

# *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*

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## Editorial

### Kihim Diary : The Village Pond

It has become my habit to write a Kihim Diary in every May-June issue of the Newsletter. (For new subscribers I would like to add that Kihim is a seaside village on the mainland just 10 km across the sea from the Gateway of India, Mumbai). I had hoped that the many representations we had made for reconverting the village pond into a bird sanctuary would succeed. But no signs of that yet. The Village Panchayat has leased it out to fishermen for Rs. 80,000 a year, and if we can match this sum, the Panchyat will give it back to the birds - the two species of jacanas, purple moorhens, Indian moorhen, grey heron and thirty other species waiting to see the result of our efforts. In Mumbai, I spoke to Asad Rahmani, Director of the BNHS, to take this as a conservation challenge. He said he would do so.

But I was most surprised to see half a dozen gull-billed terns circling over the pond everyday and diving to catch fish, and on 14th April, with the gulls there was a single juvenile Indian black headed gull *Larus ridibundus* (pink legs, mirror on wings, and jet black terminal band on white tail). I saw it attempt to catch fish, both with its bill, and also with its feet - an extraordinary feat. I thought only ospreys use their feet (claws) when they plunge into the water to land on their prey.

Can we continue to hope that this pond, the home of a baya weaver bird colony in the 1930's where Salim Ali did his pioneering work on the breeding biology of these birds, will become a sanctuary again ? Never give up hope. See the article in this issue on Birds or People ? China argues the question. If the birds do win it will be a long term victory for people as well, for ponds prevent floods & drought, the great curse of our world.

### Kankeshwar Hill

I went up the hill on the 10th of May and was happy to find that much planting has been done by the Forest Department, - but very disappointed that in spite of our continuing requests, for planting native trees, most of the trees planted are *Acacia auriculiformis*. They will attract no birds, or bees, or insects, and their long thin leaves will not prevent the force of the rain from washing away the soil. Broad-leaved local species are needed to restore a degraded environment. Birds were few and far between and I failed to see or hear the shama, which was one of the reasons for my going up the hill.

### Bayas Galore

One of the most interesting sights this year in Kihim, (15.4.99) while walking on the village road, was a flock of bayas *Ploceus philippinus*. Over a hundred, descended on a heap of paddy straw, ate the grain most avidly for 10 seconds, and flew over to a ber (jujuba) tree just 5 metres away. After a 10 seconds halt they flew back en-masse back to the straw

ground eating the grain with extraordinary rapidity - as if this was their last supper. Back again to the tree. Their disciplined manoeuvre with not a single bird out of step, and not a single defaulter left on the ground when the signal to fly was given was a revelation. Who is in command of this operation? The birds were dark brown on top and much paler below. Whether it was a mixed flock or just males getting acquainted with one another to form their cooperative breeding colony is beyond conjecture.

### Rishi Valley Ornithological Centre

On 7th April we were invited to the inaugural session of a Field Study Course in Ornithology organised by the tireless S. Rangaswami and his colleague V. Santharam. The Rishi Valley School is a fine example of an institution where people are given precedence over buildings. So the session was held under the benevolent spread of a banyan, the acoustics were perfect, and one of the statements made in the speeches was

that bird watching/ornithology can become a great builder of character. It can sharpen our capacity for ecological observation - to see the connection between things, to give adequate weightage to each - and not be overkeen to claim having observed a rare species on the basis of insufficient evidence. The great Economist Maqbul - ul - Haq said that "the most difficult thing in life is to discover the obvious". We look forward to some discoveries of the "obvious" by the Rishi Valley Centre. Aasheesh Pittie gave an interesting talk on the principles of nomenclature, and altogether it was a very happy occasion.

### Pending Correspondence

I was away from Bangalore from the 11th April till 2nd June and as expected there is a pile of letters and articles to be dealt with. To avoid delaying the appearance of the May/June issue, I have selected the articles which are the easiest to edit. You must forgive this priority of convenience.



## The Sarus in Jammu, The Fulvous Whistling-Duck in North Bengal & Birds in Pondicherry University Campus — a Reply

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Over the past one year, I have been occupied by a rather enviable job — wandering over nearly the entire length of the country looking for the sarus crane. It may seem a bit excessive at first, but there was no other reliable, quick way to find out all the places that the sarus lives in. And this was necessary since I plan to work for the next two or three years studying the ecology of these cranes. I had to find out which places are best suited for this purpose. Well, so there I was with a rucksack, all set to explore the countryside. I scoured Uttar Pradesh, parts of Himachal Pradesh, even Bihar (and escaped unscathed), Orissa, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and, above all, Jammu. The sarus is, of course, concentrated in the southern parts of Uttar Pradesh but is found in all these states in varying numbers, except Orissa. But the most memorable sighting and experience during this year has been the visit to Jammu and the single pair of cranes that are fighting all odds.

Honestly, Jammu was not in the itinerary to begin with. I bumped into two young bird researchers, in Orissa. They were from Jammu and had come over to attend a workshop. Imagine my surprise when they said they have seen the sarus in Jammu and what's more, they are nesting there. Plans changed immediately and I modified the rest of the trip to include Jammu. And the researchers, Purshottam and Surender, now very good friends, are from the University of Jammu working under very trying circumstances, on conserving wetlands in the border areas. Purshottam and Surender agreed readily to accommodate me in their busy schedules and we planned to visit two areas where they thought the sarus might be seen. Jammu, for most part, has

become peaceable. The militancy is now only a bad memory and the beautiful state can be traversed safely by an outsider. The borders, however, are another matter altogether. One is recommended to seek the able assistance of the Border Security Force. I did just that and landed in the office of the deputy-in-charge in Jammu. And guess what? He, Mr Khader, is an amateur bird watcher and takes immense pride in the natural wealth of his country. Even over the sound of the machine gun, I was on home ground and arrangements were made to facilitate my visit to the border.

The next day, Purshottam, Surender and myself set out to a place called Gharana Wetland Reserve. This compact little wetland, they believe, is the stopover point of several water birds in winter. Though there were several ducks and other birds present, the sarus escaped our notice. And I was getting impatient to see for myself the northernmost presence of this species. The day was not very eventful even though the chatter of nearby machine guns broke the silence infrequently. Bullet marks pockmarked nearly every wall in the small village. But peace had brought back security and the harvest was well in the making. And the birds continued to visit every year. Our next target was a place called Arangal in the Khatuga district. Purshottam's family owned land in that area and lodging was not a problem. We reached in the afternoon and set out almost immediately to a place where they were very confident indeed of seeing the sarus. The cranes apparently breed in the fields every year. For reasons unclear, the chicks die every year and just the same few pairs

are seen. After walking through a scrub jungle, fields and a marshland, Purshottam called a halt and sat down. It was nearing dusk and I wanted to see the cranes the same day, if they were still there. Rather impatient, I ventured forth and asked him to carry on. He looked up benignly, smiled and pointed ahead. Confused, I followed his finger and over the ears of paddy about 300 feet ahead of us popped out two red heads. Their grey bodies followed and the sarus cranes emerged into a field with newly planted wheat. By this time I had seen hundreds of cranes during the survey, but somehow, this pair's rarity enhanced their appearance. Graceful, stately and majestic, the pair paid no heed to us and continued to feed. I wanted to photograph them. I approached them and they became obviously uncomfortable. They would wait until I got to about 100 feet and then start walking away. I hid behind a mound of grass and watched. The male crane suddenly commenced the famous crane dance. He lifted his wings high, pirouetted in front of the female and basically went mad with the pleasure of living. As I watched, the pair continued to croon to each other and disappeared into a field of mustard, their red heads prominent among the bright yellow flowers. And the guns were still chattering in the distance. Mission accomplished, we returned.

But all is not hunky dory. The future of the cranes in Jammu is very uncertain. Over the past years, Purshottam has recorded two instances of poaching of the cranes. By a schoolmaster of all people! And the cranes do fly over to Pakistan where it is believed that the defence personnel there hunt them. The problem here is of conserving the cranes in a situation where the first priority is protection of the country's border, and where there are no definite areas within which the cranes can be contained. There is no immediate solution either, except that these two young scientists have taken it upon themselves to see that the cranes are not disturbed. If, by some chance, the few cranes in the region were to go extinct, it would be a real tragedy. Even as I write, I can see vividly in my mind the pair of cranes dancing in the fields with the Sivaliks rising majestically behind them and the duet sounding over the entire valley.

I am very grateful to Purshottam and Surrender for making the trip to Jammu possible and the wonderful memories of the cranes they have left with me. Mr SK Mukherjee and Mr BC Choudhury at the Wildlife Institute of India provided the facilities under the "Sarus Crane Project" and I am grateful for their continuous support and encouragement.



### The Fulvous Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna bicolor* in North Bengal.

The fulvous whistling-duck (*Dendrocygna bicolor*) is a bird with a very wide global distribution and is found in South America, North America, Africa, Myanmar and Bangladesh apart from India, on suitable wetlands (Carboneras, 1992). While it is seen in large flocks in other countries with flocks numbering up to 1,00,000 birds, it is seen in small scattered

flocks in India, and is most often seen in pairs or individual birds in secluded weed-covered tanks (Carboneras, 1992, Ali & Ripley, 1978). In West Bengal, it was believed to have become extinct from the wetlands in the southern part of the state since 1983 until recently 'rediscovered' in Howrah (Deuti *et al.*, 1996). Martin (1998) from the same area suspects the birds to have become a rarity over the years. I observed a few flocks in upper Bengal, which shows that the species is still prevalent in large numbers in remote wetlands.

While on a survey for sarus cranes in West Bengal, I visited the Rasik Bheel in the district of Atiamochar in the northern part of West Bengal (26°24.749' N; 89°43.707' E) on January 19, 1999. Rasik Bheel is a tank, partially managed for boating purposes, but covered with hyacinth in the remaining areas and heavily disturbed by cattle, villagers using the waters for fishing, washing etc. Apart from pintails, which were present in large numbers, other ducks included the white-eyed pochard and the fulvous whistling-ducks. The ducks were resting on a mound of sand within the tank surrounded by hyacinth. They are easily differentiated from the lesser whistling teals (*Dendrocygna javanica*) by the white (compared to rust-brown) rump patch and prominent dark streaks on the front part of the neck, in addition to being considerably larger. Three flocks numbering a total of 400+ birds were sitting on the banks before taking off disturbed by cattle on the far side. I had opportunity to take several photographs of one of the flocks. These birds were very shy and, on approach by boat, hastily take to flight calling loudly.

The reason for lesser numbers of the fulvous whistling-ducks in wetlands of the southern parts of West Bengal could be the increased levels of disturbance and the loss of areas covered extensively by weeds. While not globally threatened, this species is a rarity in India. Perhaps visits to more sites of this sort which are remote and suitably covered by weeds will give new sites which are used by this species and perhaps even in India, this species is found in very large groups.

### Acknowledgements

This survey was made possible through funding by the Wildlife Institute of India under the "Sarus Crane Project" and I am grateful to Mr SK Mukherjee and Mr BC Choudhury for facilities, and Mr AK Raha, Conservator (Wildlife), Calcutta for permission to visit protected areas.

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### Birds in Pondicherry University Campus - Reply to comments by V. Santharam

It was nice to have my list of birds in the Pondicherry University (NLBW, March/April, 1998) campus scrutinized with such enthusiasm and detail by Santharam (NLBW, Jan/Feb 1999). While on campus, I collected information on birds very perfunctorily. This was something I learnt to regret as I watched the campus slowly being converted, with whole patches of scrub forest being removed to accommodate new buildings. Perhaps a detailed listing right from the beginning would have given us some information about the changes in bird communities even while I was studying in the university. I agree with Santharam's thoughts that the campus will soon have more generalized bird species which will replace the scrub-specialized species. Above all, I was delighted to know the bird composition of the campus exactly a decade before the compilation of my list.

I had omitted birds which I had seen flying overhead. These include, as in the list given by Santharam, grey heron and pintail. Others not mentioned in the list were godwits, shoveller and common pochard. Really surprising was the list of additions to the resident bird species mentioned by Santharam. Blue rock pigeons were still around, though none of the others were seen during my observations of birds on the campus. All the migrants (except for the Eurasian hobby) that are mentioned by Santharam are present in patches of forest in Auroville and I have seen a few of them in the Kaliveli estuary but not on campus. Strangely, while I have seen the blue tailed bee-eater on the beach in front of the campus, I have never chanced upon it inside the university premises. Incidentally, my friend in the Wildlife Institute, Jayapal, had

been to the campus in 1991, 1992 and again in 1994 and remembers seeing the blue tailed bee-eater in the campus.

It is interesting that Santharam spotted the small green barbet in the list. I have seen it only once in the campus and was attracted to the bird by its call which is quite different from that of the large green barbet. Regarding the white eye and the grey tit, my record is perhaps the first from the plains of Tamil Nadu and surrounding areas. The distribution of these two species in publications from Ali & Ripley's *Handbook of Birds of India and Pakistan* (1980) to the recent Grimett, Inskipp & Inskipp's *Birds of the Indian Subcontinent* (1998) has excluded the southern part of the east coast. My own guess is that they probably migrate to Sri Lanka and pass through the plains in winter. This should be worth checking out by colour banding or other techniques. I have seen individuals of these two species in the scrub forest in the Auroville area as well. Only, they seem to stay for a few days in winter. The chestnut headed bee-eaters were seen twice, both times in pairs, in front of the nursery of the university. Among the doves, the little brown dove occurs (at least used to) quite frequently behind the library. The ring and the red turtle doves are rare and I have had just three sightings of the ring dove and one of the red turtle dove in campus, all beside the ravines. They are commoner in the Auroville area where scrub forests prevail in a more undisturbed form and in larger tracts. Surprisingly again, I have not seen the Blyth's reed warbler which I have had occasion to observe in Bangalore and recently in Dehradun, several times. As for the harriers, I was surprised myself at not seeing the commoner species on campus. The hen harrier has been seen once more in the Kaliveli estuary area and the pied, Montagu's and pale harriers are also seen in that area.

Three birds that I had left out of the list, however, are the white throated and spotted munias (recorded by Santharam) and the large green barbet. I am indebted to Santharam for forcing me to scrutinize my old notes carefully, for the day of birding we shared in Agumbe and for pointing out in his own way how important a simple check-list can be. I sincerely trust that the present batch of students in the ecology course are following this discussion and will be able to enhance information in the years to come, as I unwittingly did.

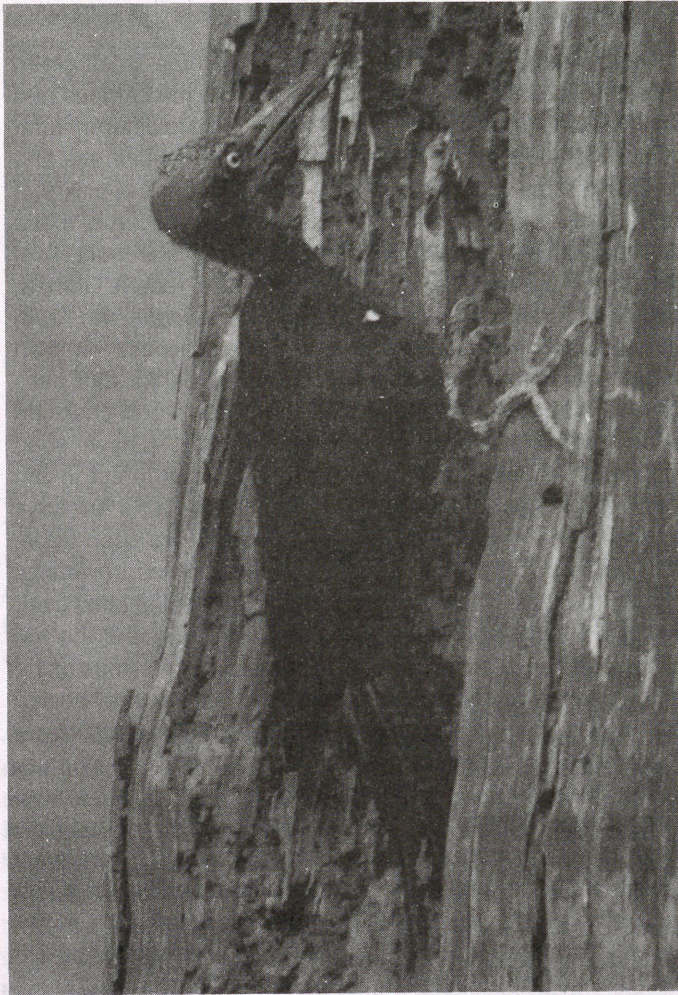


In mid-April this year I spotted a great black woodpecker at Sunkadakatte (Nagarhole National Park, Karnataka). I had fallen in love with this magnificent bird since its first sighting in the moist deciduous forests of Kirawatti (Uttar Kannada district) in 1968. Since then I had not seen it till its re-spotting at Sunkadakatte. During this visit to the Nagarhole National Park, I had the sterling opportunity of seeing a stalking tiger, sparring tuskers, huge Indian bison (Gaur) etc. I had also

## The Great Black Woodpecker

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seen some interesting birds like the mimicking racket-tailed drongos, (in unusually large numbers!), a sparkingly beautiful male paradise flycatcher, with silvery white body, black head, and two long tail ribbons trailing behind it. The brainfever bird or the common hawk-cuckoo was also calling continuously throughout the day and the night with its loud monotonous calls reaching a crescendo. But none of these had equalled my excitement on seeing the great black woodpecker.



The great black woodpecker was spotted on a roadside tree, while going from Sunkadakatte to the Kabini backwaters for spotting elephants, gaur (the Indian bison) and other animals and birds for photography. The tree was a dead one. The bole of the tree had a large decayed patch, on which the woodpecker had settled. It was continuously pecking at the rotten spot to feed on the grubs of the wood-boring beetles. It was so engrossed in its drilling efforts that it ignored our presence and the clattering of the cameras. I was really excited at the rare opportunity given to see this magnificent bird for such a long duration. A female companion also came and settled at the tree, but it soon left the scene. The female was more shy and wary.

The male great black woodpecker (*Dryocopus javensis hodgsonii*) was a magnificent large black woodpecker. It was almost as big as a jungle crow. It had a conspicuous white rump and white underparts from breast downwards. The male had its forehead, crown, crest and cheeks coloured with brilliant crimson. The female looked similar but with the crimson colour confined to nape only; and was smaller. The flight was stately and unhurried.

These woodpeckers are reported to be found from the plains to the foothills up to 1200 m elevation in climax and secondary forests in evergreen and moist deciduous biotope. They are, however, partial to mixed bamboo forests and to lofty natural shady trees. Salim Ali, says that they are very sensitive to deforestation and disturbance by humans, soon forsaking localities where lumbering is in progress. Due to disappearance of suitable habitats, the bird is endangered. The forests of Sunkadakatte are of dry deciduous type. So I wondered how come these birds could be located in such dry forests with stunted growth, and in such dry season, when the trees are completely devoid of their leaves. One reason may be that these forests, located as they are in the National park, are free from fellings and from human disturbance. Any way this fact demonstrates that undisturbed forests attract rare birds, which are normally not expected in such biotopes.

The woodpeckers may be called nature's doctors. They periodically visit all diseased and decayed trees and dig into the rotten places with their bills to feed on the hidden insects and their larvae. Like a surgeon, the woodpeckers keep the tree-wounds clean and free from gnawing termites and insects.

The great black woodpecker was not uncommon in suitable habitats of the Western Ghats about 2-3 decades ago. But now to have even a fleeting glimpse of the bird requires a bonus luck. As Salim Ali and other noted ornithologists and naturalists have said it forsakes areas under timber extraction. Thanks to the Karnataka Government to have stopped fellings in the forests a decade ago, the tree-hole nesting birds like the woodpeckers, hornbills, barbets and other kinds of birds and smaller animals are retrieved from the threshold of extinction. (Many other skulking ground birds like the grey junglefowls, peafowls, red spurfowls, quails etc. and many of the smaller animals also need fallen wood debris to breed and to thrive).

But the distressing news is that proposals are afloat to extract all dead, dying unsound trees found in the state forests, including National Parks and Sanctuaries. Other states may follow suit in times to come, if this proposal materialises. The rare birds like the great black woodpecker and other tree-hole nesting birds would disappear eventually. Even the dead and fallen trees in the forests are required by the other birds for their survival as they get food and shelter in such debris. We should not take into account only human profits and needs, but also the survival needs of other forms of life including the micro organisms like the honey bees, wasps, spiders, bracket-fungi etc.

The sighting of the great black woodpecker, feeding on the boring insects and their grubs, should serve as a pointer to the fact that such decayed trees are also required by many rare birds for their survival. It is, therefore, imperative that the dead and fallen trees available in the forests are left to themselves, without being extracted, for the survival needs of both macro and micro organisms. This also enhances the biodiversity of the forests. But how do we educate the managers, the administrators and the politicians?





## Unusual Nest Locations of the Purple Sunbird

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In a fascinating article entitled "Stopping by the woods on a Sunday morning" (reprinted in the 37/6, 1997 issue of the *Newsletter*) Salim Ali writes, "Nests are protected from their enemies either by being built in such secluded spots that without a clue of some sort, no one would think of searching for them there; or they are built of such material and design and with so much cunning and camouflage that to the untrained eye they either become totally invisible or entirely unsuspecting looking objects". The nest of the purple sunbird (*Nectarinia asiatica*) affords a case in point. It is a pendulous pouch generally attached to the tip of an overhanging branch. The material employed is fibres, cobwebs, wood shavings and all manner of rubbish. To a casual passer-by it looks like a mass of entangled rubbish hanging from a branch and therefore the least likely to attract attention.

In Sundarvan Nature Discovery Centre — a two acre park in Ahmedabad — purple sunbirds nest in several parts but two nests, whose descriptions are given below, were noteworthy from the viewpoint of their location. The first nest observed in April, 1996, was tied on to a bougainvillea branch overhanging the entrance to the park. Clearly this nest was in the way of the several hundred park visitors passing through this point but obviously the bird thought that this wasn't a problem.

Since there was every chance of this nest being knocked by passing visitors, we put up a volunteer near the gate to caution the visitors. For a nature discovery centre like

Sundarvan, this nest served as an excellent (live) educational exhibit for some time and our volunteer would gladly interpret the nest to the visitors. After the nesting season was over, it was put up as a permanent exhibit along with the nests of baya, barbet and tailor bird in a special 'Exhibit of common birds Nests' at Sundarvan.

The second interesting nest location of the purple sunbird was a table fan fixed on a wall in the staff quarters of Sundarvan in April 1999. The nest — again a tangled mass of a variety of materials was fixed on the wire cover of the fan. Once again we had to intervene to provide a safe passage to the birds. The fan was not used during the period when the birds were nesting.

It seems that purple sunbirds have great confidence in their ability to build camouflaged nests, often in full view of humans. Ali and Ripley (1984) have recorded several unusual nest sites such as: on a punkah pulling rope, hanging electric wire of portico lamp in regular use, rafter in veranda, pendant flush-tank chain in temporarily disused lavatory and pocket of nightgown and fold in canvas drying on a clothesline.

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## Important Bird Areas (IBA) Programme in India

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The Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB - UK) the two premier organisations have come together to establish the Indian Bird Conservation Network which includes NGOs and individuals who want to contribute towards bird conservation. One of the strategic aims of the Network is to identify and protect Important Bird Areas (IBAs) throughout the country.

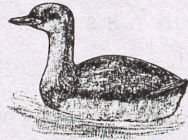
The Indian IBA Project was officially launched at the BNHS in March 1999. The IBA programme will produce inventories of internationally recognised sites vital for the conservation of birds. These sites will be identified using a set of four standard global criteria which are outlined below. These criteria are designed by BirdLife International to select

representative areas of the most important bird habitats, particularly those which are under the most severe pressure. Given that birds are good indicators of overall biological diversity, most IBAs will also be important for other animals and plants.

A significant proportion of bird (and other animal and plant) species can be effectively conserved by the protection of key sites, either as officially protected areas (national parks and reserves) or through the promotion of sustainable land-use practices. The IBA programme aims to identify and promote the protection of networks of key sites in all regions of India.

## Aims of the IBA Project

The impact of people is, however, seen on all the habitats of India, so much so that many habitats and bird species which depend on them are becoming severely threatened. The Indian IBA project will identify, document and protect a network of sites which covers all these habitats and species, particularly those which are under the greatest threat.



## The aims of the IBA project include :

- form a sound basis for the development of national conservation strategies, including protected areas programme;
- highlight sites which are threatened or inadequately protected;
- help build national and regional networks of ornithologists and conservationists;
- guide the work of national NGOs;
- influence global conventions, e.g. Biodiversity, Ramsar;
- influence regional migratory bird agreements.

### Important Bird Areas : Summary of global categories and criteria

Category	Criterion	Notes
Globally threatened species	The site regularly holds significant numbers of a globally threatened species, or other species of global conservation concern.	The site qualifies if it is known or thought to hold a population of a species categorized as Critical, Endangered, Vulnerable, Conservation Dependent or Data Deficient.
Restricted-range species	The site is known or thought to hold a significant component of the restricted-range species whose breeding distributions define an Endemic Bird Area (EBA) or Secondary Area (SA).	The site also has to form one of a set selected to ensure that, as far as possible, all restricted-range species of an EBA or SA are present in significant numbers in at least one site and, preferably, more.
Biome-restricted assemblage	The site is known or thought to hold a significant component of the group of species whose distributions are largely or wholly confined to one biome.	The site also has to form one of a set selected to ensure that, as far as possible, all species and habitats characteristic of a biome are adequately represented.
Congregations	(i) The site is known or thought to hold, on a regular basis, $\geq 1\%$ of a biogeographic population of a congregatory waterbird species. or	This applies to waterfowl species as defined by Rose and Scott (1997). Thresholds have been set by combining flyway populations within Asia. For species lacking quantitative data, thresholds were set by estimating 1% of the Asian biogeographic population.
	(ii) The site is known or thought to hold, on a regular basis, $\geq 1\%$ of the global population of a congregatory seabird or terrestrial species. or	This includes those seabird species not covered by Rose and Scott (1997). Where quantitative data were lacking, numerical thresholds were set by estimating 1% of the global population.
	(iii) The site is known or thought to hold, on a regular basis, $\geq 20,000$ waterbirds or $\geq 10,000$ pairs of seabirds of one or more species. or	This is the Ramsar criterion for waterbirds, the use of which is discouraged wherever data are good enough to permit the use of (i) or (ii).
	(iv) The site is known or thought to exceed thresholds set for migratory species at bottleneck sites.	Thresholds are set regionally or inter-regionally, as appropriate.



The RSPB - BirdLife International have developed guidelines for selecting an IBA. The same guidelines will be used by Bombay Natural History Society.





The Union Territory of Pondicherry (*Puduchcheri* in native tongue) is 500 sq.km in area and lies 125 km south of Madras (*Chennai* in native tongue) on the southern Coromandel Coast. It was first colonized by the French East India Company in 1674, who founded the town in 1683. The Dutch, and then the British, wrested the territory from the French, before they re-claimed it in 1815 and ruled from 1816-1954, when it merged with the Indian Union. The town has several buildings of french architecture and its 3 lakh plus population of natives has all but swamped the French and the city is crowded and polluted now. V. Santharam, who I have not yet met, though we correspond, is certainly one of the finest field ornithologists in peninsular India. He was a member of the first batch of post-graduate students at the Salim Ali School of Ecology, in the Pondicherry University campus, and K.S. Gopi Sundar is one of the latest 'Masters of Science' passing out from this institution. The latter's list of the avifauna of that campus was published in NLBW (38:22-23) and commented upon by Santharam (39:1-3). Together, they have recorded 110 bird species from the campus. A further 12 were recorded by Gopi Sundar but are questioned by Santharam. I spent the afternoon and night of February 17th of this year and the forenoon of the 18th as well, bird watching in this ca 800 hectare walled campus with mixed thorn and deciduous forest, including expanses of grassland. This is an area of interesting habitats, though disturbed and planted with some exotic flora. The 'protected' and relatively private nature of this campus, I think can be used to practise Restoration Ecology by the University and not only must they replace the exotic plantations with native flora (Dr N. Parthasarathy of the Botany Department is a capable, potential 'consultant' available on campus), but also consider breeding/release of some indigenous avifauna, especially those that are no more extant in this ecosystem. I went to 'Pondy' on invitation from the current Professor and acting-Head of the School, Dr Priya Davidar, herself a student of Dr Salim Ali. Most of the present batch of "M.S." students joined me in birding, insect-hunting, and botanizing, for some 36 hours of almost non-stop field work, combined with discussion, and we were able to record the following 68 bird species in this campus, which is also entomologically 'tempting'! Some birds listed here were seen by me in town, as well as along the 11 km drive on the East Coast Highway (crowded and noisy!). the 18 species marked with an asterisk (\*) are endemic to our sub-continent, and those 2 with two asterisks belong to genera that are also

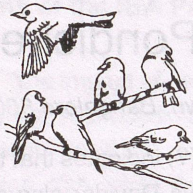
## A Note on Birds of Pondicherry

DR. KUMAR GHORPADE, P.O. Box 8439, St. Thomas Town, Bangalore 560 084

autochthonous here. A question mark (?) indicates that these 3 species' identities are in doubt.. Priya Davidar also drove me to the Vector Control Research Centre (and the French Institute in town - a premier botanical institution!) where I heard the red-breasted flycatcher and large green barbet in their compound, which is close to some good bird habitats, Priya Davidar told me. After a long long time did I get satisfying sights of grey partridge and jungle-bush quail foraging in grassland, and I wasn't at all sorry that I don't carry a shotgun any more! Against the early morning sunlight, the 'prehistoric' sight of a long-billed loten's sunbird calling, absolutely delighted my senses, in a part of India which possesses the most ancient geology and biodiversity of our sub-continent.

### BIRDS OF PONDICHERRY UNIVERSITY CAMPUS

42) Indian pond heron, 44) Cattle egret, 49) Little egret, 132) Pariah kite, 135) Shikra, 147) Eurasian sparrow hawk (?), 246) Grey partridge \*, 255) Jungle bush quail \*\*, 366) Red-wattled lapwing, 516) Blue rock pigeon, 537) Spotted dove, 541) Little brown dove, 549) Rose-ringed parakeet, 573) Brainfever hawk-cuckoo \*, 578) Eurasian cuckoo, 590) Asian koel, 600) Greater coucal, 652) Spotted owlet, 703) Grey-crowned house swift, 707) Asian palm swift, 735) White-breasted kingfisher, 750) Small green bee-eater, 755) Indian roller, 782) Large green barbet \*, 874) Madras bush lark (?)\*, 877) Red-winged bush lark (?)\*, 878) Ashy-crowned finch-lark \*, 882) Rufous-tailed finch-lark \*, 916) Barn swallow, 923) Red-rumped striated swallow, 940) Bay-backed shrike, 952) Golden oriole, 963) Black drongo, 965) Ashy drongo, 982) Ashy swallow-shrike, 994) Brahminy starling \*, 1006) Indian myna, 1032) Rufous tree pie, 1049) House crow, 1055) Jungle crow \*, 1070) Small wood shrike, 1078) Black-headed cuckoo-shrike \*, 1093) Small minivet, 1098) Oriental iora, 1128) Red-vented bulbul, 1267) White-headed babbler \*, 1411) Red-breasted flycatcher, 1517) Ashy wren warbler \*, 1538) White-bellied tailor, 1556) Blyth's reed warbler, 1562) Booted tree warbler, 1574) Eurasian chiffchaff, 1604) Dull green willow warbler, 1661) Oriental magpie-robin, 1701) Pied bush chat, 1720) Indian robin \*\*, 1859) Paddyfield pipit, 1891) Large pied wagtail \*, 1899) Tickell's flowerpecker \*, 1908) Purple-rumped sunbird \*, 1912) Loten's sunbird \*, 1917) Purple sunbird, 1938) House sparrow, 1957) Baya weaver, 1966) White-throated munia, 1974) Spotted munia.



As always, Dr Kumar Ghorpade's article (*NLBW*, 39, 7-8) made very interesting reading. I admire his span of ornithological knowledge, scholarship and integrity. Yet, I take the courage to differ with him on the subject of "introductions" of fauna and flora on alien soils.

As we all know, habitats are under severe pressure and they are dwindling by the hour. One hopes that this horrid trend would be staunch and reversed soon but seems unlikely to happen in our lifetimes. With enterprise and dedication habitats can be restored to a reasonable semblance of their original status. But extinction of the species is for ever. It is irrevocable, it is irreversible. I for one will support any initiative, scientific or otherwise, which enhances the survival of species.

It is in this context that the new niches created by the red-breasted and the Alexandrian parakeets outside their established habitat gave me joy. I look at these "accidents" as providential intervention against the possible long term threats of extinction of these species.

All "introductions" need not always "sully nature's handiwork". The nene Hawaiian goose may long have been extinct from Hawaii, its only home, but for an act of faith by Sir Peter Scott which in essence amounted to "introduction" of the nene to UK in 1949. By 1979, the breeding flock of seven nene had reached the impressive number of about 1300 birds at Slimbridge (UK). Of these, 200 birds were re-introduced to Hawaii to reclaim their lost home. To the best of my knowledge, one thousand nene geese (by now they may be many more) became permanent inhabitants of Slimbridge and they mingled freely with the many other resident and migratory species of water-fowl whose home was also Slimbridge. I wonder if that had created any temporary or permanent imbalances or "disasters" to the ecology of Slimbridge or UK. Even if it did, may we not overlook it because one species received a fresh lease of life. Even if the large presence of nene displaced other traditional species from Slimbridge to adjoining water-bodies in UK, may be that too is an acceptable price in preventing the extinction of one species in Hawaii.

In 1962-64, I met Dr Gardiner Bump of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, on several occasions in India. His team were busy with the "introduction" of black partridge, the kaleej pheasant (or was it the cheer pheasant?) and the black buck to USA. Then in 1984, by chance, I stumbled on a 35 mm colour film spool, "Passing the Buck", in a cupboard in Mr Samar Singh's office (he was then the Deputy Secretary in the MOEF). This 30 minute film was a visual delight of how well the black buck had established itself in Texas. There was no mention of any ill effects to the ecology or to the local animal species in Texas or USA. The movie did end with a depressing pull at one's heart to see US aircraft off-loading crated black

## Webs, Vultures, Escapees and Birds of a Feather Flock Together

Lt GENERAL BALJIT SINGH, P.O. McCluskie Ganj 829 208 (Ranchi Dt)

buck (may be ten in all) on an airfield in Pakistan in an effort to "Pass the Buck" back in the literal sense. For, black buck had been exterminated from Pakistan at that stage.

I would be willing to give my life (figuratively!!) if someone were to "introduce" the Hangul outside of Dachigam (J&K) to a safer and compatible habitat elsewhere in India. Political and bureaucratic promises and good intentions apart, the Hangul is not likely to survive the on-going strife in the State.

One universally condemned "introduction" into India is the Lantana bush. I am now beginning to doubt that opinion. With the alarming pace of destruction of forests and associated ground vegetation, no indigenous plant or grass of India seems to have the vigour to re-claim the mother soil without prejudice except the alien Lantana.



Mr Anish Andheria's account (*NLBW*, 39(1), 4-5) of a day's birdwatching was enjoyable. More significant was his report on talks which followed the field outing. I noticed one common thread running through the talks of the three eminent naturalists, viz., India's natural environment, its associated biodiversity and wildlife have entered the final stages of fragmentation, mass vandalisation and then, may be even large scale extinctions. The writing on the wall is all too clear. But for proactive men, men with true compassion for animals and pride in their country, this is the decisive moment to create islands of sanity in the midst of chaos.

The one living example and an unparalleled one that comes to my mind is the vision and courage of one unassuming Indian who for nearly 20 years now has been providing for up to 10,000 demoiselle cranes every year in his own courtyard, perhaps no bigger than the enclosure of the centre court at Wimbledon. As much as 200 kg grain is broadcast by this man to the cranes daily beginning October right through to March. There were no trappings of an office, or staff, or bill-boards or E-mail *etc. etc.*, when I stumbled on this enterprise in 82-83 and informed Mr J.C. Daniel at the BNHS. Just the man, Ratanlal Malu and his one resolve to care for the demoiselle cranes which arrive at village Kheechan, year after year. Out of compulsions of modern day governance, today the enterprise goes by the name Marwar Crane Foundation (MCF).

May I appeal that as and when "40+" members of the *NLBW* assemble next, they must not stop at mere expressions of shock and disgust and helplessness on the plight of India's Natural heritage. Rather that they resolve to create there and then, for instance, the "Chushul Crane Foundation" (CCF) and the "Hanle Crane Foundation" (HCF). These kind of initiatives alone are our last hope and only chance to provide space and security for fauna and flora in distress.

## Bird Identities and the Question of Establishing a Reputation



LAVKUMAR KHACHAR, 646, Vastunirman, Gandhinagar, Gujarat - 382 002

In the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* 39(1), Jan/Feb 1999, Dr Kumar Ghorpade had felt the "need to comment on the identities of three birds" and he went on to admonish "senior, experienced, bird watchers like" Himmatsinhji and myself, and others of our genre for not taking time and making an effort to comment on the contents of the Newsletter carrying new data. He is so correct and we have been rather amiss in accepting our responsibilities in this regard. While not seeking to put down enthusiasm of new and younger birdwatchers, I am sure all our friends will realise that if tall claims are made and published in the Newsletter, its credibility would be considerably impaired and knowledgeable birdwatchers would brush aside the Newsletter as "Oh that publication?" So it would indeed be in the interest of all of us to be careful before making claims. In fact, if indeed the scarlet backed flowerpecker is discovered in the Nilgiris or the small green barbet in the Himalayan foothills, the discoverers should realise they have made major ornithological finds which would need to be corroborated — in earlier days a specimen would be necessary as proof, in today's age where we cannot shoot birds, the confirmation becomes all the more necessary; where such confirmation is not possible, the identification should, by the observer, be placed in a separate list of birds whose identifications need to be confirmed. To take umbrage at being questioned is damaging for one's reputation. Surely, the heavens will not fall if an unusual identity is treated as needing further corroboration. One of the things about the doyens of Indian ornithology I was fortunate to have gone out with was that they always prefixed their identifications of even

the common well known birds by "probably", or "I think it is ....." .

While we are on this rather embarrassing subject I might bring to the notice of birdwatchers in the country a rather intriguing report by a senior forest officer of Gujarat who claims having recorded spider hunters and black and orange flycatchers south of the Narmada river in the Rajpipla Hills! There are several other improbable species which he has claimed to have seen in an official publication funded by, if I am not mistaken, the World Bank! I kept quiet because I did not want to embarrass the officer but now feel compelled to bring this fact to the notice of every one since the World Bank has recently sanctioned crores of rupees towards the enumerating of Gujarat's biodiversity. Hopefully this note will caution those being funded for this project. Fortunately to date the report I have mentioned is accumulating dust in some official storage. Presuming that the identifications are correct, the officer is doing himself and ornithology considerable harm. Keeping these observations from his peers makes for lowering his credibility, and of course the forests from getting the recognition they deserve. We loose out on every count.

The BNHS has set up a committee to verify claims and I have the honour of being asked to be a member. Unfortunately it is only reports going to the Society which will be whetted by the committee but there really is no reason why we should not include the Newsletter in its purview since the Newsletter is being referred to in bibliographies, which fortunately to date World Bank financed reports are not.



## Notes on Java Sparrow [*Padda oryzivora*]

DR RAJIV SAXENA and GAURAV PARIHAR, MIG-853, Darpan Colony, Thatipur, Gwalior 474 011 (MP)

The Java sparrow (*Padda oryzivora*) is an introduced bird in Indian sub-continent. According to Ripley (1982) it is found around Calcutta and Madras, and affects paddy-fields, gardens and reed-beds. It is also found in Colombo (Sri Lanka) where a colony was established before 1870.

Law (1932) refers to a breeding colony around Calcutta, but Kaushik Deuti (Per. Com.) writes "We have not observed this sparrow in any of our birdwatching trips. I am working in the Bird Section of Z.S.I., Calcutta but there are no specimens of this species collected from Calcutta or its vicinity". We are not aware if Java sparrow has been recorded near Madras also in recent years.

It is a rare cage bird in Madhya Pradesh. Bird traffickers bring this bird from Calcutta to Delhi, and Indore in Madhya Pradesh from where the cage bird collectors buy and take them to other places in this state. Another route of its trade starts from Chennai from where the traffickers take them to Hyderabad and then to Indore.

We felt dismayed to know that they have been cross-bred to acquire differently coloured Java sparrows. We saw them

in shiny black and chocolate (fun !) colours besides normal white.

We came to know that their price ranged from Rs 50 to Rs 60 to Rs 400 to Rs 600 per pair during last four years because of its increasing popularity as cage bird of different colours, and the fact that they have not been very successful breeders in captivity. A pair sometimes fetch up to Rs 1000. We have seen a few collections of this bird in the state, and know that Java sparrow has been bred successfully in captivity in Gwalior.

One of the reasons of its unsuccessful breeding is that Java sparrow wets itself in water that is provided to it for drinking, and this water from its body is soaked by the pad on which its eggs or newborn chicks rest. Wetness of the pad results in unduly long incubation and unproductive eggs in some cases and the death of chicks in others. Successful breeding was achieved by providing it water from outside the enclosure through a small hole just enough for its small head to protrude and drink.

In captivity, a female was recorded to lay six milky white eggs in a clutch during a span of four days. After 24 days' incubation period, four of them successfully hatched. In another 38 days they grew up and began feeding themselves.



## Nesting of Brahminy Kite, *Haliastur indus boddaert*

A.K. CHAKRAVARTHY, Entomologist, University of Agricultural Sciences, GKVK, Bangalore 560 065

We came across the nest of Brahminy kite, an untidy pack of sticks forming a platform at 20m in 'Kiralboughi' or 'Bovu' tree fork (*Hopea parviflora*) just outside the Siralal village, Karkala, Udupi, Karnataka, 30 km north of Kudremukh Wildlife Sanctuary (13° 09' N, 75° 12' E). A series of loud squeazy *cheewe.....cheewe.....chewee* outbursts, close to the nesting tree was repeatedly heard. The outbursts characterised the 'begging behaviour' of the two fledglings.

The fledglings had pale yellow legs, black back, eyes, primaries and tail feathers. The rest of the body parts were predominantly brown. The wing and tail feathers were rudimentary and the undersurface of wings was marked by two broad white patches. With difficulty did the fledglings fly from branch to branch and perch. Morrison *et. al.* (1992) located a nest between natural mudflats and the reservoir used for storing sea water for salt extraction at Point Calimere, Tamil Nadu. The identity of the species based on fledglings eluded me and Mr. N.E. Thyagaraj, Entomologist, RRS, Mudigere, till the adult landed on the nest with a low

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mae....mae....maee. In a 20 minute observation on 17 April 1999 the parent kite brought food to the nestlings thrice and the immatures showed striking differences in growth.

Unlike in pariah kites and redheaded merlins, the ground below the nesting tree was free from littering of left-overs and food brought to the nest. Once while landing on the nest, the adult dropped the food on the ground. It was a poultry chick. Ranjit Manakadan and Natarajan (1992) recorded brahminy kite preying on bats at Vedaranyam near Point Calimere, Tamil Nadu. These observations suggest that the brahminy kite is a predator. But it is a major scavenger in cities, ports and market places.

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### CORRESPONDENCE

**FOREST WAGTAILS, YELLOW WAGTAILS, & INDIAN WHISKERED TERNS,** JOB K. JOSEPH, Thottacherry House, Vazhappally West, Changanacherry 3, Kerala

I read the correspondence from S. Theodore Baskaran in Vol. 39, March/April 99 issue of NLBW about sightings of the forest wagtail in Madras Christian College in October 98. He must have seen them on their way southward.

I first sighted forest wagtails in my backyard on 29th December'98. It was the first time I saw them and therefore I identified them with the help of the new version of Dr. Salim Ali's 'A Book of Indian Birds'. As Baskaran said that it was rare to see two of them together, it's my pleasure to say that even three of four wagtails were seen in my courtyard regularly from December'98 even until mid-April, after which they suddenly disappeared probably having left to migrate to Assam for breeding. Through my 8 x 40 pair of binoculars, I observed them everyday during my Christmas holidays. I wanted to try ringing one of them to see whether they return next year, but I felt that it may deter them from ever returning to our backyard.

Our backyard contains mango trees, jackfruit trees, teak, coconut trees and a few other common trees, with moist soil

and leaf-littered floor, just right for insects, earthworms, etc., providing them with a good source of food.

### Yellow wagtails

In April'99, I happened to go past an area of waterlogged paddy fields, for watching little grebes. As the sun set and darkness was about to set in, I saw a wagtail on the edge of the road, I identified it as the yellow wagtail tentatively, but was sure after hearing its call. A few minutes later I saw a flock of yellow wagtails flying overhead. It must have had a strength of 40+ birds. Then came another flock, then another, and so on. At least 10 to 15 such flocks flew overhead. I was startled by this sight. I then referred to Dr. Salim Ali's 'Book of Indian Birds', and was happy to see that it mentioned such a behaviour of yellow wagtails to fly in great numbers across the sky and then dive down to their roosting sites.

### Breeding plumage of the Indian whiskered tern

The whiskered tern is known to have a black chest and abdomen during breeding, but among the whiskered terns that I've seen some have no black breeding plumage, and some have. Why does such an anomaly occur? Can someone tell me why?



**THE SULTAN TIT.** PROF. H.S.A. YAHYA, Centre for Wildlife & Ornithology, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh 202 002.

I would like to comment on the article "Missing species rediscovered at Kalimpong, North Bengal", by S.J. Ghosh (NLBW Vol. 39 No. 1: 11-12). The sultan tit is not a rare bird as reported by the author. May be it is not so common in Kalimpong area, but I saw them frequently in Makaibari area (near Darjeeling) during my visit in Feb 1998. They were also commonly recorded in Thanikudi area of Periyar Tiger Reserve during my stay there between 1978 and 1980.

We often tend to refer to some species as rare, vulnerable, endangered, without investigating the matter thoroughly. Though it would be a good idea to suggest studies for as many species as possible, sometimes such proposals may lead to overshadowing the real 'rare' species.



**SIGHTING OF BLACK NECKED STORK IN BARODA DISTRICT.** DR. RANJITSINH DEVKAR and Ms. SAPNA S., Division of Avian Biology, Department of Zoology, Faculty of Science, M.S. University of Baroda, Vadodara 390 002

A solitary blacknecked stork *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus* was sighted in the ravines of Mahi river near Mohmadpura village in Baroda district (Lat. 72° N, Lon. 22° E) on 8th January 1999. This observation was made as a part of routine annual winter waterfowl census. This magnificent bird is in the list of highly endangered birds in India. According to the statistics recorded in the Asian waterfowl census report 1994-96 in the results of the coordinated water bird census and an overview of the status of wetlands in Asia (Appendix VI pp. 98), the number of blacknecked stork dwindled from 6 to 2 from 1994 to 1996. Its fast diminishing population and a low breeding score is a matter of serious concern for ornithologists. The blacknecked stork was sun basking in solitude in the warm sunny winter noon. It seemed oblivious to the swimming and foraging of a couple of brahminy ducks, lesser whistling teals and a few waders in the already receded tidal waters. Interestingly, the same team of bird watchers had sighted a solitary blacknecked stork at the same place in the last winter as well. These two consecutive reports are possibly the only record of sighting of blacknecked stork from the Baroda district.



**CAMPING AND BIRDING AT CHAMPTU FOREST OF PURULIA DISTRICT OF WEST BENGAL.** ARUNAYAN SHARMA, N.S. Road, Malda, West Bengal 732 101

All children have the right to enjoy the glories of nature, because that is the only effective way to build up their physical and mental structure to become a complete human being.

Since many years I have assisted various organisations as a nature guide, birdwatcher or field assistant, especially in the case of children to make them aware about nature, environment and wildlife.

At the end of the year 1998, I had the great experience to work with deaf & dumb children. From 21st December 1998 to 31st December 1998, I went to Champtu forest of Purulia to assist a 'Nature Study and Adventure Camp' for children. 'Wanderlust' - a Calcutta based organisation requested me to assist the camp as a nature guide. The adventure camp was

unique, because along with deaf & dumb children a few orphan and normal children were included, in age group between 9-13 yrs. The activities included rock climbing, birdwatching, camping, rock identification and shelter making etc.

The camp site was at the top of Champtu hills (2290 ft.) of district Purulia, West Bengal with, green habitation around the area. The nearby Coira Bera dam adds to the beauty of the green forest.



**WHITENECKED STORKS IN KOLE WETLANDS.** P.K. RAVINDRAN, Vallissery, P.O. Avinissery, Thrissur 680 313, Kerala

On our visit to Cheruvallur area of Ponnany Kole Wetlands, Malappuram district, Kerala, on 14th March 1999, C.P. Sethumadhavan, P.P. Sreenivasan and I had a good opportunity to observe a large swarm of 180 whitenecked storks *Ciconia episcopus*. They were feeding in water-logged paddy fields in association with white ibises, herons, egrets and other waterbirds. In December last, I have also sighted 25 of this stork along with a white stork *Ciconia ciconia* at Enamavu area in the Thrissur Kole Wetlands of Kerala.

In Kole Wetlands, the whitenecked stork is a regular visitor and generally keeps singly, in pairs or small flocks. Sometimes it also congregated up to 50-70 birds in the favourite localities of Kole lands (C.P. Sethumadhavan's personal communication).

We have never seen such a large congregation of whitenecked storks in Kole Wetlands. It was an enchanting sight.

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**JUNGLE CROW CORVUS MACRORHYNCHOS FEEDING ON YOUNG ONES OF ROSERINGED PARAKEET.** C.K. BORAD and AESHITA MUKHERJEE, National Tree Growers Cooperative Federation Ltd. NDDB Campus, Anand 388 001

On April 4, 1999, we saw five jungle crows *Corvus macrorhynchus* feeding on the young of roseringed parakeet *Psittacula krameri* in the campus of Gujarat Agricultural University, Anand. On 14 May, 1998 we recorded a jungle crow feeding on the young ones of blossomheaded parakeet *Psittacula cyanocephala*. When first seen in the morning at 0730 hours, the crow had just held the parakeet young which was struggling to escape. Six Indian mynas *Acridotheres tristis* rushed to the site giving an alarming call. We scared away the crow and released the parakeet in the nearby hedge. However, when we revisited the place after some 30 min. the crow had again attacked the young and killed it.

Both the species of parakeet breed during December to April. By the end of March their young ones start fledging. The

young ones learning to fly become the victims of crow predation. In this area, the jungle crow starts nesting in the month of March. The crow may be killing parakeet to meet the food demand of its progeny.

### Acknowledgement

We are grateful to Dr. B.M. Parasharya for going through this manuscript.



**PROTECTING HERONS IN NAPOKLU (COORG).** *Air Marshal K.C. CARIAPPA (Retd.), Coorg Wildlife Society, P B No. 111, Madikeri 571 201, Kodagu*

For some years now the Coorg Wildlife Society has urged that the small township of Napoklu be declared a protected area for its heronry.

In June/July each year thousands of egrets, pond herons and other avifauna roost in trees in and around the town. Very fortunately the populace allow the birds to live in peace, build their nests, lay their eggs and when the time comes to fly away.

This issue has been raised at the State Wildlife Advisory Board during a meeting held in June 98. When no action had been taken mainly because the minutes had been wrongly recorded, the subject was raised again in the March 99 meeting. Accordingly, the Chairman directed the Conservator of Forests, Kodagu to look into the matter and make suitable recommendations. It is hoped that the result will be positive.



**BRAHMINY KITE FEEDING ON HONEY FROM AN ACTIVE BEES HIVE.** *Ms. GEETHA NAYAK, The Nature Club, Shri Bhuvanendra College, Karkala 574 104*

On the afternoon of 9th March 1999 at about 3.30, my younger sister shouted to me to come out and see a big bird attacking an active beehive in a low bush in our garden. To my great surprise, it turned out to be a brahmny kite in its full adult plumage and it was trying to get at the beehive. The bees, *Apis florea*, had built their hive about two feet from the ground in a croton bush close to the compound wall.

The bird was sitting on the wall and the disturbed bees were attacking the bird. A few bees had got on to the birds' body and the bird was vigorously beating its wings to shrug them off. In all this *melee* some portions of the beehive which had honey-filled wax combs, were exposed and the kite started to peck out beak-full of wax+honey and started feeding on it. I watched it feeding for about half a minute when it occurred to me that I should take a picture of the bird and rushed to get my camera. The bird was still feeding when I came back with the camera. I tried to approach as close as possible to the subject (I have an ordinary Kodak Click Camera) and the bird was disturbed at my approach and flew away. The bees took some time to settle down again.

I could not keep a regular check as I had to attend college. But I was told by my sister that the kite repeated the act once during the morning and again in the evening of 11 May. I am not sure whether the bird (was it the same individual?) regularly fed on the same beehive.

I referred to Salim Ali's latest revised edition of "The Book of Indian Birds". The book mentions the diet of brahmny kite as "offal, frogs, small snakes, bats etc., winged termites emerging from sodden ground hawked in the air..." There is no mention of brahmny kite attacking active beehives or feeding on honey or wax. Could this individual bird somehow have tasted the honey from a comb and learnt to feed on any beehive it came across? Could this be an opportunistic feeding by an individual bird or do birds, particularly raptors, go for such unusual fare when the opportunity confronts them?



**REDUCTION OF RAPTORS.** *HIMMATSINHJI, Jubilee Ground, Bhuj, Kutch 370 001, India*

I have been reading with interest the comments in the recent issues of the Newsletter on the reduction in populations of raptors. I agree with the observation of Dr. Rahmani. As far back as in the year 1973. Mr. Humayun Abdulali wrote and enquired whether the Neophron was still holding its own in my part of the country. He mentioned in his letter at that time that it was common around Bombay and nested on the neighbouring cliffs along with the other vultures. Its numbers had declined and that it had almost disappeared. Mr. Abdulali also wanted me to observe whether the *bill* (not face or eye-patch) was yellow or horn-coloured.

There was definitely a drastic reduction in the numbers of the scavenger vulture, but in recent years I have observed a few birds particularly in the Banni grassland of Kutch. They have disappeared from the environs of towns and cities. In recent decades the common pariah kite has also disappeared from Kutch. The king vulture was never common, but at present it is hardly seen. There is a marked decrease in the populations of other birds of prey too.

It would be rash to jump to conclusions over the above state of affairs in the lives of raptors. However the most likely cause could be the ever increasing use of pesticides and rat poison in our urban and rural areas. The second likely cause is the destruction of nesting sites as also damage to the ecosystem in general. A thorough investigation and research could reveal the actual contributory factors for this sad state of affairs which would eventually affect the human race also.



**BLUE ROCK THRUSH IN KUNO-PALPUR SANCTUARY.** *RAVISHANKER KANOJE, A.C.F. 84, Digvijai Marg, Rajnandgaon 491 441, M.P., India*

The blue rock thrush *Monticola solitarius* winters throughout India (Ali, 1979). Saxena (1998) recorded 193 species of birds in the Morena district including Kuno-Palpur Sanctuary, but it does not include the blue rock thrush.

Kuno-Palpur Sanctuary lion project is situated in the newly designated Sheopur district, formerly it was in the Morena district. It is spread over 344,686 sq. km and lies between 25°40' to 25°55' North Latitude and 77°5' to 77°20' East Longitude. The altitude varies from 200m to 500m above mean sea level in the Kuno river valley.

On 11th November 1998 I was staying in the old forest rest house on the bank of Kuno river in the Palpur village in the Kuno- Palpur Sanctuary. While going to bed I saw a small brown-black solitary bird roosting on the blade of the ceiling

fan. The next day, early in the morning, I identified it as a blue rock thrush. I observed this bird in the Sanctuary and its adjoining areas also.

This is the first record of the blue rock thrush in the Kuno-Palpur Sanctuary.

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## BIRDS OR PEOPLE? CHINA ARGUES THE QUESTION. (Courtesy) *International Herald Tribune*, 20.5.1999.

Weining, China - Deep in the ravaged mountains of southwest China, one of nature's jewels improbably endures, a shallow grassy lake that is a crucial wintering ground for dozens of species of migratory waterfowl.

Declared a protected reserve by China, the lake and its surroundings seemed tranquil on a recent morning as families of rare black-necked cranes picked their way through the marshes, surrounded by gabbling flocks of ruddy shelducks and bar-headed geese. The occasional fisherman poled a skiff through the reeds.

But the solitude was deceptive on this remote lake known as Cao Hai, situated three hours up slippery mountain roads from the nearest train stop in Guizhou Province.

A large and growing population of desperately poor farmers wants nothing more than to convert the rich marshes into farm plots, making Cao Hai one of the most acute examples anywhere of a mounting worldwide problem; the competition between people and wildlife for scarce natural resources.

In a creative effort to ease the conflict, Guizhou conservation officials, with aid from American groups, are providing loans to help some of those land-short farmers develop new sources of income -- money to buy chickens to resell in town or for tools to make stoves out of discarded cans.

"We're trying our best to prolong the life of this lake," said Guan Yuhu, a reserve official. "I know that in many countries parks are closed off to people, but that's impossible here."

But the truce remains uneasy and the effort to save nature here reveals the difficulties Beijing faces in remote spots when it tries to impose its social policies - whether birth control, compulsory education or wildlife conservation.

The hills around Cao Hai are anything but serene. Studded with the hulks of backyard zinc smelters abandoned by government fiat only last year, much of the watershed would probably qualify in Western countries as a hazardous-waste site. Denuded slopes send topsoil into the lake, and the town of Weining pours in half its sewage.

The main threat, though, comes from some 30,000 people living around the lake. These are some of China's most wretchedly poor families that get by on what corn and potatoes they grow on a small fraction of a hectare, plus the odd menial job.

They are nearly all illiterate, and often cannot even afford a radio. Couples bear four, even five or six children each and

send fewer than half of them to school. As they see it, their biggest need is more cropland.

"Everyone here would be happy if they would drain the lake," said a man in the hamlet of Bojiwan. As it is, in a cat-and-mouse game with guards, villagers are constantly trying to dig up the marshes.

Cao Hai -- the name means sea of grass -- already bears the scars of Chinese Communist history. Until the late 1950s, this lake 2,130 meters (7,000 feet) high in the mountains was a prime habitat for migratory birds.

But in 1958 came Mao's Great Leap Forward, when China was supposed to produce grain on every available hectare. Under Mao's urgent command to conquer nature, the newly formed communes dug channels to partly drain the lake.

Then in 1972, amid the frenzy of the Cultural Revolution, officials tried to drain it entirely. The transformed land would yield so much bounty that "even the sows will wear gold earrings," an official promised.

"The results were not what people had envisaged," said Hong Shouli, director of Guizhou's Nature Protection department, in the provincial capital, Guiyang. Only a fourth of the drained land proved suitable for agriculture, Mr Hong said. At the same time, the surrounding water table began to drop, insect plagues and seasonal flooding worsened and dust storms blew. Surrounding communities asserted, improbably, that draining the lake was causing droughts.

In 1980 Chinese scientists concluded that the lake should be restored, and in 1982 officials built a dam and started refilling Cao Hai.

The recovery was astounding, and in 1985 the lake and surrounding watershed were declared a national reserve -- one of hundreds in China's ambitious if overstretched effort to save natural diversity.

In recent years, the lake has been host to more than 400 of the birds that are its claim to fame, the blacknecked cranes, a 10th of the global population. A total of 184 bird species have been sighted on the lake.

This victory for nature was not widely applauded by local villagers, who seem to have sharper memories of land lost than of ecological disasters.

With little local industry, most families are dependent on minuscule plots for subsistence, lucky to have a cash income equivalent to \$100 or \$200 a year from temporary jobs or raising a few pigs.

So in 1994, with aid from the International Crane Foundation in Wisconsin and the Trickle-Up Program in New York, officials tried a strategy involving more carrot than stick. It includes employment for reserve guards, ecological education and aid for school fees. But the core is the program of small grants and loans.

In the initial phase, more than 400 small-grants were doled out to some of the poorest families to enable them to create business like selling produce or raising pigs or chickens.

To promote long-term development, the aid project is now providing seed money for perpetual community funds, in which groups of people join and provide three-month loans to a few members at a time, using the moderate interest charged to build up the fund.

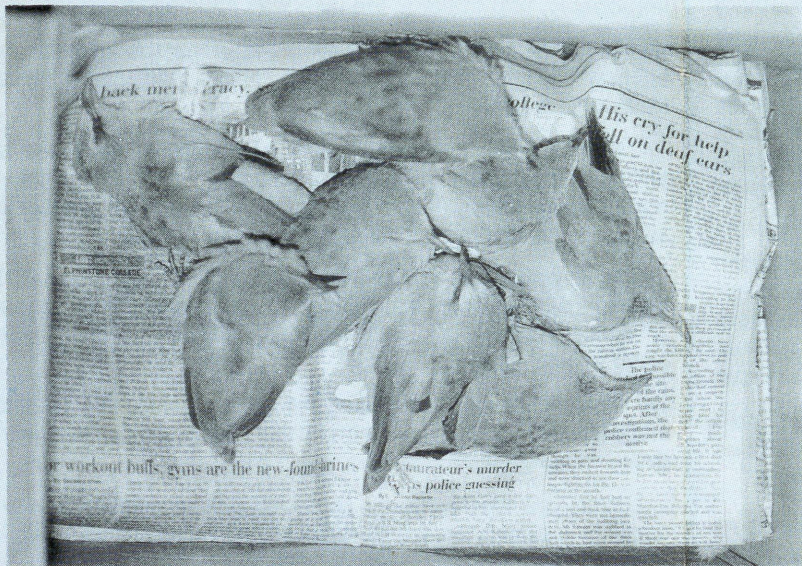
The programs are popular, but how far they can transform these villages and reduce the pressure on the lake remains to be seen.



**TRADE IN LARGE GREY BABBLERS (*TURDOIDES MALCOLMI*).** A.M.K. BHAROS, *Chhattisgarh Wildlife Society, B-101, Gayatri Nagar, Raipur 490 007*

It was not a matter of surprise to find the name of the large grey babbler in the list of birds which need protection in the brochure by the Birdwatchers Society of Andhra Pradesh. The noticeable point is that the species has been described as common in the Deccan plateau and that it now needs protection. It is difficult to analyse the reasons for depletion in its population from here, but one of the major factors which might lead the species to the same fate in Chhattisgarh region is its intensive trapping. These trapped birds are commonly served in road side hotels as quails. An instance quoted below will be sufficient to confirm the matter.

One acquainted person brought a bagful of quails on 26 December 1998. On examination, to our astonishment, the bag contained large grey babblers. These so called "quails"



had wings broken, tail feathers pulled out and used for tying their legs together. Birds were photographed before release in nearby bushes.

On investigation it was found that the centre of this trade is located at Simga a small town and Block HQ situated at 44

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km and Raipur-Bilaspur road. The birds are trapped by locals known as Shikaris from nearby villages and sold on road sides and road side hotels which serve them as quails to ignorant customers. Several other species, e.g. stilts, sandpipers, other waders, mynas, crows are served as partridges and quails whereas egrets and herons are substituted for chicken.

Such trade might be going on at other places as well. It is high time that concerned authorities take notice of the situation and initiate appropriate action against the Shikaris so that the species could be saved and customers too are not deceived.



**NESTING OF THE MALABAR WHISTLING THRUSH (*MYIOPHOMUS HORSFIELDII*) AT MUTHODI.** Paresh Karmarkar, Suma Karmarkar, Nitin Mallapur & Rajkumar, No. 20, Ganesh Prasad, Kirloskar Colony, 1 Stage, WCR, Bangalore - 560 079.

We went on a three day birdwatching trip to Bhadra Wildlife Sanctuary from 16th June to 20th June 1999. We camped at the Muthodi Nature Camp of Karnataka Forest Department. On 18th morning we heard a sweet and melodious whistling call of a bird and we went out to inspect and located a Malabar whistling thrush (*Myiophomus horsfieldii*) calling intermittently from a nearby bamboo clump. Soon after, the bird was seen hopping around the dining tables, adjoining the Somavahini Cottage. We were delighted to watch the bird from such close quarters. We were under the impression that the bird was looking for some tit bits on the dining table. Just as we were watching, the care-taker of the cottage, who had taken note of our interest in birds, pointed to a rafter on the wooden roof where the bird had located its nest. We took considerable interest and watched the activities of the nesting pair. The nest was bulky and lined by moss, grass and rootlets. It was placed on the rafter about 4 mts. above ground. We were distressed to learn from Dr Salim Ali and Ripley's Hand Book of Birds of India and Pakistan that "nestlings of Malabar whistling thrush are commonly taken from the nests to be raised as cage birds for their beautiful song and imitating ability. Birds have been taught to whistle an entire tune. The growing demand from bird fanciers and attractive prices that the birds fetch have caused a noticeable decline in numbers in many of its best known haunts". We trust that this practice is being checked, by a stricter enforcement of the Wildlife Act of 1972.



Cover : **Indian Roller (*Coracias benghalensis*)** belongs to the *Coraciidae* family, comprising stout birds with big head, and long broad wings. The name comes from the acrobatic courtship display of the male; tumbling to ground from a considerable height, twisting, turning and rolling all the way, while trying to attract the attention of a female.

Photo : S. Sridhar, ARPS