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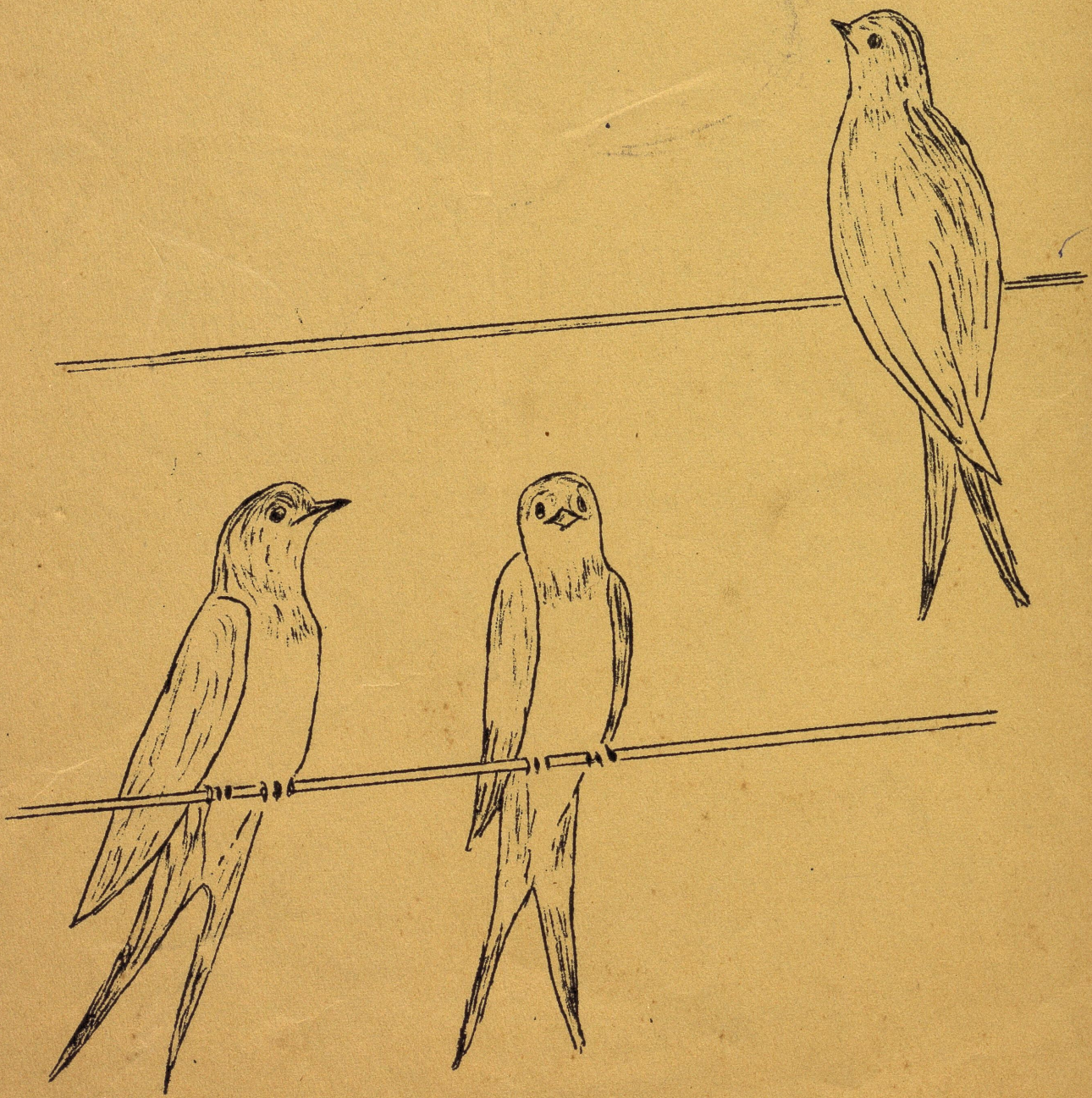
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NEWSLETTER

FOR BIRDWATCHERS

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BLACKNECKED STORK (XENORHYNCHUS ASIATICUS)
AND THE MARRIAGE OF MIRSHIKARS.

By

B. Robert Grubh & P.B. Shekar.

Mirshikars are a group of Muslims (see Newsletter Nov.'67: "A Week in Bharatpur" by S.F.) found in various parts of Bihar, whose occupation has been trapping birds since several generations. The abundance of birdlife, especially waterbirds, and the lack of proper enforcement of the Wildlife Rules in Bihar enabled the Mirshikars and certain others to make bird catching the occupation of their caste. Here we shall see how Loha Sarang the Blacknecked Stork had been associated with the social life of Mirshikars.

If a Mirshikar youth wanted to marry a girl, besides fulfilling all other conditions and formalities, he would have to catch an adult Blacknecked Stork, alive, single-handed and unarmed, but for his glue-and-rod device. Here let us digress a little to discuss how this device works. Several canes of about an inch in diameter and ten feet length are fittled one on top, thus making a single rod of considerable length which gradually tapers towards one end. At that end a slightly upturned and trifurcated stick is fixed, on which a kind of strong glue is applied. The man holds the other end of the rod and manoeuvres it with amazing skill towards birds sitting quite far away, on the ground. The bird would not fly away because the man is at a 'safe' distance. The bird would not know that the stick, approaching it steadily, is 'remote-controlled'. When the tip of the rod reaches the right distance the hunter gives a quick forward jerk to the rod and the glued stick fastens itself well into the feathers of the victim. The bird cannot free itself from the stick, be it a sparrow or a bird of the size of a vulture. This method is used for birds even today, and we have witnessed it.

Now let us go back to the story. On the day of marriage the bridegroom starts from his house with a party comprising of his people and those of the bride, and marches towards the place where the Loha Sarang is known to be present. The procession stops as soon as the bird is located. The bridegroom goes alone to get the bird. We may wonder why so much fuss is made for catching just a bird. However, the Blacknecked Stork is shockingly ferocious when cornered. The bird stands on its knees with partly open wings, facing the enemy and waits for a chance to plunge its bill, which is like a dagger, into

its opponent. As it is a tall and huge bird with long and agile neck, it is not very easy to catch it hare-handed.

If the bridegroom was successful in catching the bird the procession would move with him on to the bride's house and the marriage would take place. If he could not succeed on that day, the marriage would be postponed. When he finally manages to catch the bird, perhaps after several attempts, the marriage date would be fixed and the wedding would be solemnized. As it was prevalent among Muslims, they could marry more than one girl, if they desired so. But the hunting of the stork would have to be repeated each time.

This custom was stopped some forty years ago, following a tragic incident. A bridegroom set out with the people to catch the Blacknecked Stork for his marriage. He managed to fix the bird with the glue, and approached it. When he tried to catch it the worst thing happened - perhaps because of some miscalculation on his part. The bird gored his side fatally, and he died on the spot.

The above episode is true to the best of our knowledge. We got these facts from the Mirshikars and others who live in their neighbourhood.

BIRDWATCHERS' FIELD CLUB CUTING

By

Shama Futehally

On Sunday 19th February, the Club met, not as it usually does at Tulsi, but at Andheri: breakfast at our house, and then a walk through the 'meadows' behind the house to Juhu. Although the area is being rapidly built up, on this trip we saw enough that was new and interesting to make it a memorable walk.

First, Rosy Pastors: two or three of them feeding off a blossoming silk cotton tree. We got a very good view of these, they did not fly off for a long time. Then there were the wagtails, a couple of white wagtails, and some Eastern Grey. There were plenty of European swallows. On the side of the road we were following, I saw one or two Tree Pipits, merging beautifully with the background, and a group of five or six Ring Flowers were startled into flight. There were many flocks of ordinary sparrows but one of them proved to consist in part of Brown Munias as well, established on barbed wire fences, taking off frequently to indulge in a short circular flight, returning to the identical spot again and again. Another discovery was one rather unusual bird, the Desert Wheatear. As far as I remember, this was perched on a stone wall and then on a boulder. There were two of them, some distance from each other. A thrilling new species, and if we had seen nothing else, they would have made the day.

Another lovely bird we saw was the Collared Bush Chat on a fence, one single male with a bright rose-orange breast, black head and back, and white patches on the neck. We had a long and excellent view of this bird rummaging among the dust for food.

Later we settled round a creek with a few small islets, reputed to be covered over completely with migrant birds sometimes; but now had only a few stray Sandpipers, one Spotted; one Little Egret, and a couple of Common Kingfishers. Then we walked along beside the creek on a dirt track, thick mangrove vegetation at the side and there were Blyth's Reed Warblers by the dozen in the bushes. Incidentally, there was a train of camel-wallahs coming along and I had a jerky ride along the road. Once we were arrested by a loud and harsh chuk-chuk from the mangrove, punctuated by scuffling and the sound of creaking twigs. Dr. Salim Ali identified this as a large Reed Warbler, uncommon in the area. But the bird, did not respond to our various eager claps and hisses, and remained hidden.

That makes about fifteen inspiring species, a revealing total for this otherwise dull and stony stretch of ground.

BIRD WATCHERS' FIELD CLUB OF ROORKEE

By

Joseph George

Field outings were organised once a month or oftener in 1967. The average attendance was six which we consider very encouraging for a small town like Roorkee. A rare bird seen was the Terek Sandpiper.

Five film shows on birds and other wildlife were arranged. We are now finding it difficult to get new films.

Dr. G.L. Christie, visiting Professor from Canada at the Roorkee University, addressed the Club on his impressions of the fauna and flora of India. Shri K.M. Vaid of the Forest Research Institute, Dehra Dun, delivered a lecture on 'Badrinath and Valley of Flowers'.

Nestboxes installed in gardens and school premises in Roorkee were taken by the Blackheaded Myna, the Common Myna, the Roller and the Spotted Owlet.

WILDFOWL SURVEY

(Reproduced below are two letters from Christopher Savage, Honorary Coordinator, Asiatic Wildfowl Working Group).

I am very interested to read in the Newsletter for Birdwatchers that you have been counting ducks in Nagpur District. We are of course most interested.

I am sending you copies of our latest count forms and should be most grateful if you could airmail to me details of any counts made in January so that they may be included in the 1968 January Census Report. In due course I should be very glad to have details of all your counts as these will be valuable in assessing seasonal distribution and status.

Meanwhile I am putting you on our mailing list for next year.

(Letter addressed to Mr. T.S. Venugopalan).

I was very pleased to see this letter to which the above is a 'reply'. We are having a wonderful response to the Census this year and by all indications of a higher quality than last year.

One thing that puzzles me is that several reliable observers have reported Scaup. I cannot really accept this without further justification and I wonder if it would not be timely if you could put a notice in your splendid Newsletter to ask your readers to send in to you full details of unusual sightings supported where possible by observations by at least two other experienced observers. Scaup are very exciting as up till now they have been very rare visitors. You might add that anyone shooting a rare duck by accident should try to send in the skin for confirmed identification by the Bombay Natural History Society.

(Letter addressed to Mr. Zafar Futehally).

∟ Will readers kindly co-operate with Mr. Savage and heed his advice about being more than usually careful in reporting Scaups — Ed. ∟

THE BIRDS OF THE GIR SANCTUARY

By

Zafar Futehally

Some years ago Mr. J.K. Sen of the Zoological Survey of India, Calcutta, sent me a list of the birds of the Gir Forest. This consisted of 96 species plus three 'doubtfuls'. Mr. Sen was in the forest for six weeks in January-February. This list was useful during my recent visit to the Sanctuary (21-23 February) with the group sponsored by the Fauna Preservation Society, London. There were many keen bird-watchers in this group and the tour leader Sir Hugh Elliott was knowledgeable enough even about Indian birds to be able to identify several nebulous forms in the distance. During the short period devoted to bird-watching we saw over 60 species, consisting of members of many widely separated families. I will refer to a few which caused great excitement among the visitors.

We in India have got used to the Copper-smith (Megalaima haemacephala) and seldom take time to admire its elegant colouring, but our friends from temperate lands were quite overcome by the sight of this bird 'tonking' away from the top of a bare teak tree. Another delightful bird much appreciated was our Golden-backed Woodpecker (Dinopium benghalense) whose golden and scarlet colours and merry laughter enlivened the somber setting of the dry teak forest.

Birds of prey always pose special problems of identification. If they are high up in the sky in bright light their colours escape even a good pair of binoculars. If they are sub-adults their plumage is very different from that of their parents which is the one usually illustrated in the books. I have, however, been fairly familiar with the White-eyed Buzzard (Butastur teesa) and the Shikra (Accipiter badius), but both the birds would have eluded identification were it not for the presence of Sir Hugh. This Shikra in the compound of the Guest House at the Gir, had a very broad white eye-brow, and white and brown markings on the breast, very different from the finely vermiculated front of the bird in my garden. Apparently, Shikras have a very wide variation in plumage markings and there is a great difference between male and female, young and old.

The three Buzzards were high up in the air, and their beautiful and cosy acrobatics was something I had **never** witnessed before. I have always been under the impression that they are a lazy species, waiting endlessly on a lamp post for a cricket or a mole to pass beneath them and provide an easy meal. It was the call Pit-Teer, Pit-Teer which gave them away. There is a good description of this in Whistler's "A Popular Handbook of Indian Birds". There were three birds, and one seemed to be slightly smaller than the other two, suggesting that the three were a family unit.

I will continue this account in the next issue.

CORRESPONDENCE:

The November copy of Newsletter for Birdwatchers was of special interest because of the article by Werner, "Two Visits to Nepal." We were on home leave at the time he was here so did not have a chance to compare notes on what he saw on the trek north of Kathmandu. I would like to make a few suggestions regarding species mentioned based on our observations for the past ten or twelve years.

Mr. Werner mentioned a Black Tit at about 9,000 feet. He gave his identification as a Sikkim race only found in eastern Nepal. Hodgson's Cole Tit (Parus ater aemodium Blyth) is the more common species in that area although the Rufous-bellied Crested Tit (Parus rubidiventris rubidiventris Blyth) is also present. It may be the latter bird he saw.

About March 20th, the most common Leaf Warbler in the oak forests in that area is Phylloscopus pulcher pulcher Blyth. The wing bars are conspicuous. This is several weeks too early to expect P. proregulus at any height. The Greenish Warbler (P. trochiloides viridanus Blyth) is on migration in March, as Werner observed. P. t. nitidus Blyth, moves in to the hills mostly in April. The Yellow-rumped Leaf Warbler (P. proregulus chloronotus (Gray)) is numerous in that area from March onward. With at least twelve species and sub-species of Leaf Warblers moving through Kathmandu Valley in spring and fall, it is indeed difficult to keep track of them. However, Mrs. Desiree Proud has detailed records in the Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society, Vol. 53, No.1, 1955, pp.62-64, which prove extremely helpful for us who live in Kathmandu Valley.

The data from rhododendron forests at about 8,000 feet needs a comment or two. One would expect the tree creeper at that altitude to be the Sikkim bird, Certhia discolor discolor Blyth, also in Kathmandu Valley in winter. Short-billed minivets are confined to far eastern Nepal but the Long-tailed Minivets (Pericrocotus ethologus favillaceus Bangs and Phillips) is to be expected here. The Woodpecker with a "warm orange ochre breast" would be the Eastern Rufous-bellied Woodpecker (Dendrocopos hyperythrus hyperythrus (Vigors)) rather than the Fulvous-breasted species. Of course the Himalayan Pied Woodpecker (Dendrocopos himalayensis albescens (Baker)) is only in far western Nepal but the Darjeeling Pied Woodpecker (D. darjellensis Blyth) is here.

On the succeeding paragraphs I might add that the Black Eagle (Ictinaetus malayensis (Temminck)) which we saw at close range two weeks ago appeared to have no white either above or below. In regard to flock of thrushes, the last week of March is too early for Tickell's Thrush (Turdus unicolor Tickell). Both Zoothera mollissima mollissima (Blyth) and Z. dixonii (Seeborn) breed in that area but I have never seen them in large flocks. The description suggests the Black-throated Thrush, Turdus ruficollis astrogularis Temminck, not all of which have "black" throats.

It would have been rather unusual to have run across Mrs. Gould's Sunbird (Aethopyga gouldiae (Vigors)). We have seen it once in eighteen years. The Nepal, A. nipalensis nipalensis (Hodgson) and Fire-tailed Sunbirds, A. ignicauda (Hodgson) are fairly common, however.

Finally, the identification of the White-crested Laughing Thrush given is for the far eastern Nepal race, while the one here is Garrulax leucolophus leucolophus (Hardwicks).

I might add that we have an interested group of adults in the Valley who go on birdwalks together. One has proposed we organise a "Spiny Babbler Club" with the only requisite for admission that he has seen this species. Because of frequent visitors from abroad, it is also proposed we get out a check-list for the Valley and surrounding hills. Such lists were invaluable in the United States and Britain when I was looking for birds in those countries.

1 February 1968.

Robert L. Fleming, Sr.
Shanta Bhawan,
Kathmandu, Nepal.

I was indeed sorry to miss the annual meeting of the Field Club last Saturday afternoon; it would have been most pleasurable to sit on your lawn again, and drink your tea, and renew acquaintances there. Please excuse me for not coming.

Actually I expect you will approve of the way I spent the day. My activities were in sympathy with your interests and those of our society. While you lunched, Sir, I was wading far from land in a soggy-bottomed tank surrounded by flocks of Buff and White Ibis and Openbilled Stork. In the early afternoon, while you took your nap, I lay on my stomach in the mud squinting through a telescope. And when you were arranging chairs for your meeting and welcoming the first members to arrive I was squatting on the dry bed of the River Palar contentedly eating an iddli and watching -- as always, in vain -- for pratincoles. I say contentedly because I had set out that morning with a specific and limited objective, and was now able to feel more or less certain that I had achieved it.

The objective was to follow up a hunch about Glossy Ibises. There appears to be a conspiracy among writers on Indian birds to deny to the south-east of the country the regular occurrence of many species which are in fact quite common visitors, and to assume that occasional vagrants are singular rarities. A good instance of the former penchant is that of the Blacktailed Godwit; 'common ... south to Bombay (Salsette), less common to very rare in the Peninsula and Ceylon' says Ripley; perhaps he got this idea from the Vernay surveyors, who put the bird firmly in square brackets and wrote, 'This species is however so rare in Central and Southern India that it cannot be included in the Presidency list until a more positive record is forthcoming'. The Bartailed Godwit they ignore altogether, and Ripley restricts it to West Pakistan, western India and Ceylon: which is precisely the same range he allows the Whimbrel. Now both the Blacktailed Godwit and the Whimbrel commonly winter on the Madras coast, and the Bartailed Godwit is not impossibly rare (I saw a single bird last Sunday, at Pulicat). These are merely examples of what seems to be a trend in the literature of the Indian avifauna -- due, probably, more to a paucity of human observers and correspondents than to any genuine lack of birds -- a tendency to underestimate the quantity and variety of migrants which regularly or sporadically reach the south-eastern seaboard. This is not a thing for which the authorities should be censured; the distribution of birds is not a static phenomenon, and for want of observers they must often rely on out of date records, or make assumptions from the absence of any. But it means that on the question of the range of some species the field is wide open for fresh discoveries.

The Glossy Ibis is probably, pace Ripley, a sporadic visitor to the south. But as far as I know its only firm claim to honorary South Indian citizenship is based on three skins in the Hime Collection at the British Museum (JBNHS 39: 451). Wretched mouldering smelly dead things! It is more than eighty or ninety years, I suppose, since they dabbled with their numinous bills in the mud and preened their glistening black and green and purple and russet plumage. Have none of their posterity ever followed their doomed trail southwards since then? On the basis of reliable published records, apparently not -- though there may be some post-Vernay record buried in the Journal which I have missed. I did not know this when ten days ago I saw a distant party of twenty-one 'black' ibises feeding in the shallows of Madurantakam Tank. They were unidentifiable, anyway, being up-sun and far away. I was only struck by their glossiness. I daresay the Black Ibis is just as glossy as the Glossy Ibis, but the sheen I saw gave me a hunch, and when I later read about those exanimate husks in Kensington it became all the more important to examine the Madurantakam birds again properly.

There were twenty-three birds there on the day of your meeting, and I got quite near and watched them for an hour or more through a good telescope in perfect light. I was later able to approach within a few yards of them. They had none of the characters which are diagnostic of the Black Ibis.

The heads gave no impression of nakedness, and bore no trace of red wattles. There was no white anywhere on the shoulders, and the legs appeared the same colour as the beaks -- a dull greyish black. A tinge of rufous was to be seen on the feathered portions of the tibiae of one or two birds, but there was no sign of the Black Ibis's brick-red legs. One bird at least was near enough for me to see faint longitudinal pale flecks on the neck, which is a feature of the non-breeding plumage of the Glossy Ibis (Henry).

It is some years since I saw a Black Ibis at close range, nesting in Gujerat, and if I made notes I've lost them. I should therefore be most grateful if any of your readers who are familiar with Black Ibis would confirm or deny that the established characters, in particular the white patch on the shoulder and the red legs, are invariably easy to spot at close quarters and are present in birds in and out of the breeding season and at all fledged ages. It is so easy to be absolutely wrong about things like this, especially when one is following a hunch.

I am, sir, your obedient servant,

R.A. Stewart Melliush.

Holloway's Cottage,
19 Casa Major Road,
Madras 8.

24-1-1968

Would somebody please identify these two birds? I cannot find them in Whistler or Salim Ali's "The Book of Indian Birds", or "Indian Hill Birds".

1. On October 17th, we saw a bird resembling a dove sitting on a bush in an area of waste land, comprising eroded ridges of ironstone shale near Kulti, West Bengal. We observed the bird through binoculars from a distance of about 70 yards, in clear afternoon sun. Its entire head and neck were a subdued pinkish brick colour. The back, wings and longish tail were brown. There seemed to be a slightly scaly effect on the wings. Eyes and bill dark, legs not seen. When it flew away to one side of us, there was a definite impression of grey blue. It was quite silent all the time we observed it.

2. We heard this bird in our garden about 6 times last winter, between October and early March, but only saw it once. We have again heard it several times this winter, and managed to see it on January 1st evening, sitting in a hibiscus hedge. It appeared to be smaller than a mynah, with a rather dumpy figure. Head, neck, back, wings and tail were dark brown, with the wings folded rather high. The wings were covered with coppery buff spots. The whole of the underside was buff, with thin dark bars running from wing to wing, all the way from the dark throat to the tail. A dark line through the eyes, running back to the wings. A slight crest on top of the head, with a dark line running through it from bill to back. The tail was barred. The bill was short, straight and very sharp and tapering. Bill and legs greyish, eyes dark. Its flight was noisy at the start like a dove's, and continued in a series of short dips. Its call sounds like "chlee" repeated rapidly seven or eight times.

Sanctoria,
Disergarh P.O.,
District Burdwan,
West Bengal.

Mrs. Sarah Jameson.

[Unfortunately the Editor cannot help]

Today I observed a small bird of the size of a sparrow on the top of a mango tree which seems to be a Verditer Flycatcher, but its colour was much deeper blue above and more slaty blue below than the picture in Salim Ali's "The Book of Indian Birds". Is the colour in the book incorrect, or did I see a different bird? The bird had no patch of white anywhere on the body or on the tail.

The Nilgiri Verditer Flycatcher has been described by Salim Ali as duller coloured, but the picture of the bird in "Indian Hill Birds" is much brighter than the picture of the Verditer Flycatcher in "The Book of Indian Birds". Can you throw some light on this?

Kameshwar Singh.

A.N.S. College,
P.O. Barh,
Dist. Patna (Bihar).
20.2.1968.

[Dr. Salim Ali will reply in the next issue -- Ed.]

In the February Newsletter under the heading "Birdwatching in Andheri", you have mentioned the call of Blyth's Reed Warbler (Acrocephalus dumetorum). I could not find any description of it in Salim Ali's "The Book of Indian Birds". In the Synopsis by Ripley, only distribution in India during winter is given. I would like to have a short description, so that I may be able to identify it more accurately. I have heard as well as seen the bird, but I am not so sure.

M4/4
Hirakud.
15.2.1968.

M. R. Ray

[You will find a description of this bird in Hugh Whistler's "A Popular Handbook of Indian Birds" -- Ed.]

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