

# Newsletter for Birdwatchers

VULTURE  
SPECIAL

Vol. 45

No. 3

May - June 2005

National Seminar on "**BIRD ECOLOGY AND CONSERVATION**" to be held at Bangalore on 12<sup>th</sup> - 13<sup>th</sup> November, 2005. Please Register by 15<sup>th</sup> September, 2005.



## Editorial Board

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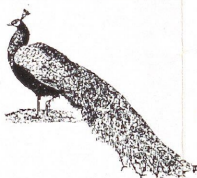
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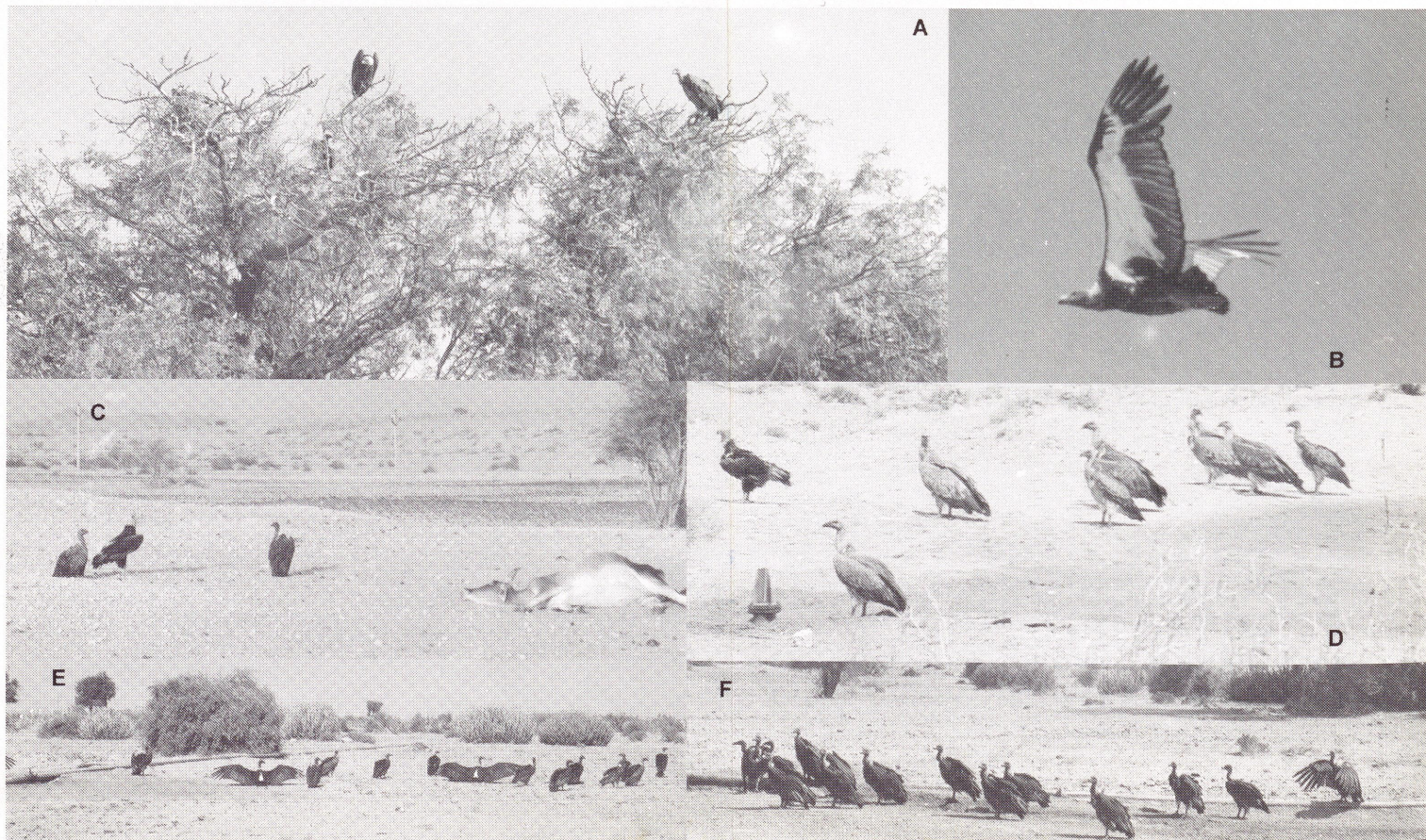
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**A Note from the Publisher**

Dear fellow birdwatchers,

**Peafowl and pesticide savvy farmers**

The incidents of pesticide poisoning of birds narrated by Timmapur, typify the problem that is taking a heavy toll of our birds. This is indeed tragic. The peafowl had rushed to feed on



taken the lion's share, and left a measly 100 grams of putrefied venison per vulture. Or, was the tiger waiting behind a bush to return later and finish its meal and deprive even that skimpy share to the famished vultures?

The case isn't any different for the vultures starving at Hazira or Shivalik area as reported by Snehal Patel *et. al.* and Pradeep Kumar Sharma respectively. Kasambe's interview with Pardi Pardhi, throws much light on the hunting skills of the vulture eating community. The fact that this Pardi Pardhi was overcome by grief and nostalgia of many years, when he used to relish vulture meat on a regular basis, is an eye opener to all bird conservationists. There is the danger from the spread of 'Raniket' virus among vultures at Mahuva, as reported by Amit Patel. These observations are cumulatively signaling grave dangers ahead for the vultures.

Contributors have dealt with the subject over a period of time and have suggested perspectives and strategies that would be useful in the national campaign to save the vulture. It is perhaps the only way to remove the angularities of the theories promoted at present. Rhetorical debates should not continue for a few more months, but ultimately the hard realities alone will decree the fate of the vultures.

We have to address these evidently manageable differences, and the diclofenac theory in a fair, reasonable and balanced manner, quite a few are yet to come around fully by calibrated shifts in their opinions and viewpoints. In a shadow of a doubt, we are none the wiser after painstaking vulture research. For that reason, we need to accept the contradictory aspects of the vulture problem and begin to respect balanced views and promote action oriented proposals.



you,  
bird conservation  
NLBW

**Birds from Hidkal Dam Area, Belgaum District, Karnataka**

TIMMAPUR, HDP High School, Hidkal Dam - 591107

...elf, instead of the usual first week of April. Such a change in the cement of the breeding timetable was particularly noticeable in 2002, 2004 and 2005.

The pair has been refurbishing and using the same old nest after year. They add sticks, hay and coarse materials as they begin their courtship rituals and the nest is more than a meter wide and a meter deep. We also noted the existence of a medicine chest in the nest; wherein the birds continue to bring fresh leafy sprigs of Eucalyptus, and keep them throughout the nesting season. This is done to

keep them free from irritating ticks and mites at bay. The eagle pair usually raises two chicks. But in 2001 and then again in 2004, only one chick was raised by the pair. The fledgling remains with

**NATIONAL SEMINAR**  
on  
**BIRD ECOLOGY AND CONSERVATION**  
  
**BANGALORE**  
**12<sup>th</sup> - 13<sup>th</sup> November, 2005**  
  
**THEME**  
  
**NEW INITIATIVES FOR BIRD CONSERVATION**

**FIRST ANNOUNCEMENT**

**ORGANISED BY**  
**INSTITUTE FOR NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION,**  
**EDUCATION, RESEARCH & TRAINING (INCERT)**  
and  
**NEWSLETTER FOR BIRDWATCHERS**

**IN COLLABORATION WITH**  
**THE FOREST DEPARTMENT**  
**GOVT. OF KARNATAKA**

**SUPPORTED BY**  
**KARNATAKA STATE BIODIVERSITY BOARD**  
and  
**DEPARTMENT OF FORESTRY &**  
**ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE, UAS, BANGALORE**

After this accident, the eagles have seemingly advanced their breeding schedule by three weeks to the first week of January. The chicks leave the nest by the third week of

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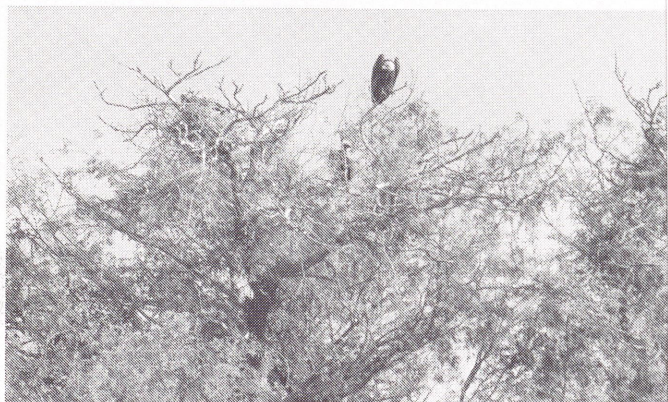
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Vultures at the

- A) *White-backed Vulture at nest on a Khejari tree*
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- 40 White-backed vultures die at the Mahuva Vulture

## CALL FOR PAPERS

## FIRST ANNOUNCEMENT

We propose to conduct a National Seminar on **Bird Ecology and Conservation**, at **Bangalore** on **12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> November, 2005**.

The seminar is intended to throw light on the status of important bird species and facilitate their conservation. You will have an opportunity to share your experience with the rest of the participants. You are welcome to make a short presentation of your work. We are looking for your ideas and suggestions for the seminar and comments on any other aspect of bird conservation. The proceedings of the seminar will also be published. A half-day optional field-trip is planned for **14<sup>th</sup> November 2005**.

**Birdwatchers and Conservationists are cordially invited to participate and contribute papers for Oral and Poster Presentations on the following themes :**

1. Bird diversity and conservation
2. Bird population dynamics
3. Bird biology and behaviour
4. Wetlands and waterfowl
5. Applied ornithology
6. Impact of development on bird populations

Please organise your manuscript under the following heads : Title, Full address of Author/s, Introduction, Materials and Methods, Results and Discussion, References including Tables, Figures, Photographs, Maps etc. not exceeding **five** pages of A4 size in Times New Roman (10pt. Font size).

Please mail your full paper (in duplicate) along with a soft copy (in MS Word format only) and the Registration form duly filled-up, so as to reach the **Seminar office** latest by **September 15, 2005**.

**INSTITUTE FOR NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION,  
EDUCATION, RESEARCH & TRAINING (INCERT)**

No. 10, Sirur Park 'B' Street, Seshadripuram, Bangalore - 560 020, India  
Ph. :(080) 23364142, 23364682, E-mail : bird\_seminar2005@yahoo.co.in

## Registration Fee:

- Rs. 400/- for *INCERT* members & Newsletter subscribers
- Rs. 300/- for Students
- Rs. 500/- for other delegates and accompanying persons

(Registration fee includes Seminar kit, Refreshments and Lunch during the seminar. Registration fee is non-refundable)

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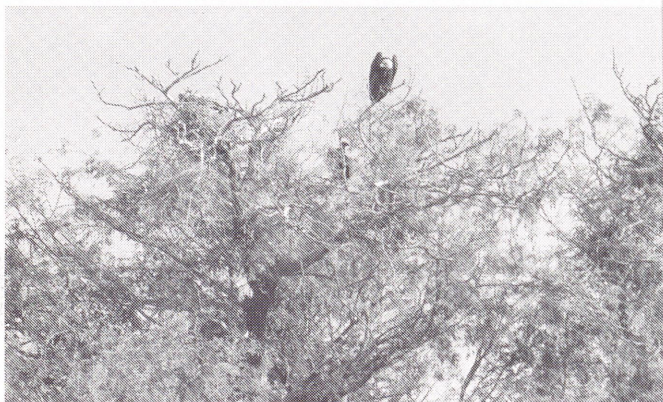
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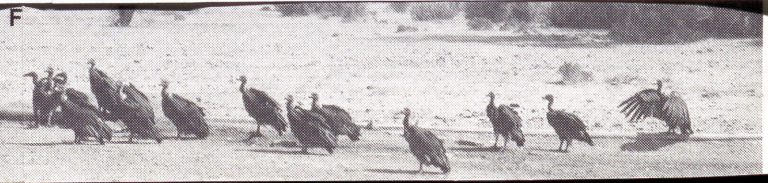
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Dear fellow birdwatchers,

**Peafowl and pesticide savvy farmers**

The incidents of pesticide poisoning of birds narrated by Timmapur, typify the problem that is taking a heavy toll of our birds. This is indeed tragic. The peafowl had rushed to feed on a banquet of maize corns laced with endosulfan. The dry seeds were not only appetising meal but also tantalised the taste buds of the peafowl. They had rushed to enjoy the spoils, only to lay motionless and debilitated a few minutes later. The image lingers in every bird lover's mind as the lifeless peacock's body was laid to rest by Timmapur. Meantime, on 8<sup>th</sup> July 2005, in the nearby Palikoppa village in Hubli Taluk, 25 peafowl and their young ones died when they ate jowar grains sprinkled with rat poison. Such scenes ought to be impacting the collective consciousness of the pesticide savvy farmers, who have mostly commercial interests in their minds. The utterly discriminating and iniquitous nature of pesticide is open to misuse in the agricultural fields for decades. In addition to the calamity of peafowl, bulbuls and bee-eaters, a host of other granivorous and insectivores are also suffering endless trials and tribulation.

Although the lives of several peafowl are balanced on a knife's edge; 1000 peafowl at Bankapura, near Haveri are likely to get a breather, with the proclamation of Bankapura as a Peacock Sanctuary by the Karnataka Forest Department.

**Vulture alert!**

Amidst the hype surrounding the vulture crisis, we are publishing eight notes concerning vultures in this issue. They partly explain the serious misgivings surrounding the crisis. There are indications that several factors are collectively contributing to the decline of vultures in India. Ramesh's reported sighting of ninety vultures waiting patiently to feed on the remnants of a dead animal in the Nagarahole National Park (NNP) is further proof that reduced availability of carcasses could be a causative factor. At NNP, a tiger had

taken the lion's share, and left a measly 100 grams of putrefied venison per vulture. Or, was the tiger waiting behind a bush to return later and finish its meal and deprive even that skimpy share to the famished vultures?

The case isn't any different for the vultures starving at Hazira or Shivalik area as reported by Snehal Patel *et. al.* and Pradeep Kumar Sharma respectively. Kasambe's interview of an elderly Pardhi, throws much light on the hunting skills of an erstwhile vulture eating community. The fact that this octogenarian Pardhi was overcome by grief and nostalgia of the bygone years, when he used to relish vulture meat on a regular basis, is an eye opener to all bird conservationists. Then there is the danger from the spread of 'Raniket' virus to the nesting vultures at Mahuva, as reported by Amit Jethava. These observations are cumulatively signaling grave problems ahead for the vultures.

The contributors have dealt with the subject over a period of time and have suggested perspectives and strategies that could prove useful in the national campaign to save the vultures. It is perhaps the only way to remove the angularities from the theories promoted at present. Rhetorical debates are likely to continue for a few more months, but ultimately the ground realities alone will decree the fate of the vultures.

Even as we address these evidently manageable differences, including the diclofenac theory in a fair, reasonable and virtuous manner, quite a few are yet to come around fully by making calibrated shifts in their opinions and viewpoints. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, we are none the wiser after years of painstaking vulture research. For that reason, we must learn to accept the contradictory aspects of the vulture crisis and begin to respect balanced views and promote conservation oriented proposals.

Thanking you,

Yours in bird conservation

**S. Sridhar**

*Publisher, NLBW*

**Breeding cycle of the Bonelli's Eagle**

Since 1992, we have been observing the nesting activities of a pair of Bonelli's eagles near the Hidkal dam area. This pair used to commence its nesting activity by January end and the fledglings used to leave the nest around first week of April. But on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2001, high velocity winds dislodged the solitary chick from the nest. The chick which was about three weeks away from fledging, fell to the ground headlong and sustained a bleeding injury at the base of its beak. It died before any medical aid could be summoned.

After this accident, the eagles have seemingly advanced their breeding schedule by three weeks to the first week of January. The chicks leave the nest by the third week of

## Random Bird Notes from Hidkal Dam Area, Belgaum District, Karnataka

**R.G. TIMMAPUR**, HDP High School, Hidkal Dam - 591107

March itself, instead of the usual first week of April. Such an advancement of the breeding timetable was particularly noticed in 2002, 2004 and 2005.

The eagle pair has been refurbishing and using the same old nest year after year. They add sticks, hay and coarse materials every year as they begin their courtship rituals and the nest is now more than a meter wide and a meter deep. We also noticed the existence of a medicine chest in the nest; wherein the parents continue to bring fresh leafy sprigs of Eucalyptus, to the nest throughout the nesting season. This is done to keep the irritating ticks and mites at bay. The eagle pair usually raises two chicks. But in 2001 and then again in 2004, only one chick was raised by the pair. The fledgling remains with

the parents till December end, to learn and perfect its hunting skills, before leaving the family to lead an independent life. The parents are also seen chasing away the juvenile eagle from the nesting site and the territory during the last week of December, before embarking on yet another nesting programme of their own. A bold and fascinating hunter, the Bonelli's eagle brings a variety of prey to the nest, that includes partridges, pigeons, and monitor lizards. Once I witnessed a Bonelli's eagle trying to overpower an adult peacock with its razor sharp beak and talons. But the timely intervention of alert villagers in the vicinity spared the life of the peacock, which was otherwise completely at the mercy of the eagle. During the nesting season the eagles are seen hunting in pairs. They soar in the air and reach dizzy heights with ease. They bring their victims to the nest, dexterously clasped in their talons, to enjoy and share the meal with their offspring. Pigeons and partridges are picked clean of their feathers, their flesh shorn neatly from their bones and painstakingly cut to pieces and fervently offered to their chicks. The Bonelli's eagles at the Hidkal dam area are presumably the same pair, as they are said to be mated for life. They are particularly silent, save for sporadic *kir...kir...kir* feeble chattering calls uttered on wings and at nest.

Surprisingly, I found the eagle pair, zealously guarding their territory and the nest throughout the year, from other birds of prey, crows and langurs (*Somnopithecus entellus*). Hitherto, I have noticed the female giving out an alarm and the male Bonelli's eagle proceeding to fiercely attack and chase away common langur troupes approaching their territory or nest by chance, no matter whether the eagles are nesting or not, at that point of time.

On one occasion, I had a rare opportunity of witnessing the hunting skills of a Bonelli's eagle; true to life and not to legend, when the eagle was seen swooping down on a hapless domestic hen. This hen had been recently acquired by a villager, who wanted it to accustom to the surroundings of his hut. Therefore, he had tied a thick cord to the hen's foot and tethered the other end of the cord to a fairly large stone, allowing the hen to forage in the open patch opposite his hut. The eagle which was observably on a hunting mission, had espied this hen from the sky and at once dived to clasp the hen with its razor sharp claws and tried to lift it off the ground. The eagle's prowess was so much that the hen was lifted up along with the dangling stone, by a meter or two off the ground. The eagle found the hen surprisingly heavy to commute to its nest and dropped it post-haste to the ground. The remorseless eagle made a second bid and with a swiping action, ripped the cord off the stone (which had obviously got loosened during the first attempt) and effortlessly flew away with the hen clasped firmly in its talons. The sound of the stone falling to the ground and the concurrent commotion of squirrels and babblers had alerted the villager, who darted out of his hut only to notice his newly acquired hen fast disappearing with the eagle. He

made a vain bid to retrieve his hen; but one has to admit he was a tad too slow. He returned to his hut screaming a catalogue of abuses on the eagle that had craftily robbed his worldly possession.

### **Demoiselle Cranes on the move**

From the very year the Hidkal dam was built, it has been playing host to about 15,000 Demoiselle cranes (*Grus virgo*). They invariably arrive at the dam site by the first week of January and leave on 21<sup>st</sup> March. Their 1.5 Kilometer long formation flight is a sight to behold and cherish. These cranes are gifted with some natural qualities to discern the planetary movements. They can somehow figure out that the sun will be on the Equator by 21<sup>st</sup> March and get the cue to move northward to their breeding grounds. The cranes go out to forage on jowar and groundnut crops during the night. They return from their foraging grounds in flocks by noon to assemble along the vast stretches of the reservoir and remain there till dusk. The farmers are apprehensive of loosing their crops to the cranes and they constantly chase the cranes back and forth from one cropland to the other, during the night. This continues till dawn or until the farmers get tired and call it a day. The Ghataprabha reservoir also plays winter-host to some 400 bar-headed geese (*Anser indicus*), 1000 pintail ducks (*Anas acuta*), 400 Brahminy Shelducks (*Tadorna ferruginea*), 500 Common Pochards (*Aythya ferina*).

### **An experiment with a Baya's nest**

One morning in September 2004, as I was taking my class, an eighth standard student, barged into my class with a nest of a baya weaver bird (*Ploceus philippinus*) in his hand. He told me that there were hungry chicks inside the nest and that he had tried to feed them with some grains through the long pouch-like entrance, typical to the weaver birds; but he had not succeeded. I examined the nest and found the chicks alive and begging for food. I asked him how he chanced upon this nest and he explained that on the previous evening while he was returning from the school, he had found the nest on the ground, and had taken it home and tied to the porch at the entrance to his house.

I, at once requested my colleague B.R. Sharanobat to accompany me to the baya colony overhanging the well, from where the student had retrieved the nest on the previous day. By 11.30 am we reached the spot indicated by the student and found some eight active baya nests. Sharanobat, carefully fastened the nest to the overhanging branch and withdrew to a safe distance. We all waited anxiously and the chicks started chirping when the nest oscillated gently with the wind. Then the female baya weaver bird arrived with a mouthful of grains from nowhere to feed the chicks! This happened within 30 seconds of replacing the nest at the original site!

I was skeptical, if not cynical to begin with, because we were under the notion that sparrows and other finches usually abandon or peck their chicks to death, if they are handled

by humans. But the weaverbird's overpowering maternal instinct had nullified our anthropogenic notion!

### The case of the poisoned Peacocks

In the maize corn fields in Ingalagi and Yeregatti villages, which are near the Hidkal dam, pesticides are extensively used. The corncobs are usually prone to attack by pests, a month or so prior to their harvest. During September 2004, a pair of peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*); a male and a female, were brought to my home, by two villagers of Yeregatti. The peafowl were seen gasping for breath and too weak to stand on their own legs. Their eyes were only partially open and they remained spread-eagled, when left on the ground. The villagers informed me that the peafowl had sustained some injuries and therefore they were unable to fly. Taking their word for granted, I applied the homeopathic medicine 'Calendula' also called as 'Calendula mother tincture' all over their bodies and expected the peafowl pair to recover by daybreak. But to my dismay, the peacock had died some time during the night. Only then, I suspected them to have feasted on maize cobs sprayed with pesticides. Therefore, I administered 3 globules of another homeopathic medicine 'Arsenicum album', with '1 M' potency, to the surviving peahen, at intervals of three hours. The peahen defecated greenish/blackish faeces that had strong whiffs of pesticide. After emptying its bowels, the peahen improved gradually and regained its strength by the third day. A week later, Shivaraj Patil of Ingalagi village told me that six more peafowl (two peahens and four peacocks) were found stricken and struggling for life around the islands of river Harinakeshi, which are situated about 11 kms west to the Hidkal dam. I rushed to this village early next day and recovered the said peafowl, which had apparently consumed maize cobs sprayed with insecticides. I administered Arsenicum album, in the same manner explained above. This medicine had to be force-fed, as the peafowl were too weak to feed by themselves. By the third day all the six peafowl had recovered completely. After 15 days of nursing them back to perfect health, they were released in the wild. But I had planned some logical first steps before the ceremonial release. Myself and my fellow teachers took the peacocks with their streamers impressively training below, to the villages and schools situated at Sindhihatti, Yeregatti, Yeranala, Hosur, Chilabhavai, Ramaganatti, Parakanatti and Ingalagi. Here we went on an awareness campaign and spoke to the students and the village elders about the ill effects of pesticide use, which in turn is detrimental to the health of the community at large. Hopefully, the use of pesticides in this area will abate in time.

### The fall of the Bulbuls

In February every year, as soon as the mango inflorescence appears, certain pests proceed to lay their eggs in the flowers. When the flowers become fruits, the eggs hatch into worms to feed on the pulp and render the fruits useless. Therefore, the mango farmers of Ingalagi, start spraying an insecticide called Monocrotophos, to the inflorescence of

mango to contain these pests. Often the Red-vented bulbuls (*Pycnonotus cafer*) that rush to devour the insects sprayed with the pesticide, drop unconscious to the ground. In February 2004, 14 red-vented bulbuls were found scattered unconscious across the mango orchards. Eight bulbuls died before any medication could be given; but the remaining six were administered the Arsenicum album in good time and nursed back to health by the third day. Even the bee-eaters are not spared of this ordeal. Year after year, quite a few small green Bee-eaters (*Merops orientalis*) dig nesting tunnels in the earthen walls near our home. I have often found a handful of Bee-eaters lying unconscious on the ground or some even dead. They had either feasted on bees or other flying insects sprayed with pesticide or suffered from some unknown viral infection.

### A Cormorant's spirited fight

On a crystal clear day in November 1998, a student brought a little cormorant (*Phalacrocorax niger*), which looked weak and emaciated. I fed small fish at regular intervals which it ate with relish. It seemed to be fit for release in the wild by the 4<sup>th</sup> day. I took the cormorant to the same section of the canal from where the bird had been collected and brought to my house by the student. This canal is quite deep and had about 13 feet of water in November. After releasing the bird in the canal, I waited for the bird to begin its fishing activities, before returning to my house. But, soon I noticed the arrival of another cormorant, which rushed underwater towards the cormorant, and started attacking it with its sharp beak. The distressed cormorant not only tried to defend itself but also spiritedly jabbed at the attacking cormorant. I urged one of my students to dive into the canal and chase the attacking cormorant away and it was accomplished in the manner suggested. But the unrelenting cormorant returned with two other cormorants and they collectively attacked and chased the sick cormorant up and down the canal waters. Their rapier-like beaks sparkled during the duels, and the ailing cormorant started losing whatever little strength it had recouped during its stay with us and wrestled with its wings to jump-up the bund to avoid the three adversaries. Though completely exhausted, the ill-fated cormorant finally managed to reach the bund, collapsed on the shore and breathed its last. It all happened so fast that we could do precious little to save the cormorant.

### Black-bellied terns at nest

On 20<sup>th</sup> March 2004, I went on a birding trip with Niranjana Sant, a renowned bird-photographer, along the backwaters of the Ghataprabha reservoir. The Hidkal dam has been built across the river Ghataprabha, which has formed quite a few islands in the reservoir; an ideal nesting habitat for terns, ringed plovers and pratincoles. In one such island, we stumbled upon an active nest of Black-bellied terns (*Sterna acuticauda*). In the nest, the chicks had started hatching by making small holes in their respective eggs, to begin with. When we retracted to a safe distance, the parent terns returned to the nest and picked up a reassuring 'Chiew-

*chee'* conversation with the chicks. The hatching sequence lasted just about two hours and the chicks were seen moving about energetically a day later, when the parents escorted the chicks to an area strewn with stones and pebbles. Here the chicks sought safe refuge in the gaps between the stones and pebbles, and remained perfectly camouflaged. The parents were time and again bringing fish dangling in their beaks and the chicks were seen coming out to the open to accept the fish from their parents and rushing back to their chosen cavities amid the pebbles. On

our second visit on 28<sup>th</sup> March 2004, we located another active nest of the Black-bellied terns. The terns nest only if the water level is deep enough to form islands. If the rock-strewn islands get connected to the mainland during low tides, the terns become wary of predators like stray dogs, cats, mongoose, and jackals freely prying into their nesting area and for that reason, forego their nesting for the season. Thankfully, the entire reservoir is protected and not easily accessible to human beings.



## Forest Owlets *Heteroglaux blewitti* in Melghat Tiger Reserve, Distt. Amravati, Maharashtra

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Forest Owlet [*Heteroglaux blewitti*] was considered extinct for well over a century. It was recently rediscovered at Taloda in Nandurbar District of Maharashtra. Pamela Rasmussen and her team had achieved this feat. Later, B.N.H.S. research fellow Faraha Ishtiaq, carried out her field studies mostly in Nandurbar district along the Satpudas. This followed news in local newspapers from Mr. Kishor Rithe and his team claiming to have spotted the enigmatic bird in Melghat Tiger Reserve [MTR] also. This aroused our interest in this owl species. MTR is my (RK) first birdwatching love and home territory since I (RK) took to bird watching seriously. Hence I decided to look particularly for these "enigmatic and endemic" birds as a challenge! I clicked my first Forest Owlet on 19th June 2002 with fellow birder Mr. Jayant Wadatkhar and Mr. Nandaram Bhusum, after failing in earlier attempts! Then on 1st June 2003, Mr. Jayant Wadatkhar, Dr. Satish Pande, Amit Pawashe and myself among others, recorded the Koel like "oowoow" call of the Forest Owlet. Then there was no looking back.

Every time we visited Melghat, I started looking out for Owls and Owlets. We exchanged notes of all our birding trips to Melghat. We sometimes feel Forest Owlet gave purpose to my exhausting trips on my Honda, to the land of ghats and tiger. My companions on the bike were always helpful and a source of encouragement too.

This interest of mine in such an elusive and rare bird brought enough opportunities to work with renowned ornithologist Dr. Satish Pande. He in turn provided a lifetime opportunity to me to work with Rolex Awardee Dr. Reuven Yosef, who is presently the Director of EILAT Bird Watching Center, Israel. He is acknowledged as the man who converted a garbage-dumping site into a paradise, i.e. a bird sanctuary and a bird-banding center. Four days with this India-born Israeli Ornithologist along with his country mates Mr. Tzadok and Mr. Israel and an English lady Ms. Lynette Mitchell, gave us immense learning experience in ornithology. His military

discipline, working style and knowledge of raptors and Afro-Asian migration routes of birds astonished us.

I always envied the advanced gadgets and equipment they owned compared to what we have, (rather haven't). Myself and Mr. Kedar Pawgi led the team for four days into the Owlet countryside habitats from 8th to 11th February 2004.

My familiarity to the "oowoow" and "shree...shree" calls got my ears attuned to it. My eyes also got trained in locating the owlets even by their silhouettes.

Herewith I am presenting only four noteworthy facts:

1. Number of Forest Owlets located till date in Melghat.
2. Predation on Roseringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri* chick by Forest Owlet.
3. Diurnation as a conflict avoiding strategy
4. Some features of typical resting behavior

### Number of Forest Owlets sighted in MTR:

Following is the list of approximate locations of sightings of Forest Owlets in MTR and the number of birds sighted:

i. Malur Village	—	4
ii. Malur Harisal Road	—	2
iii. Malur Chopan Road	—	2
iv. Malur Jambukuwa	—	2
v. Malur Chaurakund	—	4
vi. Bhanwar Nulla Malur	—	2
vii. Talai Area Malur	—	2
viii. Chaurakund village	—	2
ix. Chaurakund Bulumgana Road	—	4
x. Chaurakund JamudaPadav	—	6
xi. Chichapati Area Harisal	—	2
xii. Chikhalam Area Raipur	—	2
xiii. Raipur Village	—	4
xiv. Raipur to Hatru	—	6
xv. Hatru Area	—	2
xvi. Malur to Khokmar	—	2

Therefore, the total number of Forest Owlets sighted in MTR till 20<sup>th</sup> June 2004 were 48 at 16 different sites. I have tried to avoid counting the same birds twice, by different birders during their visits, as the birds are highly territorial. I could not locate the solitary Forest Owlet reported at Mahendri Reserve Forest in Amravati district (sighted by Rithe K.), which is near Warud tahsil and approximately 100 kms away from MTR.

After this Nandaram and Faltu (the third and fourth authors) continued to search for the Forest Owlets in the study area on an intensive scale. Here it must be mentioned that Nandaram and Faltu are educated members of the Korku tribe and reside at Malur and Chourakund villages in MTR respectively. Nandaram is a daily wage employee of MTR and an expert tracker of Forest Owlets and locates the enigmatic birds with more accuracy and perfection than probably anybody else mentioned in this article. Till 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2005, Nandaram located around 100 Forest Owlets in MTR. Also Faltu, who is a tiger tracker of MTR, sighted 20 birds around Chourakund in MTR. In all more than 100 individuals have been recorded, excluding the overlapping of the latest sightings by Nandaram and Faltu. This includes nearly all the sightings mentioned above, except the one at Mahendri. In Korku dialect all owlets are called 'Dooda' and Faltu has named our Forest Owlet as "Dongor-dooda" (Dongor=forest in Korku dialect). The previous studies were carried out along the forest roads or areas adjacent to the forest roads and hence the sightings were less. (P.S. : Incidentally Nandaram has been designated as a guide on a tourist bus named "Dooda" in MTR).

A systematic and intensive search may yield more sightings of the bird, in the above areas. Serious attempts along the Satpuras are also required. Now we feel that Forest Owlets are not as rare as they were thought to be, at least in the above-mentioned areas. The sightings of the Spotted Owlets were less than those of the *H. blewitti* in the areas studied by RK.

#### **Predation on Roseringed Parakeet (*Psittacula krameri*) chick by Forest Owlet:**

On 1<sup>st</sup> May 2004, I (RK) located two birds on Malur-Chopan Road along with my friend Shailendra Chaudhari and we found pellets of Forest Owlets under a *Tectona grandis* tree. These pellets clearly revealed the feathers of Roseringed parakeet (*Psittacula krameri*). Another *Tectona grandis* tree nearby had an abandoned nest hole of Roseringed Parakeet. We found two primaries of Forest Owlet under the tree, indicating the skirmish the predator had with the parakeet chick, before the latter was over powered. I collected the two primaries. After returning to Amravati, we found that these two feathers did not match with the primaries of the Spotted Owlet *Athene brama*, which I had collected from dead birds found on road. I have retained all the primaries and those interested in carrying out a genetic test, may contact me.

#### **Diurnation as a conflict avoiding strategy ?**

While observing forest owlets on 14<sup>th</sup> March, 28<sup>th</sup> March,

1<sup>st</sup> May and 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2004; two pairs of spotted owlets were located in a stretch of 200 meters in which forest owlets were also encountered, but without any noticeable competition between themselves for food. By 1830 hrs, the forest owlet comes out of its day-time hidout, perches on the lower branches and actively looks for its prey. It keeps calling continuously 'shree...shree' to maintain contact with and to declare its territory to other birds. Around this time the spotted owlet becomes alert and starts preening its feathers. In another 10 minutes it starts calling 'chivivivik...chivivivik' and repeats the call every 4 to 5 minutes. Then it comes out of its diurnal roost to some open branch. And this is the most crucial time for the two owl species. On all the days, it was observed that, both species call for a few minutes only, but there is no noticeable confrontation or rivalry. And it is the forest owl which retreats to its favoured roost clearly avoiding a conflict with its sympatric cousin. By 1900 hrs, the Forest Owlet stops calling and nocturnal predators take charge of the territory.

Other owl species, viz. Eurasian Eagle Owl (*Bubo bubo*), Brown Fish Owl (*Ketupa zeylonensis*), Mottled Wood Owl (*Strix ocellata*), Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*), Collared Scops Owl (*Otus bakkamoena*), and Jungle Owlet (*Glaucidium radiatum*) were also seen or heard in the same areas frequented by the forest owlets.

Surprisingly *H. blewitti* has to compete with diurnal birds like Black Drongo (*Dicrurus macrocercus*), White-bellied Drongo (*Dicrurus caerulescens*), Long-tailed Shrike (*Lanius schach*), White-browed Fantail (*Rhipidura aureola*), Bay-backed Shrike (*Lanius vittatus*), Rufous Tree Pie (*Dendrocitta vagabunda*), Indian Roller (*Coracias benghalensis*), and probably even Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) for its food. That is because of the similarity (overlapping) of prey subjects, which includes lizards, small rodents, grasshoppers and nestlings of other birds. We have seen all these bird species (except Cattle Egret) attacking or mobbing Forest Owlets.

Forest Owlet becomes alert and keeps continuous watch on the movements of Greater Coucal (*Centropus sinensis*), Sirkeer Malkoha (*Phaenicophaeus leschnaultii*), Shikra (*Accipiter badius*) and White-eyed Buzzard (*Batastur teesa*). Smaller birds like, Chestnut-shouldered Petronia (*Petronia xanthocollis*), Indian Robin (*Saxicoloides fulicata*), Oriental Magpie Robin (*Copsychus saularis*) and Red-vented Bulbul (*Pycnonotus cafer*) create a lot of ruckus and mob the owlets.

#### **Some typical resting behaviors:**

We observed that in the months of March and May, while resting, the bird often droops its wings. We have observed similar behavior by the Spotted Owlets (*Athene brama*). Another strange phenomenon is its indulgence in joker like antics. It bobs its head many times and stares at us whenever we approach the bird. It remains asleep, but whenever it hears some noise, it opens only one eye and looks towards the source of the noise. It also flicks its tail laterally.

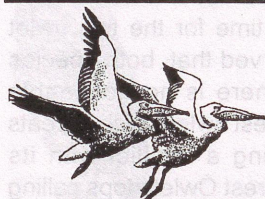
### Acknowledgments

Thanks are due to Mr. Ramanuj Choudhary, Director MTR, Mr. Kamalakar Dhamge, ACF, MTR and my Korku guide Mr. Sukhlal Kasdekar. Thanks are also due to Dr. Reuven Yosef and his Team (Israel), Dr. Satish Pande and his team, Mr. Kedar Pawgi, Mr. Shailendra Chaudhari, Mr. Sameer Deshpande, Mr. Pankaj Gogte, Mr. Satish Charthal and many local guides not mentioned in the article.

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## Checklist of Sambhar Lake Waterfowl in Inland Saline Water Ecosystem, Rajasthan, India

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### INTRODUCTION

Sambhar lake was designated as a Ramsar site in 1990. Sambhar lake (27°00 N and 75°00 E ) is approximately 60 km northwest of Jaipur, Rajasthan, India, at an altitude 365 m. The lake is classified as : Salt Lakes Saline Marshes (Inland drainage system). At full capacity, it covers an area of 7,200ha and is thus the largest inland saline lake in India.

During winter, it receives tens of thousands of waterfowl visitors, some migratory from as far north as Siberia. For such waterfowl, Sambhar Lake is one of the few habitats that ensure sustenance every year.

Baseline information is a prerequisite for planning and monitoring populations of waterfowl and their habitats.

As part of the Flamingo Research Station, Ajmer, Rajasthan, India, collects, collates and disseminates information of waterfowls and wetlands. The following checklist of Waterfowl of Sambhar Lake Ecosystem will be of great benefit in this respect.

The standard common and scientific names of the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent by Manakkadan and Pittie (2001) have been followed in this checklist. The present checklist in which Binomial Nomenclature has been followed (Manakkadan and Pittie 2001), comprise 51 species of waterfowls (Table 1). In the present checklist of waterfowls an attempt has been made to determine its status for the Sambhar Lake Ecosystem.

### RESULTS and ANALYSIS

**Residential Status:** Out of 51 species of Sambhar Lake Ecosystem's Waterfowls are 24 winter migrants and 27 residents.

**Population Status:** The population status of both residential and migratory waterfowl species were regularly monitored at Flamingo Research Station, Ajmer (Sambhar Lake Field

Research Station, Campus) are categorised as very common = V.Com.(9 species), common = Com. (40 species), Uncommon-UnCom. (1 species) and Rare= Ra (1 species) (Table 1).

Table 1. Checklist of Waterfowl of the Sambhar lake Ecosystem

Sl.	Common Name	Scientific Name	Residential/ Migratory Status	Abundance (2003)
1	2	3	4	5
	<b>Grebe</b>	<b>Podicipedidae</b>		
1.	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i> (Pallas)	R	V.Com.
	<b>Pelican</b>	<b>Pelecanidae</b>		
2.	Great White Pelican	<i>Pelecanus onocrotalus</i> (Linnaeus)	WM	Com.
	<b>Cormorants</b>	<b>Phalacrocoracidae</b>		
3.	Little Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax niger</i> (Vieillot)	R	Com.
4.	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i> (Linnaeus)	WM	Com.
	<b>Darter</b>	<b>Anhingidae</b>		
5.	Darter	<i>Anhinga melanogaster</i> (pennant)	R	Com.
	<b>Herons and Egrets</b>	<b>Ardeidae</b>		
6.	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i> (Linnaeus)	R	Com.
7.	Large Egret	<i>Casmerodius albus</i> (Linnaeus)	R	com.
8.	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i> (Linnaeus)	RV.	Com.
9.	Indian Pond Heron	<i>Ardeola grayii</i> (Sykes)	R	Com.
10.	Black Crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i> (Linnaeus)	R	Com.
11.	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i> (Linnaeus)	R	Com.

12. Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i> (Linnaeus)	R	Uncom.	35. Red Wattled Lapwing	<i>Vanellus indicus</i> (Boddaert)	RV.	Com.
<b>Storks</b>	<b>Ciconiidae</b>			36. Yellow Wattled Lapwing	<i>Vanellus malabaricus</i> (Boddaert)	R	Com.
13. Painted Stork	<i>Mycteria leucocephala</i> (Pennant)	R	Com.	<b>Sandpipers, Stints</b>	<b>Scolopacidae</b>		
14. Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i> (Linnaeus)	R	Com.	<b>Snipes, Godwits</b>			
<b>Ibises &amp; Spoonbills</b>	<b>Threskiornithidae</b>			<b>and Curlews</b>			
15. Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i> (Linnaeus)	R	Uncom.	37. Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i> (Linnaeus)	WM	Com.
16. Oriental White Ibis	<i>Threskiornis melanocephalus</i> (Latham)	R	UnCom.	38. Marsh Sandpiper	<i>Tringa stagnatilis</i> (Bechstein)	WM	Com.
17. Black Ibis	<i>Pseudibis papillosa</i> (Temminck)	R	Com.	39. Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i> (Leisler)	WM	Com.
18. Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i> (Linnaeus)	R	Com.	40. Temminck Stint	<i>Calidris temminckii</i> (Leisler)	WM	Com.
<b>Flamingos</b>	<b>Phoenicopteridae</b>			41. Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i> (Linnaeus)	WM	Com.
19. Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i> (Linnaeus)	R	Com.	42. Black Tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i> (Linnaeus)	WM	Com.
20. Lesser Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus minor</i>	R	Com.	43. Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i> (Linnaeus)	WM	Com.
<b>Geese and Ducks</b>	<b>Anatidae</b>			Avocets and Stilts	Recurvirostridae		
21. Bar headed Goose	<i>Anser indicus</i> (Latham)	WM	Com.	44. Black winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantous</i> (Linnaeus)	R	V.Com.
22. Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i> (Linnaeus)	WM	Com.	45. Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	WM	L.Com.
23. Spotbilled Duck	<i>Anas poecilorhyncha</i> (Forster)	R	V. Com.	<b>Pranticole</b>	<b>Glareolidae</b>		
24. Northern Shoveller	<i>Anas clypeata</i> (Linnaeus)	WM	V.Com.	46. Collared Pranticole	<i>Glareola pranticola</i>	WM	Ra.
25. Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i> (Linnaeus)	WM	V.Com.	<b>Gulls and Terns</b>	<b>Laridae</b>		
26. Common teal	<i>Anas crecca</i> (Linnaeus)	WM	V.Com.	47. Brown Headed Gull	<i>Larus brunnicephalus</i> (Linnaeus)	WM	Com.
<b>Cranes</b>	<b>Gruidae</b>			48. Black Headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i> (Linnaeus)	WM	Com.
27. Common crane	<i>Grus grus</i> (Linnaeus)	WM	Com.	49. River Tern	<i>Sterna aurantia</i> (Gray)	R	Com.
28. Sarus Crane	<i>Grus antigone</i> (Linnaeus)	R	Com.	50. Black-bellied Tern	<i>Sterna acuticauda</i> (Gray)	R	Com.
29. Demoiselle Crane	<i>Grus virgo</i> (Linnaeus)	WM.	Com.	51. Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybridus</i> (Pallas)	R	Com.
<b>Moorhens &amp; Coots</b>	<b>Rallidae</b>			<b>The following abbreviations are used :</b>			
30. Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i> (Linnaeus)	WM	Com.	Com.	Common	R	Resident
31. Purple Moorhen (Linnaeus)	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>	R	V.Com.	Ra.	Rare	Uncom	Uncommon
32. Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i> (Linnaeus)	WM.	V.Com.	V.Com.	Very Common	WM	Winter migrant
<b>Plovers and Lapwings</b>	<b>Charadiidae</b>			<b>Acknowledgment</b>			
33. Little ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i> (scopoli)	WM	V.Com.	We thank Dr.S.Kaul, Director, Wetland Division, Government of India, Ministry of Environment and Forests, New Delhi, for encouragement.			
34. Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i> (Linnaeus)	WM	Com.	<b>Reference</b>			
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## VULTURE WATCH

**SAVING 200 VULTURES FROM PROBABLE DEATH,**  
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Although vultures have become very rare, volunteers of Nature Club Surat observed around 200 vultures circling and beginning to land for feeding on six buffalo carcasses on 24th, April 2005 Morning. We were informed on the previous night that six buffalos had died after drinking poisonous water from an industrial unit at Hazira.

So our volunteers had reached the site early morning, about 8 vultures were seen, we decided to bury the dead buffalos instead of allowing the vultures to eat poisoned carcasses and ultimately die. In about an hour 200 vultures has gathered and we had a difficult time keeping them away from their food. Ultimately an excavator was arranged and the bodies were buried.

This was a very strange incident where we were forced to keep hungry vultures away from their food. Normally it is the dogs that keep the vultures away from their food.

In India the vulture population has declined by 90% in last decade and the main reason is found to be the dead bodies of cattle having traces of harmful veterinary drugs.



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Vulture populations across West Africa have plummeted in rural areas, on a scale comparable to the decline in South Asia. This is the alarming finding of a study in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, reported by Guy Rondeau and JeanMarc Thiollay in the September 2004 issue of *Vulture News* (51: 13-33).

The authors counted vultures along more than 7,000 km of road transects in West Africa during a four-year period in 1969-1970, and then again in 2003-2004. Populations of six vulture species in the region had all fallen, and excluding one species - hooded vulture (*Necrosyrtes monachus*), which had declined by 45% in abundance - numbers in rural areas had dropped by an average of 95%. Worst hit were African white-backed vulture (*Gyps africanus*), down by 97%, Rüppell's griffon (*G. rueppellii*) (96%), white-headed vulture (*Trigonoceps occipitalis*) (100%) and lappet-faced vulture (*Torgos tracheliotus*) (97%). Apart from small numbers in protected areas, the latter two species have essentially disappeared from West Africa. The lappet-faced vulture is already considered Vulnerable on a global scale. The study found that vultures in protected areas have fared better, with hooded vultures not decreasing significantly, but overall vultures had declined by an average of 42%.

These massive declines are unlikely to be caused by diclofenac, the drug widely blamed for the similar losses in

South Asia: initial indications are that diclofenac is not used to treat livestock in West Africa. The authors speculate that causes may include the reduced availability of carcasses as mammal numbers in the region have declined through habitat loss and over-hunting; improved veterinary practices resulting in more cattle making it to market and not dying in the bush; direct persecution of vultures for use in traditional ceremonies and medicines; and hunting of birds for food. The widespread use of pesticides could also be significant, as in the decline of raptors in Europe caused by DDT and other organochlorine pesticides during the 1940s-60s. Whatever the cause or causes, the authors conclude 'if nothing is done to address this decline, which is surprising in its scope and especially in its lack of warning, the vultures of West Africa will quickly disappear.'

(Source: *International Zoo News* Vol.52(3) p. 156. Abridged from *World Birdwatch* Vol. 27(1) March 2005)



### **POACHING OF VULTURES BY PARDHIS OF VIDARBHA.**

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I was conducting a survey among the Pardhis of Maharashtra to get information about Lesser Floricans, quails, partridges and sandgrouse and their poaching of other wild animals. My work slowly turned to understanding their dialect, listing to the names of birds in Pardhi dialect, and the precarious condition of this tribal lot. It is indeed a tragedy of our country that we still have a community which mostly depends on hunting for its survival! No sincere attempts have been made to improve the lives of this community.

In December 2001, when I was taking down names of birds in Pardhi dialect, from an 85 year old Pardhi Mr. Bhura Sonawji Solanki, (At. Sawanga village, Tq. Karanja-Lad, Distt. Washim), this fellow started crying after looking at the pictures of vultures in the bird book. He said in a choked voice "I like vultures so much, they are so tasty! Whenever there was a drought, God used to send these birds as food for our hungry kids. And in the last so many years I have not tasted a single vulture! They are all gone!" This was a shocking news to me.

After this information, I changed the topic to other birds and mammals. Then each Pardhi 'beda' or hutment I went, I started gathering information from these tribals in Amravati, Washim, Akola, Yavatmal and Wardha districts about their vulture-eating habits and the names of the vulture species in their dialect. The information and names, which I collected through this survey, can be surmised under the following titles:

#### **Study Method:**

My method of obtaining information is simple. I introduce myself as a researcher of birds and clarify that I'm not a forester and it's my hobby to study birds and jungle. (Note- Pardhis are very much afraid of foresters and police officers

as hunting is now illegal.) I show them Grimmett and Inskipp's Guide and once they open-up you get a lot of information. But I have to be wary of the mob that begins to surround me. Pardhis are involved in poaching, illicit liquor business and many remain drunk most of the time. They are also very quarrelsome, ill-tempered and start fighting over petty issues and I was lucky to have escaped getting beaten up by an irate Pardhi clan, on three different occasions.

#### Trapping of vultures:

Pardhis used simple noose traps to catch vultures. These were laid around a fresh carcass when it is being skinned. When the vultures arrived they were allowed to consume the flesh to their stomach-full. Then the vultures were frightened with some noise or by waving a piece of cloth. Now the vultures with their bellyfulls, had to run for a while before takeoff! As they run helter-skelter their feet get entangled in the noose traps laid around the carcass. The noose traps are firmly fixed to the ground with the help of chords tied to wooden pegs. The frightened vultures are chased back and forth by the Pardhis, until all the birds get entangled in the noose traps.

Then the Pardhis used to take the vultures back to their *bedas* on shoulders. The primaries of the birds were tied together with chords (made from vulture intestine) to prevent their flight; and with strings the vulture's legs were tied to one wooden pole (just like our livestock are tied). These vultures were then killed, cooked and eaten as and when required. Pardhi children often played with these vultures. Sometimes the vultures were kept alive for months as newer birds were captured and added to the group, producing a pet like situation. So these 'captive' or so called 'pet' vultures were taken to new carcasses for feeding. This sometimes created a misunderstanding among the non-Pardhis that these 'captive' vultures were used to attract more vultures from the sky! In one 'catch' 10 to 50 vultures were trapped. The hip portion (called '*dhepas*' in Pardhi dialect) is the most preferred part of the vulture anatomy. Empty vulture body was sometimes used as a decoy while hunting.

#### Names of vultures in Pardhi dialect:

The following names were collected and found to be similar throughout the study area among the tribe. There is some difference of pronunciation in different villages. They tend to use 'o' at the end of the names of most wild animals.

1. Scavenger Vulture: *Linda or Lindo*
2. White-backed Vulture: *Garad*
3. Long-billed Vulture: *Pandharo or Dholiyo*
4. King Vulture: *Raattal or Raatallyo*

#### Area of survey:

The survey was done in the five districts of Western Vidarbha. Surprisingly the information provided by a Pardhi in the remotest village of Yavatmal district matches with that of another Pardhi in any of the five districts. This establishes the fact that the knowledge about birds to the

tribe has come through the generations and it is not superficial.

#### Other observations regarding wildlife and Pardhis:

Pardhis still survive mostly on 'shikar' (hunting) of wildlife. They can consume anything from a quail to a jungle cat to a deer. They seldom eat Hyena. The common 'shikar' includes quails, partridges, sandgrouse, common peafowl, White-breasted waterhens among birds and Wild Boar, Blackbuck, Monitor Lizards, Black-naped Hare, Jungle Cat etc., among wild animals. At the onset of monsoon in Vidarbha, thousands of Monitor Lizards are hunted by Pardhis. It is a well-known fact that all these are sold openly in meat markets in Vidarbha. Even today it is not difficult to get the meat of a Blackbuck in a village, or a '*Bater-chicken*' (not '*butter-chicken*') in a restaurant.

#### Names of some Pardhi tribals interviewed :

##### Amravati district:

1. Mr. Shyamrao Bhosale (50 yrs.) At. Rajura, Tq. Amravati
2. Mr. Terling Pawar, At. Rajura, Dist. Amravati
3. Mr. Ramdoshi Tarachand Pawar (80 yrs.) At. Mogra Beda, Tq. Amravati

##### Yavatmal District:

1. Mr. Phulkathi Chouvan (85 yrs.) At. Bijora Beda, Tq. Darwha
2. Mr. Siliman Chouvan (70 yrs.) At. Ganeshpur Beda, Tq. Darwha
3. Motilal Pawar (35 yrs.) At. Banayat Tq. Darwha
4. Mrs. Shantabai Pawar (40 yrs.) At. Bijora Beda, Tq. Darwha

##### Washim District:

1. Mr. Bhura Sonawji Solanke (85 yrs.) and Mr. Srikrishna Bhura Solanke, At. Savangi, Tq. Karanja-Lad

##### Wardha District:

1. Mr. Senapati Pawar (40 yrs.) Near Collector's Bunglow, Wardha

**Akola District:** Mr. Himmat Pawar, At. Tq. Akot

#### Discussion:

Many theories are being debated about the serious decline of vulture population in India. These include shortage of food, vehicular traffic, viral epidemic, use of veterinary drug diclofenac, among others. The poaching of vultures for food among Pardhis in Maharashtra is of course a local phenomenon and might not have led to the near wiping out of the population from the study area. But it is certainly a causative factor in the decline of the vulture population in the study area.

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**RECENT RECORD OF WHITE RUMPED VULTURE *Gyps bengalensis* FROM 24 PARAGANAS DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL.** ARUNAYAN SHARMA, Centre for Ecological Engineering, Netaji Subash Road, In front of T.O.P, Malda - 732 101, West Bengal. Email: ecoeng@rediffmail.com

I was going to the Sunderbans delta by road up to Sonakhali Dockghat ( c. 96 km from Kolkata by road ) on 7th January 2005, to lead an International Expedition in search of Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Calidris pygmaeus*. While I was driving my vehicle from Kolkata on Bantala - Tiljala road, I noticed a flock of big birds roosting on a large roadside tree near the Metallica Karson Limited factory. I stopped the vehicle there at around 10:15 hours which was around c. 22 km from Kolkata. The place is Dhapa, the largest municipal solid waste dumping ground of Kolkata Municipal Corporation. The place is also famous for its leather complex near Bantala in South 24 Paraganas district, West Bengal.

I observed those birds and identified them as adult White Rumped Vultures *Gyps bengalensis*. At that moment I counted 15 White Rumped Vultures on that tree. I spent some 30 minutes looking out for more vultures in the area. A group of nine vultures was found near a carcass dumping site and another group of four was located alongside a canal. In all I recorded 28 White Rumped Vultures from that particular area.

Between 7th and 28 January 2005 I went to Sunderbans through this route many times. Whenever I got an opportunity, I stopped there and counted the White Rumped Vulture population of that particular site. On 10th January 11 individuals were recorded; six on the same tree; four from carcasses dumping site and an individual near the canal. On 15th January nine were recorded; four on the roosting tree, five at carcass dumping site, but none near the canal. On 19th January out of 22 individuals, seven were sighted on the roosting tree, 12 at the carcass dumping site and three near the canal. On 28th January altogether 17 were sighted from the area; 11 on the, four from the carcass dumping site and two alongside the canal.

After the survey, I found that particular area still holds a healthy population of the White Rumped Vultures and should be focused as a vulture watching and conservation site. However, I did not find any sick-looking vulture and none of the vultures exhibited head or neck drooping syndrome. Probably the vultures are breeding on large trees in the neighborhood. Perhaps this is the largest vulture sighting in recent times from South 24 Paraganas district, West Bengal.



**40 WHITE BACKED VULTURES DIE AT THE MAHUVA VULTURE COLONY, GUJARAT.** AMIT B. JETHAVA, President, Gir Nature Youth Club, Gujarat State, At:Khambha, Di: Amreli, Pin:365650 (Gujarat) India. Email : amitjethava@rediffmail.com

A total of 38-40 White backed vultures have been reported to have died between 18<sup>th</sup> May and 10<sup>th</sup> June 05 from Mahuva

Vulture Colony in Bhavnagar District of Gujarat. (140-142 WBVs spotted in this colony during vulture census conducted by GEER Foundation).

A few days prior to this incident there was a mass mortality of chicken in 50-60 poultry farms around this colony. Reports suggest that between 1,00,000 and 1,50,000 chicken died due to " Ranikhet", a highly infectious viral disease.

We reliably learnt that Ranikhet is an airborne viral disease. The vulture colony is situated very close to these poultry farms and the dead chicken were dumped in the open and not buried. This is the most likely reason for the death of the vultures in this area. We have requested the concerned forest and veterinary officers for a detailed investigation and hope it will be done very soon. Readers are requested to suggest measures to be taken for the protection of this colony from such viral attacks in future.

Earlier in August 2004, a sick vulture from the Mahuva Vulture Colony was taken to the Vulture Care Centre, Pinjore by a Senior Official in the presence of Chris Bowden for treatment and investigations. We learn from reliable sources that the report sent to the Forest Authority of Gujarat, confirmed the presence of Ranikhet (New Castle) virus in the sick vulture. If only this report was published in any scientific or semi scientific journal, remedial measures could have been taken to protect the vultures at the Mahuva colony. Instead, the diclofenac theory was vigorously promoted, which has resulted in the death of some 60 vultures of the Mahuva vulture colony.

I hope, all research findings on New Castle virus is made available, including preventive measures to be taken, so that the vultures can be protected from this deadly virus in future.



**OBSERVATIONS ON VULTURES IN THE DESERT NATIONAL PARK, RAJASTHAN, INDIA.** VIVEK K. PANDEY, SANJAY K. DAS, MANOJ K. PARDESHI and NARENDRA S. RATHORE, Desert Regional Station, Zoological Survey of India, Jhalamand, Pall Road, Jodhpur - 342 005

We surveyed the Desert National Park, Rajasthan, India from 30th September to 10th October, 2002 and again from 22nd March to 28th March 2004. During our first survey there was acute famine and the entire area was dry and death of domestic animals was alarming. During the second survey there was no such famine and the area was verdant with grass cover. In spite of different conditions that prevailed in the region during the two surveys, we have sighted five species of vultures in this region. The vulture species we sighted in the area were Long-billed Vulture *Gyps indicus*, Indian White-backed Vulture *Gyps bengalensis*, Egyptian or White Scavenger Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*, Griffon *Gyps fulvus* and Red-headed or King Vulture *Sarcogyps calvus*. Among our sightings, the frequency of occurrence of Long-billed Vultures was highest followed by Indian White-backed Vulture, while Redheaded or King Vulture was the

least (one to three found in the flocks of other vultures). During these surveys we had some interesting observations on vultures. In the first survey we saw most vultures near cattle or sheep carcasses, in addition to one Egyptian Vulture near a dead Monitor Lizard *Varanus bengalensis* (between Myajlar and Khyala, ca. 3 km. from Myajlar). In the second survey we located a nesting site of Indian White-backed Vulture on a Khejari (*Prosopis cineraria*) tree, between Sam and Sudasree (GPS 26°47' 55" N; 70° 31' 68" N). Further, during the second survey we observed more than forty vultures including two King Vultures bathing at Jion ki talab, near Satta village (GPS 26° 15' 69 N; 70° 27' 14 E) and more than thirty vultures including one King Vulture at a small puddle formed due to leakage of pipe, between Kuldhara and Khaba Fort, ca. 20 km from Sam (GPS 26° 49' 08 N; 70° 42' 46 E). The sightings were between 11 and 12 hrs., of the day. It was also interesting to note that only one to five vultures from the flock enter the water at a time to bathe. They bathe by dipping their bodies partially or fully in water, vigorously flip-flapp their water soaked wings and return to the flock (most times by running). Immediately on reaching the flock they bask by spreading their wings in the sun. These observations in this region and particularly the nesting of Indian White-backed Vultures, which is critically endangered (Islam & Rahmani, 2002) in Desert National Park area, is of significance.

#### Acknowledgment

We are grateful to Dr. J.R.B. Alfred, Director, Zoological Survey of India, Kolkata for providing study facilities. The financial assistance of the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Govt. of India, New Delhi under the project is also acknowledged.

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**NINETY WHITE-RUMPED VULTURES [*Gyps bengalensis*] SIGHTED AT THE NAGARHOLE NATIONAL PARK.**  
J RAMESH, Wildlife Artist and Photographer, #14/03, 11<sup>th</sup> Cross Wilson Garden, Bangalore 560 027.

I had been to the Nagarhole National Park with my wildlife photographer friends A K Raju and H L Prakash, on Sunday the 19<sup>th</sup> June 2005. It was drizzling and we did not expect to see much animal activity. As we drove along the banks of the river Kabini, at about 7. 30 a.m., we saw a herd of spotted deer about a km away to our right. We saw a couple of wild dogs approaching the deer and they began to run in our direction. We anticipated an opportunity to watch and photograph the wild dogs in action. But the deer were sufficiently ahead of the wild dogs and they crossed our path in leaps and bounds and fled to our left.

As we traveled further on, we saw a solitary stag that had got separated from the herd, running in and out of the thick bamboo clumps. We drove two kilometers further down the jeep-track before returning to the spot where we had encountered the spotted deer. As we began to scan the horizon, we saw some vultures landing at a secluded spot on the banks of the river. We left our jeep-track and proceeded towards the landing spot, where we saw the half-eaten carcass of a spotted deer. But this kill had no relation to the wild dogs chase. In all probability, a tiger had killed the deer, during the night or early in the morning. A good half of the deer's carcass had been eaten-up and some organs were scattered all along the ground.

Meanwhile, many more vultures began to land near the river bank. A K Raju took a count of the vultures. The flock comprised of 90 white-rumped vultures (*Gyps bengalensis*) and a solitary King vulture [*Sarcogyps calvus*]. We took photographs of the vultures with our telephoto lenses and waited for a couple of hours to take photographs of the vultures feeding the deer carcass. But the vultures did not oblige us. They remained in loose flocks exhibiting considerable patience. We suspected them to be ill at ease with our presence. Therefore, we retracted and positioned ourselves sufficiently away from the kill. Yet the vultures refused to proceed towards the kill and commence their meal. Hence, we left the place with much reluctance by 10.55 am.



**FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE DECLINE OF VULTURES IN THE SHIWALIKS.** PRADEEP KUMAR SHARMA, Opp. Carmel Convent School, Nahan-Shimla Road, Nahan, Distt. Sirmour Himachal Pradesh - 173 001.

#### Introduction

I was posted as the Range Forest Officer in Kandi Project at Nahan in Sirmour Dist. of Himachal Pradesh. I started collecting information regarding the availability of food for vultures in places adjoining Haryana in Shivalik area of Himachal Pradesh between 30° 26' 45" N to 30° 41' 45" N and 77° 02' 45" E to 77°29'05" E.

The white-backed and long-billed vultures used to be the most common species in the area. One could see them soaring in the sky almost every day. They could devour bigger animal carcasses within hours and maintained the environment clean. But these days their absence has resulted in foul smell of decaying cattle and wild animals. Almost everyone is aware of their dwindling population.

In lower areas close to Haryana, Egyptian Vulture was also reported in the past, but none of them are reported in the last three years. The Himalayan Griffon Vulture was also fairly common. These species are steadily declining in their population for the past few years.

The entire area was surveyed and information was collected from 15 villages located at different places. Since the major source of food for the vultures are dead cattle and wild animals, a questionnaire was prepared to find out their

method of disposal of dead cattle, frequency of sighting wild animals, approximate number of vultures in that area in the past and at present. Villagers aged fifty or above were particularly interviewed. The data was compared between the present situation and the past 10 to 20 years. Vulture nesting sites were also surveyed in the area.

### Results

- \* From the survey it is clear that there is a sharp decline in the population of the cattle over a period of 20 years. Many families, which were dependent on cattle for their livelihood have either abandoned their profession or moved to the towns in search of jobs. Those still residing in the villages have given up cattle rearing or only a handful of cattle are being reared at present.
- \* Sighting of wild animals which used to be a common event about 20 years ago, has now reduced to almost nil or very rare. Twenty years ago people used to sight wild animals almost everyday. Nowadays, though they stroll on the same path, they seldom come across any wild animal.
- \* Large number of cattle used to die due to accident or diseases, 10-20 years ago. The cattle death rate has come down drastically, mainly due to improved medical facilities, improved breeds of cattle and increase in the number of stall-fed cattle.
- \* Methods of disposal of dead cattle have also changed as there is a shift towards burying the dead cattle and the tribes involved in the skinning process have abandoned

their profession, thus limiting the availability of carcasses to the scavengers.

- \* Sighting of a vulture has reduced to once in three months or so, while it was a daily affair about 10 years ago.
- \* Killing of cattle by panthers have also reduced as compared to 20 years ago, due to the decline in panther population itself.
- \* In area under study about 70% of breeding sites of vultures have been reportedly abandoned. The biggest flock of vultures encountered during the survey was only 50 birds.

### Conclusion:

From the present survey it is obvious that there is a sharp decline in the food availability for these raptors. This has resulted in the decline of the vulture population. Decrease in cattle population coupled with significant reduction in the death rate of cattle on account of improved health facilities and rearing of improved cattle breeds, reduction in wild animal population (both herbivores and carnivores), burying of dead cattle, reduction in cattle lifting cases (by panthers), have drastically reduced the availability of food for the vultures. Therefore, non-availability of food is the most important factor contributing to the decline of the vulture population in the Shiwaliks.

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## CORRESPONDENCE

**WHITEBELLIED SEA EAGLE IN GREAT RANN OF KACHCHH, GUJARAT.** P. S. THAKKER,  
 E-mail : thakkerps@yahoo.com

I visited Great Rann of Kachchh on 5th June 2001 to collect water samples coming out from the earth as a result of 26th January 2001 Bhuj Earthquake. I visited this area earlier on 12th May 2001 to confirm the presence of sweet water in the Rann with Shri Jagdishbhai Gandhi who had come from Bombay. Earlier to this I visited the Rann area upto Old and New Sardar B.S.F. Outpost near Vighokot at the extreme Northwestern part of the Rann on 12th February 2001.

During my visit of 5th June 2001, I saw a black and white eagle having white head and underparts, at Chhappabet on the way to Narveri B.S.F. Outpost. After reaching Narveri post I referred the book of Indian birds by Salim Ali and found that the bird under observation was Whitebellied Sea Eagle which was generally encountered along the sea coast in the area South of Bombay on west coast and upto Bangladesh, Burma, Myanmar, on east coast extending upto Malaysia and Australian coasts.

After returning to Ahmedabad I referred other literature and found that there are only two records of this bird in Gujarat.

One record was by Shri Dharmakumarsinji at the mouth of Shetrunji river near Talaja in Saurashtra and another record was by Shri Harinarayan Acharya of Ahmedabad at Gobhlaj lake on February 9th, 1936. The sea coast is about 80 km away from this lake, where this eagle is normally restricted. (Salim Ali Journ. of BNHS. vol. 52, 1954-55). Sinhji has mentioned in his book - Birds of Saurashtra that he saw one bird in the mouth of Shetrunji River near Talaja in Bhavnagar District. Lavkumar Khachar (1973) has mentioned the bird as vagrant.

These records are mentioned in the Handbook of Birds of India and Pakistan by Salim Ali and Ripley (1978). Looking into the presence of birds at Gobhlaj lake, Kheda district; Talaja of Bhavnagar district in Saurashtra and to the north of Khavda in Great Rann of Kachchh in Kachchh District, I think this eagle occurs in Gujarat along the 1600 km long sea coast. But due to the limited number of birdwatchers and their limited visits to the sea coast and the Rann area, might be one of the reasons for the lack of proper records of the bird population in Gujarat. It seems that the eagle might have reached this area, as the sea water had reached upto India bridge and Punjabi bridge, due to the high tides and high velocity winds before the monsoon rains. This was for the first time that the water reached upto Chhappabet according to B.S.F. Officials.

I think this is the third sighting of this eagle in Gujarat and the first record for Kachchh worth reporting.

**REDVENTED BULBUL (*Pycnonotus cafer*) FEEDING ON DRUMSTICK LEAVES (*Moringa oleifera*) AT MALDA DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL.** ARUNAYAN SHARMA, Centre For Ecological Engineering, Netaji Subhash Road, In Front Of T.o.p, Malda – 732 101, West Bengal. Email : [ecoeng@rediffmail.com](mailto:ecoeng@rediffmail.com)

It was on 14<sup>th</sup> January 1998, I was watching birds in my garden at English Bazaar, Malda district, West Bengal. At around 09:15 hours I noticed a pair of Redvented Bulbuls (*Pycnonotus cafer*) flying towards a drumstick tree (*Moringa oleifera*) in my garden. As I followed their playful movements, I found something unusual in them. I noticed that they were actually plucking the leaves of the drumstick tree or looking for some insects or eating some caterpillar. On a close observation for around 10 minutes through a 10x50 binocular at a distance c. 20 m, I discovered that they were actually eating the tender leaves of the drumstick tree. At that time it was not known to me that they were eating the drumstick leaves as a digestive agent or it was their food item. I noted down this stray incident in my lifetime birdwatching book.

This unusual foraging behaviour of Redvented Bulbul inspired me to explore their life-style more closely. After the incident, whenever I got an opportunity I observed the Redvented Bulbul's foraging behaviour. The last observation on foraging behaviour of Redvented Bulbul was made in the month of February 2005 at Malanchapally in Malda district. This was the 43<sup>rd</sup> sighting in the last seven years that Redvented Bulbul's are actually feeding on leaves of drumstick tree. After observing Redvented Bulbul's foraging behaviour more closely I came to the conclusion that drumstick leaves are one of their favourite food items, particularly during winter season.



**SIGHTINGS OF A SPOTTED OWLET *Athene brama* CHICK WITH ERYTHRISM AT NAGPUR, MAHARASHTRA, INDIA.** NACHIKET KELKAR, Punarnava, Kelkar Bungalow, Old Ramdaspath, Nagpur - 440 010, M.S. India. E-mail : [kelnachiket@rediffmail.com](mailto:kelnachiket@rediffmail.com)

A pair of Spotted Owlets *Athene brama* has been nesting in the hollow of a large Gul Mohur *Delonix regia* tree in the Maharaj Bagh Zoo in the city of Nagpur, Maharashtra, India. I have been observing this pair every year in June, for the past three years, when their chicks just hatch and my school sessions are yet to begin.

However, I was once surprised by an unusual chick in the nest. It was smaller than its two siblings and much reddened. It continued to be so for over a week. The dates were from 23<sup>rd</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> June, 2000. The daily observations were taken at 6.00 a.m. and at about 9.30 a.m. Whenever it was possible, evening observations were also taken at about 5.30 p.m. (on 24<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> June, 2000). The chick was surely not normal and very much red-patched all over. It definitely showed conditions like erythrism. Although it did not exhibit any signs of weakness in terms of siblings competition, it was kind of backfooted by the parents and the siblings. In demanding

food from parents, the chick did not lag behind and managed to get its share of a garden lizard or insects.

By 5<sup>th</sup> August, the chicks were fledged to varied extents. The red chick did not show as much growth of feathers as compared to its siblings. But the redness had noticeably decreased. By the beginning of September, the Spotted owlets and their siblings had left the hollow of the Gul Mohur. Even the red chick was gone and I could not track it any further.

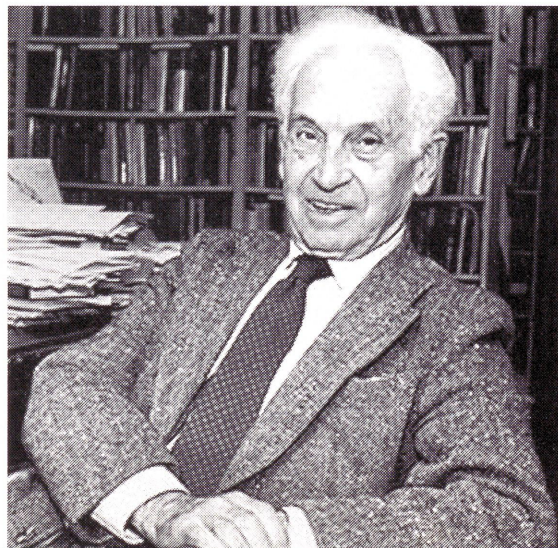
Erythrism in the spotted owlet in my opinion has not been reported as yet, as far as my reading goes. What is the fate of such abnormal chicks later? How does this abnormality affect their reproductive behaviour and success? These intriguing questions, I hope will stimulate answers.



**ERNEST MAYR FOUNDER OF MODERN SYNTHESIS OF EVOLUTIONARY THEORY, NO MORE.** N.P. DANI, Retired Scientist, CFTRI, Mysore - 570 026

Ernst Mayr, distinguished biologist, scientist and one of the leading evolutionary biologists passed away on February 3<sup>rd</sup> 2005 in Bedford, Massachusetts. He was also the most celebrated ornithologist. He worked under Prof. Erwin Stresemann, at the Berlin Museum while studying medicine. He was so fascinated by bird study that he left medical studies, and joined Prof. Stresemann to complete his Ph.D. in 1926 at Berlin University. The noted Indian Ornithologist Dr. Salim Ali too was studying under Stresemann, during Mayr's term at Berlin University.

Ernst Mayr was born at Kempten, Germany on 5<sup>th</sup> July 1904. After completing Ph.D. Mayr joined as Curator of Birds at the American Museum of Natural History in New York in 1931, where he remained for over twenty years. During this period he advanced the concept of species. The species concept had even defied Darwin. According to Mayr, species is not a fluid concept but species have an objective reality. In his book, *Systematics and the Origin of Species* (1942) he wrote that species is not a group of morphologically similar individuals but a group that can breed only among themselves excluding all others. When a group of identical individuals get isolated, the subgroups will evolve into new species by natural selection over a period of time.



He rejected reductionism in evolutionary biology. He maintained that evolutionary pressures act on the whole organism not on single genes, and that genes can have different effects depending on other genes present. It is necessary to study the whole genome, and not isolated genes. Genesis of modern evolutionary thought emerged when problem of biodiversity (Mayr, J. Huxley, Rensch) and school of population genetics advanced our understanding of evolutionary process and led to new synthesis. In 1947, this paradigm was fully acknowledged at a meeting in Princeton and accepted by most of the biologist-to date.

His main contribution to ornithology has been identifying new species of birds of New Guinea, and Solomon Islands, history of the North American bird fauna, ecological factors in specialization and over 200 articles published in scientific journals. He lived for 100 years and continued to write till his death. His most important book has been *Animal species and Evolution* (Harvard Univ. Press). Source: [http://.wikipedia/wiki/Ernst\\_Mayr](http://.wikipedia/wiki/Ernst_Mayr)



**A VAGRANT OWL AT SURENDRANAGAR, YOGENDRA SHAH, CHIKU VORA and FARUK CHAUHAN. Anand Opp. Amrutkunj Society, Jintan Road, Surendranagar - 363001. Gujarat. E-mail : vmshah55@yahoo.com**



On a routine birdwatching trip in the Surendranagar man-made mines area, between Wadhwan-Vaghela road, on 19-05-2004, at 3.00 p.m., a small owlet of the size 8-10" perched at a height of 11 feet on one of the mining area captured our attention. The owl sat there on a rocky

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surface for quite some time and then flew away. The sighting of this owl was only once, but we were fortunate enough to get a good close-up picture of the bird. On closer examination and referring to various field guides we were thrilled to identify the bird as the Eurasian scops owl. The pristine long ears of this vagrant owl were a distinguishing feature. Just next to the site we have been observing the breeding activities of the Great horned Owl. Was it that the Scops Owl had got attracted to one of its family kinds or is it possible that the mines was just a stop over place for the Scops? After some days we saw another or possibly the same Eurasian Scops Owl at Surendranagar – Muli Road.



25 Peafowl died at Palikoppa, Hubli Tq.- 8.7.05 Courtesy:Deccan Herald



Forest Owlet Survey at Malur (1-06-03) inside the Melghat Tiger Reserve (L to R) M/s. Chandrahas Kolhatkar, Raju Kasambe, Nandaram Shikari Bhusum, Satish Pande, Dr. Prashant Deshpande, and Jayant Wadkatkar

Cover: **Small Green Barbet** (*Megalaima viridis*). This immaculate bird frequents wooded areas, gardens and orchards. Early in the spring, this barbet begins with a resounding monotonous *kotur...kotur...kotur* call. It is particularly fond of the berries of peepal and banyan trees and the cherries of the Singapore tree. It supplants its diet with an occasional insect. This green carpenter, chisels out a compact nest in a partly decayed branch. Removal of such branches in the urban areas is jeopardizing the continued existence of this barbet. Photo : S. Shreyas