must say in the Introduction on what basis you are making the subspecific identifications. This is very important, for a record once wrongly published is almost impossible to delete and the best of observers make mistakes in identifications, not only in the field but also of the specimens. Instances of the latter are visible in the course of cataloguing the birds in the Bombay collection.

In Ripley's Synopsis, the distribution is broadly given and it does not give the exact place where one subspecies meets another. In many cases the form at the meeting place is midway between the two races and in many instances it is not possible to determine to which race it really ~~is~~ belongs. Therefore, until such time as you are better versed in the handling of birds and their study, I would advise you to leave the subspecies alone.

As regards the journals for reading and study, I have just resigned from the B.O.U. after 40 years of membership, for I am afraid the articles in their Journal are much too technical. ~~but~~ In any case we do get a copy at the Bombay Natural History Society. I have recently been subscribing to British Birds (Fountains, Park Lane, Blunham, Bedford MK44 3NJ) which is a monthly issued in England and for which the annual subscription is £18/- with a discount for those who are members of other ornithological societies.

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17th June, 1982.

I paid my subscription on the last understanding but there was some difficulty as it does not apparently apply to overseas members. If however you write and tell them that you are doing so at my instance and would like to know what discount they could offer you by being a member of the B.O.U., you might be able to get a better price. This is full of short notes and observations and will give you some idea of the extent to which these matters have been studied abroad and how much they know. As and when this knowledge is available here, we can have equivalent magazines

I notice that you have given up your membership of the B.T.O., which presumably issues the Bulletin of the B.T.O. Is this a subsidiary to the Ibis which deals mainly with taxonomic matters and which is usually known as the Bulletin B.O.C.? This is very useful to people working on taxonomic matters and though I was paying for this magazine for the last two years, my resignation ^{from} with the B.O.C. has put up the price for this exorbitantly high and I am trying to transfer the membership to the B.N.H.S. There are several American magazines like the Auk and the Condor which are of long standing and of great importance. However, they ordinarily deal only with American birds and are not always of interest. The national and international issues of natural history are popular magazines issued in America which are perhaps the best popular magazines showing coloured pictures which are far superior to those in any other place. If you wish, I could arrange to send you a couple of copies which you will please return after perusal.

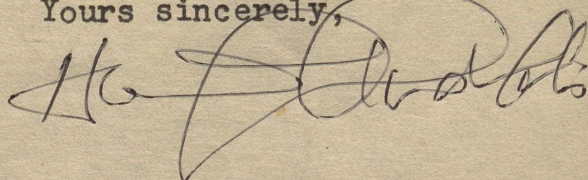
It would appear that there are now several people in Hyderabad who are interested in birds and it would be well if you were to keep together and exchange notes and papers amongst yourselves, so that you know what notes you have got are of value.

If you let me have any of your notes, I would be glad to comment upon them.

Incidentally, if you were to write to me at the above address, the letters would reach me much quicker.

Mr. Aasheesh Pittie,
14-7-370 Begum Bazar,
Hyderabad-500 012.
(A.P.).

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Yours sincerely,



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17th June, 1982.

Two ~~Likely~~ persons in Hyderabad whom you probably know
are:-

- (1) Major Ahmed Abdul Aziz,
Aziz Bagh,
Sultampura,
Hyderabad-500 024. (A.P.).

- (2) Mr. Siraj A. Taher,
Road No. 1, Banjara Hills,
Hyderabad-500 034. (A.P.).

Mr Humayun Abdulali
75 Abdul Rehman Street
Bombay - 400 003

27th June 1982.

Dear Sir;

Thank you very much indeed for that extremely informative letter. I could not reply immediately because I was then laid down by a bout of malarial fever. Now I am sufficiently recovered to send a coherent reply.

A doubt is worrying me about the Grey Wagtail. In the Book of Indian Birds (page 117; 10th Ed) and in your checklist of Maharashtra, this bird's scientific name is Motacilla caspica. But in the new Collins Handguide to the Birds of the Indian Sub-Continent and the Synopsis (2nd Ed), this bird is not even mentioned. According to the Synopsis, the Grey Wagtail is Motacilla cinerea (Tunstall) contrary to Motacilla caspica (Gmelin) in the book by Dr Salim Ali. Could you please clear that up for me Sir?

Before I say anything about my bird-notes, I would like to tell you about the local bird-watcher club here. It was started a little over two years ago by very able gentlemen like Capt N S Tyabji (Hon Rep of WWF-India), Mr Pushp Kumar (CF wildlife management), etc. Quite soon the membership grew and our outings did become interesting. We travelled around the city in the jeeps of the forest department - this luxury has become a disadvantage because now no one is willing to take a bus when jeeps are not free. Anyway, in the beginning, we would go out, some with note pads, some not. A very few of us did actually jot down the names of the birds we saw, a great majority making excuses - there are some who are writing and we shall copy from them! For a year - so it was initially planned - we would just watch and identify birds, and then get down to some serious birding. It is over 2 years now, and that mysterious seriousness has been eluding us. ~~For~~

and
For the first year I was taken in and did continue to write the birds we saw and identified in my pad. But somehow this was not satisfying. So I started maintaining lists of birds seen in different places, a visit to a place getting one sheet, and arranged these alphabetically, in a file. Then I maintained another list according to birds. I write the bird's name on top and then below in columns I fill in the date, place on which it was seen. Both the lists are cross referenced to the notepad.

Much later Capt Tyabji advised me to keep a migration list. Nothing very elaborate, but just to jot down the date of arrival and the place where seen of migrant birds and also the date on which it was seen last and of course, where. This has become an interesting list too.

All this is fine, but I still feel like clockwork. How can I record bird behaviour through my notes? Does it involve going out alone in the field and sitting down in one place? I do confess that I have never sat tight in a place and watched birds. It has always been done moving or standing still. I hear of people keeping bird diaries. What do they generally record in them? Bird-behaviour?

I may be coming to Bombay in the second week of July. Then I will bring my notes and also my lists - and ask you for comments. Maybe that would be a good time to go through a copy or two of British Birds - which I intend to subscribe from next year. I have seen a few copies of NATURAL HISTORY, which our zoo subscribes to, and some of which I had borrowed from the BNHS library some time ago. They are quite like NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC. And I get the latter.

The British Trust for Ornithology - BTO for short - is not a subsidiary to the IBIS, but a society by itself. It issues a quarterly journal called BIRD STUDY, which is generally full of papers on either the migration recoveries of birds, or their feeding habits. Very dry. Recently I was lucky enough to read a copy of ORYX, the magazine of the Fauna Preservation Society. I thought it was quite an informative journal. What do you think Sir, would it be worthwhile subscribing to?

I know Major Aziz and Mr Taher quite well, and as a matter of fact, it was only after Mr Taher told me about his correspondence with you regarding the Pied Crested Cuckoo, that I wrote you...

...and shall continue to write.

Yours sincerely

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75, Abdul Rehman Street,
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4th August, 1982.

Dear Mr. Pittie,

I just returned from a more or less holiday trip to the U.K., to find in my unattended mail your letter of 27th June.

The purpose of using a scientific name is to assure that everybody knows what you are talking about i.e. Motacilla caspica (or by whatever name you call it) is the same whether included in English, Chinese, Russian or Dutch text. To assure that the name caspica is used by everybody and not cinerea by some and caspica by others, there is a convention whereby the oldest name has priority over all the others using Linnaeus's Systema Naturae (1757) as the base. However, there are many mistakes of omission and otherwise and the names are altered from time to time. Writing from my office I do not know why caspica has been changed to cinerea, but once you appreciate the principle of the thing, you will understand that they *can* change from time to time. I will give you an example or two. I had described a kingfisher from the Andamans as Pelargopsis capensis shekari but it was later discovered that Stuart Baker had described the same bird as osmastoni in a footnote in another volume many years ago which invalidated me -- making it Pelargopsis capensis osmastoni with shekari as a synonym. In another instance I described an oriole as Oriolus chinensis andamanicus but it was later discovered that the word andamanicus had already been used for another bird of the same genus which was later synonymised with macrourus from the Nicobars rendering it void. The name has therefore been changed to Oriolus chinensis reubeni followed by Abdulali, i.e. the author's name. Complicated rules and regulations cover all these *changes* and in the event of there being any dispute, it is referred to an International Committee who in turn are also liable to overlook records and make mistakes.

As regards the bird notes, our position is relatively simple in so far as very little is known about the habits of *many* of our birds. Though it is advisable to keep written notes of all that you see, you must have sufficient knowledge of the background to know what is worth noting and what not. In my experience it would be best to do it on a card system and have a card for each different bird found in your State. At the top you have the English and

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the local names and they should be arranged according to the numbers in Ripley's Synopsis (a second edition has just been issued) *or in the Handbook.*

After every trip, you make ~~a~~ notes indicating how many you have seen, on what date, and in what ecological condition and also note down whatever you think has been unusual or curious in its behaviour. In the earlier stages, you will be recording a lot of items which it will soon become apparent, are wellknown and do not need to be noted. However, many items like dates of arrival and departure of migrants, relative abundance or paucity at certain times of the year in certain places or biotopes, dates of nesting, kind of nest made, number of eggs laid, period of incubation, time taken in nest building, if both sexes work at the nest and incubate or feed the young, periods spent by young in nest etc., are points about which we know very little.

has add to our knowledge
After you have kept such notes for some time, you should compare them with the literature available and extract such items ~~in~~ the form of a general note. Small differences are not worth recording separately, though if you should run into something which is really interesting, or exciting, you can go through the process immediately. It is however very difficult to judge if what you have noted is original or worth publishing and in most instances it is advisable to pass it on to somebody more familiar with the subject and obtain his opinion before sending it to a journal. It is very discouraging to have one's note rejected.

to see it
The interest shown in birds in England has got to be seen to be believed. I was staying with a friend in Norfolk. She had mentioned my interest in birds to a local birdman. On the first morning we received a telephone message saying that a white stork, which is very rare in England, had been seen some distance away and whether I would like to join the party going down. Six or eight of us got there in a station wagon to find one car already parked along the roadside with several people who had seen the bird fly and settle behind a clump of trees about 200 yards off the road. The leader of our party walked away and after a few minutes signalled to us to come over. There was the stork seated alone high up in a bare tree about 300 yards from where we stood. Cameras and binoculars

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were immediately produced and everybody had a good look. After about half-an-hour or so, during which we looked at other birds also, we walked back to see 2 other cars pulled up by the roadside looking for the stork. As we gave them the necessary instructions and were about to drive off, yet another car-load appeared, and we were told that hundreds of people would visit the place before the day ended. All the information was conveyed over the telephone to friends and co-workers.

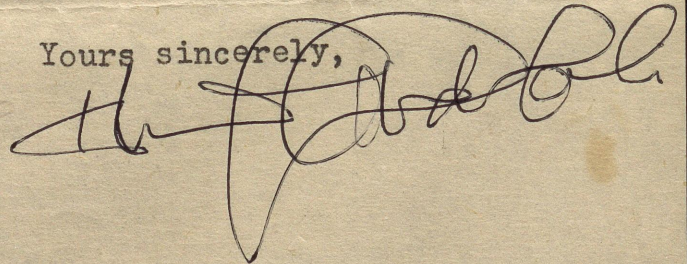
I am afraid that it will be a long time before we have such conditions in India, but let us see what can be done.

As regards subscribing to different papers, it is difficult to be very dogmatic because all of them contain bits of useful information for everybody. I think the best arrangement for you is to subscribe to one or two papers not available at the B.N.H.S., or similar organisations which you present to them after you have finished with them. This makes it available to others, ^{many} for very few of us are even aware of the existence of ~~such~~ journals and it is impossible for one person to subscribe to all of them.

I would be glad to be of such assistance as I can in ornithological matters, but you will no doubt realise that it would be difficult to write at great length on many subjects and my response will to some extent be controlled by the amount of other work which I then have in hand.

With all good wishes.

Yours sincerely,



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