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FOR BIRDWATCHERS

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3

Indexed
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134



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Contents

The Birds of Darranga (Bhutan). By Zafar Futehally	1
Birds of Juhu swamp. By S.V. Nilakanta	4
Some birds common to India and northern Europe. By Sven Nilsson	6
A valley in the Orissa jungle. By S.K. Reeves	7
Notes and Comments	8

Correspondence:

Birdwatching at Periyar, Kerala. By W.D.C. Erskine Crum (p. 8);

Drought conditions and waterbirds in the Mysore State. By Rhalid Ghani (p. 9)

THE BIRDS OF DARRANGA (BHUTAN)

By

Zafar Futehally

The King of Bhutan has asked Dr. Salim Ali to undertake a survey of the birds of his country and to write a book about them on the same general lines as his 'Birds of Sikkim'. The survey is now in progress and I had the good luck of being with the survey party from the 30th January to the 10th February. It was with reluctance that I came away to continue the process of earning my living.

Bhutan is an independent state in the Eastern Himalayas bordered by Sikkim, the Chamb Valley, and the district Darjeeling on the West and Nefa on the East. To the North lies Tibet, and to the South the Goalpara, Kamrup, and Jalpaiguri districts of Assam. It is roughly 26 to 28 degrees North and 88 to 91 degrees East. The country consists of extremely steep mountain ranges running mainly East to West and there are at present three roads running North to South through the country. All these roads are being constructed by Dantak, the Project of the Border Roads Organisation of the Government of India, which

which is concerned with road making in this area. At the moment the Bird Survey work is being carried out in the Eastern part of Bhutan, along the road going from Darranga to Tashigong. Darranga is at a height of 220 M from seam level and Tashigong about 185 K.M. away, is at a height of 1000 M and in between the road crosses areas as high as 2730 M.

Before joining the party in Bhutan I spent a couple of days with Mr. E.P. Gee, in Shillong. As is well known, he is now a distinguished honorary worker in the cause of nature preservation in this country and his home 'Evergreen Cottage' has become a place of pilgrimage for like-minded people from all parts of the world. His orchid collection is famous, and he has acquired an intimate knowledge of the requirement of each species of plant, so that he can make them bloom to their maximum glory. Orchids are apparently very choosy about their host plants---which is strange considering that they are merely epiphytic. *Bauhinia variegata* and *Largestroemia* are satisfactory hosts. The orchids are tied to the tree in a position as similar as possible to the one in which they were before being plucked from the forest. Nature, after all, is the best guide and the way sunlight strikes the flower is all important. Apart from orchids, 'Evergreen Cottage' has lovely trees, all carefully positioned to get the best possible effect. Upper Shillong is about 2500 M high and the main trees here are Pines (*pinus Insularis*). There are also some deodhars and cypruses.

In spite of the thickly wooded hills, bird life is conspicuous by its absence. During the two days I was there I saw only the Scarlet Minivet, Southern Yellow Cheeked Tits (black crests with black line down their throats) Blackheaded sibilias, White eyes, Ashy drongos, crows, (with very deep voices) Himalayan Whistling Thrushes and Redvented Bulbuls. Apparently there is a great deal of netting and killing going on here. On my way up by taxi from Gauhati I saw a man with a catapult carrying a freshly killed Bronze-winged Dove, and talks with the locals indicated that they considered birds primarily as an article of food.

On 30th January, I arrived at Rangiya Rly. station to meet the survey party. Rangiya is the nearest railway station to Bhutan, and from there onwards all the movement was by jeep. Between Rangiya and Darranga a distance of nearly thirty miles, there were several Bombax and *Erythrina* trees, which were in bloom, and they were inhabited by many flower and nectar eating birds. Apparently in these parts birds are not molested and killed, which was a pleasant change from the situation in the Khasi hills (Shillong) less than a hundred miles away. Every few hundred yards in the wet fields by the side of the road there were solitary Lesser Adjutant Storks, suggesting that each bird had acquired a particular territory for itself. We also saw several Brown Shrikes (migrants) which appear to be the only species of shrike found here. The piercing and far-carrying call of a Crested Serpent Eagle from a telegraph pole was exciting and familiar although, as Salim Ali pointed out it was of a different race from the ones we see in Bombay.

The Bhutan Administration had made excellent bundobast for us and we were soon happily settled in the Guest House at Darranga. I shall always remember Darranga for the two striking Flame of the Forest trees in the compound of the Guest House, and the equally attractive birds which flocked to them.

Rosebreasted parakeets were constantly around these trees. The calls of these birds are much deeper and less shrill than those of the parakeets at home and have a certain duck-like quality about them 'KAN KAN KAN'. There were also quite a few Large Spider Hunters, small birds with an enormously big curved bill. They seemed to me to be a good diminutive replica of a curlew. The colour is also similar. They have a shrill chattering call and we came across them in many localities. They are extremely active and seem intent on getting all the nectar from the flowers before the others have had a drink. We shot a specimen at Deothang and when the dead bird was held by its legs, beak pointing down, quite a large quantity of colourless nectar trickled

down. I had a sip, and it was as sweet as sugar. Then there were the Goldfronted Chloropsis, which keep up an endless chatter and imitate to perfection other bird calls. They are also very aggressively disposed towards other birds. They do not believe in co-existence and insist on driving away other birds which come to the same branch or even to the same tree. There were Bluethroated Barbets (*Megalaima Asiatica*) with crimson red foreheads and the Large Green Barbets calling at all hours of the day. Grey Headed Mynas, Collared Bushchats Brown Shrikes, and Chestnut bellied Nuthatches, could all be watched without trouble.

The cook of the guest house, sensing our interest in viewing new varieties of birds, came upto us after dinner and said, we would probably consider him mad but every morning a two headed bird came to the Flame of the Forest tree and plucked the flowers alternately with both its beaks on either side of the body. Dr. Salim Ali offered him Rs 100/= in cash and world fame if the bird was shown to him next morning. The next morning alas his 'TAKDIR' was bad and the bird did not come.

A boulder strewn stream meanders around Darranga and we were excited by what we saw along the stream and in the adjoining forested tracks. Apart from the birds mentioned we saw Black Partridge (?), Bronze Drongo, Black Drongo, Hair-Crested Drongo, Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo (the rackets are more elongated yet smaller than the ones on the Racket tails of Bombay), Shama, Iora, Whitecapped Redstart, Plumbeous Redstart, Blythe Rock Thrush, White Wagtail, Green Sandpiper, White throated Kingfisher, Magpie Robin, Whitebacked vulture, Redvented Bulbul, Red-whiskered Bulbul, Pond Heron, Tailor Bird, Barred Jungle Owlet (only heard its call *kao kuk, kao kuk, kao kuk*), Himalayan Pied Kingfisher Red eared Rufous Woodpecker, Ashybacked Shrike, Spotted Forktail, Striated Munia, and Greyheaded Flycatcher.

I would particularly like to comment on two species of Fantail flycatchers, which were very common here and which we had the opportunity of seeing at close quarters, the Yellowbellied Fantail Flycatcher, and the White throated Fantail Flycatcher. True to their genus the birds kept returning to the same perch after working sallies after winged prey, so that they could be observed for long periods. The Whitethroated bird is very much like the Whitespotted one in Bombay, except that it is darker and has only one white line at its throat. Its call is not as sharp and neat as that of the other species and it seemed to be less spry than *albobularis*. Nevertheless it is a delightful bird, and its presence gave the forest a dainty quality. The other bird, equally agile, restless, and confiding, was the Yellowbellied species, which was one of the few birds I managed to photograph. Unfortunately, it is always on the outskirts of thick bush and scrub and the tiny bird is lost among the tangled background.

At Darranga, which is only at a height of 250 M above sea level, both the House Sparrow and the Tree Sparrow were present. Higher up at Deothong 1100 M (formerly known as Diwangiri) only the Tree Sparrow was present. The steady and definite change in the species of birds at different levels of the Himalayas is an exciting feature of bird-watching in these parts. One advantage of being with Salim Ali is that every bird can be identified accurately, and all relevant taxonomical and ecological facts about it are available to the enquirer. Without this information mere watching would be much less meaningful. Below the tall trees of the forests at Darranga the undergrowth mainly consists of a shrub called *EUPHETORUM*. This is rather Lantana like in appearance but it is actually a competitor of the Lantana. No Lantana grows in these parts. Unfortunately, unlike Lantana, *Euphetorum* produces no berries for birds, so that apart from providing cover it is not much use from the avian point of view. However, it is a very domineering sort of plant, and has extended its influence very effectively over the Eastern Himalayan region.

* * * * *

BIRDS OF JUHU SWAMP

By

S.V. Nilakanta

Bombay City as we know it today was at one time many small islands separated by the sea which has a rise and fall of nearly sixteen feet during spring tides. Most of these islands have been joined together by the process of silting and also by dumping city refuse. In many places the flight for living space has been so great that this reclamation seems to have been done without paying due attention to natural drainage, with the result that in the rainy season, water collects in low-lying areas and can drain out only when the tide ebbs. These floods are not uncommon.

During such floods, Juhu can be recognized as a separate island lying to the east of Santa Cruz and Vile Parle. The main access to Juhu is by a causeway from Santa Cruz. There is a small swamp to the north of this causeway and a much larger one to the south. The low area north of the causeway ebbs and floods through a narrow culvert. The vegetation of this part is stunted. There are also several acres of dirty mud which harbours several small waders as well as the ever present Pond Herons. It is worth one's while to stand on this road somewhere near the Lido cinema and watch Little Egrets or one lone Reef Heron stalk mud skippers. There, at times, may be seen hundreds of these amphibians waiting to be caught. At other times there is too much water for waders and we may see cormorants or coots.

The swamp to the south of the road is thick with vegetation, and birds, if any, cannot be spotted. This part of the swamp drains into the fast flowing Danda creek, which effectively cuts off Juhu from Bandra.

Although the main causeway remains the bus route and the usual access to the southern extremity of Juhu, further land connection is provided by the Juhu aerodrome which is just a flat and not very broad field joining Vile Parle to Juhu. Till two years ago almost free access to this airfield was available, the field being used only for amateur flying. Recently, however, strong fences have been erected as security measures. The southern fence of the airfield is the northern boundary of the swamp, described in the previous paragraphs. On this boundary may be seen vast numbers of wagtails, Grey, Yellow, and White Wagtails can be compared at close range for identification signs. Ringed Plovers and Kentish Plovers can also be seen though the latter are very abundant on the sandy beach of Juhu sea shore. This boundary is difficult of access and not recommended for birdwatching.

The northern fence of the airfield is the southern boundary of yet another swamp which stretches from Vile Parle to Juhu in the east-west direction. Easy access is provided by a new road running along the northern boundary of the swamp as well as from lanes between newly constructed houses in Juhu.

This swamp has no vegetation, is a salt water marsh and its bottom is just oozy mud which dries and cakes on its fringes. On the caked mud may be seen White Wagtails, Little Indian Skylarks and difficult to identify pipits. There is a short belt of rather dry grass on which Blackbellied Finch Larks glean seeds. Further on are the fence posts of new constructions on which sit Rufousbacked Shrikes and an odd Blue Rock Thrush. But it is the actual water of the swamp which teems with birds and holds our attention.

The waders in the swamp water can be graded according to height or rather according to length of legs and thus they deploy themselves. The shortest feed in the shallow edges and the tallest stand farther away in deeper water. Since we are not able to judge distances very well, especially when looking through field glasses, the far away birds look small. Fortunately there are large numbers of Blackwinged Stilts and Pond Herons everywhere and comparison with these can give a reasonable indication of size. A

little caution has to be exercised in judging the size of pond herons which can crouch into small brown bundles or stretch their long rubber necks straight upwards.

The smaller waders make up for their size by being present in larger numbers. Thus, the Little Stint becomes noticeable, especially as flocks of hundred or more birds take off for no apparent reason and fly, skimming over the water in unison. The whole flock disappears and reappears depending on whether they show their brown back or their white undersides as they bank and turn. After flying all over the place, they settle down some times in a different place and sometimes back in their original place and start feeding at once.

Numbers of Wood Sandpipers may be seen feeding in the foreground. The very similar but much larger Greenshank can be recognized at once by its size and by its relatively longer legs. We have to wait and see one of the Wood Sandpipers fly to notice the white rump and brownish tail. Occasionally, one of them flies and shows a dazzlingly white rump and whiter tail. This is a Green Sandpiper.

The somewhat unsoiciable Common Sandpiper may be seen feeding, quietly by itself, some distance away from other birds. If we wait and watch till the bird flies, it will enable us to identify it positively by its whitish wing bar and brown rump. This bird holds out its wings in a peculiarly stiff attitude and beats its wings in very short strokes. Once this is noticed, it cannot be forgotten.

Redshanks are easily identified by the colour of their legs. It is a good thing to position ourselves with the sun behind us so that the birds are properly illuminated and also to avoid too much glare from the water. Otherwise, it is not possible to see all the delicate shades of colour in all these essentially brown and white birds.

In the great distance we may see three or four Large Egrets. These are available throughout the year. On some days we may see a few Grey Herons. At that distance it becomes impossible to judge size but the slow and majestic wing beats distinguish it from a closer Reef Heron.

On one occasion, we have seen Whimbrels or were they Curlews? They were too far off to distinguish dark crown stripes, present in Whimbrels and absent in Curlews.

On more than one occasion we have seen the beautiful avocets. Once, when the tide had flooded the swamp, the avocets were swimming like ducks.

One day, while watching this panorama, there was a sudden commotion. All the birds with the exception of the largest rose up although no gun was discharged and there had been no sudden noise. I looked skywards for the reason while the birds flew helter skelter at top speed. The reason appeared in the shape of a Marsh Harrier (female) which came down in a swooping glide but went onwards without picking up anything.

There are usually numerous House Crows, which sometimes chase the smaller birds. In this season, when there are so many winter visitors, one just doesn't take much notice of Redwattled Lapwings and Kites and such.

SOME BIRDS COMMON TO INDIA AND NORTHERN EUROPE

By

Sven Nilsson

We have been living in Iran for four years and are now on our third year in India. Although ornithologists only in a very elementary way we have had great pleasure in studying to some extent the birdlife in these countries and compare with that of our homeland Sweden.

Some birds are obviously very well equipped for life in various environments which differ considerably as to climatic and other conditions. I am not so much thinking of migrant birds for which their normal cycles of life may take them from the tropics to the Arctic and back again every year. But of our common birds, e.g. the house sparrow (Passer domesticus) is found over most of Eurasia and seems to be equally able to survive a Scandinavian winter as an Indian summer.

One of the common crows in India, the house crow, Corvus splendens, appears to be very similar in its plumage to that of most of Eurasia, Corvus cornix. A layman would suggest the differences to be only that of races, but the books say something different. Corvus cornix is common from the River Elbe to the Jenisei and the common crow of Iran, but definitely a different specimen than Corvus splendens.

The black Indian crow (Corvus macrorhynchos) on the other hand, is in India taking the place of the raven (Corvus corax), not that of the black crow of Europe (Corvus corone). It also looks more like a raven.

But how has it really been established which of these populations are races and which are different specimens?

Very interesting is to see the beautiful great shrike (Lanius excubitor) in India, knowing that in Sweden it breeds only in the northern part. In winter it comes down to southern Sweden. It can then be seen sitting on fence poles during the short day at 0° F. looking for food.

Or the Little Grebe (Podiceps ruficollis), which can sometimes be seen staying as a rare guest through the winter in Stockholm, swimming in the narrow water kept free from ice by the strong currents at the outlet of Lake Maelaren.

This particular spot of open water in Stockholm is a haven for an enormous number of birds in severe winters as the present one. Otherwise shy birds become quite domesticated as they are fed by people. The great number of swans in particular make a spectacular feature in the centre of the metropolis. Of the birds common to India the coot (Fulica atra) is always found there.

Another interesting species is the Lesser Spotted Eagle, which can although rarely, be seen in Sweden and Iran, which are the northwestern and southeastern limits of one population, while there is another population of the same bird breeding in India. It is surprising that it is not to be found in between. Could dependence on forests be the explanation?

The kestrel (Falco tinnunculus) resident only in south India is a very common bird in Iran, in breeding season actually the bird of prey most easily seen in that country. In Sweden it has also been common until recently, but, alas the mercury treatment of seeds has now almost made it extinct. Its primary food, such as field mice eat of the poisoned seed and become an easy prey in turn transferring of the deadly poison to the kestrels.

A VALLEY IN THE ORISSA JUNGLE

By

S. K. Reeves

In the June 1965 issue of the Newsletter, in a note entitled "A Valley in the Orissa Jungle", I made some remarks regarding the distribution of the Large Greenbilled Malkoha (Rhopodytes tristis). I was prompted to do so by an article written by Mr. L.A. Hill, in the May issue, under the same heading.

I am at present reading a book entitled A BIRD PHOTOGRAPHER IN INDIA, written by that well-known photographer of Indian birds E.H.N. Lowther, and which was published in 1949 by the Oxford University Press (Indian branch).

It occurred to me that our readers and Mr. Hill in particular, might be interested to read what the author has to say (at p. 46) regarding the status of this bird in the Manbhum District of Bihar. At the time of writing, the author was stationed at Dhanbad and would appear to have done a good deal of his bird photography in the Dhanbad sub-division of the district. It will be observed that, in terms of avian distribution, Dhanbad is not so very far from Panposh.

Mr. Lowther writes as follows:

"As long ago as 1862, Jerdon either stated that the large Himalayan green-billed malkoha occurs or breeds in Chota Nagpur and the northern Circars, or he thought it did -- I am not sure which, as my copy of 'Jerdon' was lent a few years ago to a friend who failed to return it. But no ornithologist since appears to have met with this species in these parts, judging by what 'Old Fauna', 'New Fauna', and 'Nidification' have to say in the matter. The first-named quotes Jerdon in support of the large green-billed malkoha's occurring in Chota Nagpur, but adds: 'This needs confirmation,' while in 'New Fauna' Stuart Baker observes 'possibly Chota Nagpur and Northern Circars (Jerdon)', a statement which is repeated in 'Nidification', the relevant volume of which was published in 1934. It would therefore appear that in spite of the passage of seventy-eight years Jerdon's remarks still awaited confirmation in 1940, when I first published my discovery. It is surprising that the species has not been noted from Chota Nagpur in recent years, as it is not only fairly common (for an unusual bird) in Manbhum, in the heavy mixed forest round the Topchanchi reservoir and the Dolkata nullah, but is found in the neighbouring district of Hazaribagh. It is, however, a particularly shy species and frequents forests the ornithologist seldom invades, which fact probably accounts for its having remained unnoticed so long. A hasty glimpse of the bird -- and this is all that is vouchsafed one as a rule -- gives the impression of a very large male koel -- it is about twenty-three inches in length, more than half of which is accounted for by the tail. At close quarters, however, the apple-green bill, with a tinge of red about the base, and the bare crimson orbital patch, as also the ashy-green colouring about the head, neck and chin, are noticeable. Sceptics may imagine I am mistaken in my identity and that what I saw was the small green-billed malkoha. Such is not the case. Although I have not come across the second-named malkoha, it is not possible to confuse the two species. The small malkoha is not only considerably smaller (about 15½ inches in length) but has the orbital patch cobalt-blue and the throat feathers forked, which is not the case with the larger bird.

In the Manbhum district the large green-billed malkoha nests during July and August in heavy jungle, amongst creepers, at a height of between fifteen and twenty feet from the ground. I have found eggs as early as 14 July and as late as 8 August."

NOTES AND COMMENTS

The regional clubs of Rajkot and Roorkee, U.P., seem to be doing very well. It would be a good policy for other regional editors of the Newsletter to organize lecture meetings and outings from time to time.

A report received from Dr. Joseph George, Central Building Research Institute, Roorkee, is reproduced below:

"The membership of the Club during 1965 was twelve which we consider quite good for a small place like Roorkee. During the year ten field + trips were organized and the average attendance at these trips was over 50 per cent. Birdwatchers from other parts of the country visiting Roorkee joined our trips on a few occasions adding greatly to our pleasure.

"Mr. Haridutt Vedalankar of Haridwar addressed the Club on "Kalidasa as a birdwatcher", and Mr. K.M. Vaid of Dehra Dun on "Spring in the Himalayas",

Club members have made a modest beginning in attracting birds to gardens by installing nestboxes."

CORRESPONDENCE

Birdwatching at Periyar, Kerala

If you want to avoid a holiday at home, no better place to spend it than Periyar, and no better time than the winter months -- we have just spent Christmas there.

Facilities for birdwatching are legion but not organized. The Hotel could give no advice. Eventually the Range Officer lent me a guide -- to show me the jungle paths, not to show me birds! In the three days I saw some 30 varieties, a dozen new to me, got a vicious crick in the neck from gazing at tree tops, and enjoyed an almost deafening day long chorus of song and chatter. Unfortunately I neither saw, nor heard, so far as I am aware, a Malabar Whistling Thrush.

My scorecard shows:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Black Drongo | Rackettailed Drongo (F) |
| Velvetfronted Nuthatch (F) | Redwhiskered Bulbul |
| Paradise Flycatcher | Common Wood Shrike |
| Orange Minivet (F) | Golden Oriole |
| Grackle (F) | Large Pied Wagtail |
| Goldenbacked Woodpecker | Rufous Woodpecker (F) |
| Chestnut-headed Bee-eater (F) | Pied Kingfisher |
| Whitebreasted Kingfisher | Malabar Grey Hornbill (F) |
| Whitebacked Vulture | Darter |
| Whitenecked Stork | Egrets |
| Paddybirds | Jungle Myna (F) |
| Kestrel | King Vulture (F) |
| Green Pigeon (greyfronted ?) | Large Green Barbet |
| Small Green Barbet | Coppersmith |
| Roseringed Parakeet | Bluewinged Parakeet (F) |
| Greyheaded Myna (F) | Crimsonthroated Barbet |
| | Grey Wagtail |

The Greyheaded Mynais questionable, seen in a flock at tree top height. in fading dusk.

The hornbill male birds had yellowy/red bills and a ruddy patch around the vent, the females absolutely grey all over.

(F) shows my first sighting.

Drought conditions and waterbirds in the Mysore State

The failure of the rains throughout the Mysore State must have brought so many waterbirds on a big tank, which I usually visit 4-6 times a year between August and February. The place I visit is about 40-60 miles from Chikmagalur district, which consists of 4-6 fairly big tanks. I first visited these tanks in August 1965 and found most of the tanks were drying and on one tank where there was about 3-4 ft. deep water I saw 12 flamingos and about 200 spoonbills and a few spottedbilled pelicans.

I visited the same place on 29th December 1965. On a small tank I saw for the first time a pair of Ruddy Sheldrake (Brahminy Duck) (as Dr. Salim Ali mentions in his book these ducks are rare to the south of Mysore), and also saw six painted storks and some shovellers. The other tanks were completely dry except for the big tank where thousands of waterbirds of many species congregated, which is about 250-300 acres in area. The concentration of so many birds must be due to the failure of rains and the drying up of almost all the surrounding tanks where these birds would have been distributed. It was a fascinating sight to see so many birds on a single tank which includes about 200-300 Barheaded Geese, about 20 flamingos, about 200 spoonbills, spotbills, pintails, shovellers, garganey, whistling teal, cotton teal, thousands of coots, little cormorants, darter (snakebird), grey heron, little egret, blackwinged stilt, stone curlew (in a scrub field near a tank), little stint, little ring plover, white ibis 2, black ibis 6, purple moorhen, pond heron and redwattled lapwing.

Again on 10th January 1966, I visited the same tank and there were about 40-50 geese and many other waterbirds. When I went on the other side of the tank, I was very much surprised to see bird-trappers spreading thousands of snares made out of fishing line on the tank's bank, where hundreds of ducks and geese come for resting in the day and night. When I asked them what they were doing and how many birds they had snared, they said, that they have come just for fun like myself. After making friends they slowly started telling that they had snared 10 geese and many other unwary birds which step into the snares. It seems they are professional trappers and must have snared hundreds of these lovely birds which include flamingos, geese, pelicans and many ducks. They said that they also snare Black Buck in the harvesting season. I actually saw a little stint caught itself by the neck in one of the snares as they had not yet completed spreading the snares. Really it is a great pity and I felt very sorry that such beautiful and lovely birds are caught indiscriminately by the hundred in a season. I saw the feathers around the tank.

The beautiful tank, I suppose could be converted into a Wildfowl Sanctuary, as so many thousands of birds congregate in the season every year and if they are protected, I am sure many more species of birds will collect. It will be an excellent and an ideal place for ornithologists and lovers of avifauna.

Unless this indiscriminate snaring and poaching is not stopped, the future of these lovely and pretty birds and animals will be in great danger and very soon they will be wiped out.

Rhalid Ghani

Hosahalli Pet P.O., Chikmagalur, Mysore

Zafar Futehally
Editor, Newsletter for Birdwatchers
32-A Juhu Lane, Andheri, Bombay 58-AS

editorial board

Dr. Salim Ali, F. N. I.
33, Pali Hill, Bandra, Bombay 50

Kunvar Shri Lavkumar,
Rajkumar College, Rajkot

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Gujarat Refinery Project Camp, Baroda

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Calcutta

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University College,
Trivandrum

Mr. R. A. S. Melliush,
Oxford University Press,
Mount Road, Madras

Editor :

Mr. Zafar Futehally,
Juhu Lane, Andheri,
Bombay 58 AS