

# *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*

VOL. XXX

No. 7 & 8

July - August 1990





## GREATER ADJUTANTS HOLD ON IN ASSAM

Koen Brouwer, Co-chairman of the ICBP/IWRB Storks, Ibises and Spoonbills Group, reports that 72 nests of Greater Adjutant *Leptotilos dubius* were recently found by Prasanta Saikia and P. C. Bhattacharjee of Gauhati University in Assam.

*Greater Adjutant* (Photo: M. P. Kahl/Bruce Coleman Ltd)

This news is very welcome. The Greater Adjutant is one of those species that has slipped almost to extinction without ever being listed as at risk until identified as such in ICBP's *Birds to watch* in 1988. Assam is evidently its last stronghold (see *World Birdwatch* 11,1: 1), but the situation there is far from optimistic (see next item).

## MENACE TO MANAS

Among the 300-odd wildlife sanctuaries and national parks in India, the 2,837 km<sup>2</sup> Manas Tiger Reserve in Assam is one of the largest and until now the best protected, writes *Asad Rahmani*. When combined with the wildlife sanctuary across the border in Bhutan, Manas protects some 4,000 km<sup>2</sup> of alluvial grasslands and moist mixed deciduous and tropical semi-evergreen forest. A core 391 km<sup>2</sup> of this reserve in Assam forms Manas Wildlife Sanctuary, 45% of which is grassland home to some of the rarest Indian birds such as Black-necked Stork *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus*, Bengal Florican *Houbaropsis bengalensis*, Swamp Partridge *Francolinus gularis* and Finn's Baya *Ploceus megarhynchus*. Some 20% of the florican's world population occurs in

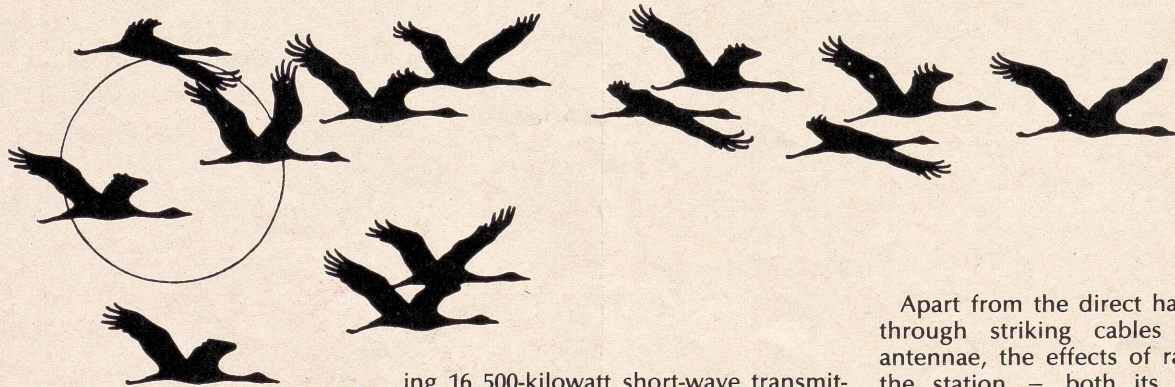
Manas. Several highly threatened mammals also make their last stand in the reserve.

Despite its additional status as World Heritage Site and Biosphere Reserve, Manas is under severe threat owing to a recent tribal insurgency. The region's Bodo people are demanding a separate state and since February 1989 Bodo guerrillas have occupied Manas's thick forests and driven out all forest guards. Poaching has become common, the worst sufferers being rhinoceros, elephants, tigers and deer, and timber smuggling is now rampant. BNHS and WWF-India have lobbied the government for intervention, but to no avail. If nothing is done, Manas will soon be lost as one of the world's great wildlife areas.



*Swamp Partridge* (Painting: N. Arlott)

Drawing: N. Arlott



## VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

U.S. taxpayers will give \$300 million for the construction of a giant Voice of America radio station in Israel's Negev Desert, unless conservationists make their own voices heard soon.

The station, intended to broadcast to the central and Asiatic republics of the Soviet Union, will be one of the largest and most powerful in the world, includ-

ing 16 500-kilowatt short-wave transmitters, 22-24 antenna towers 140-200 m high, 47 curtain antennae and a maze of guy wires and cables, all housed on an 8 km<sup>2</sup> site in the central Arava Valley, 30 km south of the Dead Sea; and as environmentalists from SPNI point out, it is directly in the line of the major eastern Mediterranean bird migration route.

Apart from the direct hazard to birds through striking cables and curtain antennae, the effects of radiation from the station – both its heat and its capacity to disorient – remain a source of serious alarm. Millions of birds use the Rift Valley each spring and fall, and especially for the larger species – the raptors and storks – this project could prove fatal. ICBP has written to the Israeli government to object to this enterprise whose expense, for birds, may be no less massive than that for the U.S. taxpayer.



Newsletter for Birdwatchers 1990

Name:

Address:

State:

Pin Code:

Always Mention !

Dear Member,

Please send your contribution towards meeting the publication cost of the Newsletter for Birdwatchers for the calendar year 1990. Any amount above Rs.20/- is welcome. Add Rs 5/- for out station cheque and mail to;

**Newsletter for Birdwatchers**

C/o. Navbharath Enterprises,  
No. 10, Sirur Park 'B' Street, Seshadripuram,  
Bangalore 560 020. India.

You are welcome to enrol your friends as members of this Newsletter.

Editor



Newsletter for Birdwatchers 1990

Name:

Address:

State:

Pin Code:

Always Mention !

## CONTENTS

## Editorial

- Common names of Birds in English
- An explosion of Shikras
- The Scavenger Vulture, a tool using bird
- Movements of House Martins *Delichon urbica*
- Information requested on Rufous-bellied Eagle, Bazas, Shaheen Falcons and other raptors
- Books and Journals available

## Articles

- Discovery of Greater Adjutant Stork nesting colonies in Assam, by Prasanta Saikia and P.C. Bhattacharjee
- The Nesting Behaviour of Yellow Throated Sparrow, by M.K. Misra IFS
- Encounters with Himalayan Snowcocks, by Paresh Karmarkar

## Correspondence

- Crested Goshawk identified, by Robert P. Sikora
- Shortwings and Grosbeaks in Mandakini Valley, by Dhananjai Mohan IFS
- Birds of Petuparai, by Arthur Steele
- Midnight feeding by Black Drongo, by P.O. Nameer
- Chinese Goshawk in Bandhavgarh National Park, by Asad Rahmani
- Comments on Ashy Minivets, and on Cormorants in Thekkady, by V. Santharam

## EDITORIAL

## Common Names of Birds in English

Continuing the argument about the permissibility of using only small letters and avoiding capitals in bird names, I am still not convinced that capitals must be employed. There may occasionally be a doubt about which species is meant, and this point has been well explained by P T Thomas. He says: "If, in writing, one were to refer to a shrike as a grey shrike, to a kite as a black kite, or to a sibia (seemingly objectively) as a beautiful sibia, what is the ordinary reader to make of it? He would think the writer was referring to a shrike that looked grey in colour, more or less, or to a kite that looked black....." I agree but the fact

that the scientific name leaves no ambiguity and the English name can be written in a variety of ways, should leave some discretion with the writer without causing confusion. However, the argument can continue and meanwhile here is a comment from F.M. Gauntlett, 55 Larkfield Avenue, Harrow, Middx, HA 3 BNQ U.K., which further weakens the Editor's point of view.

"Regarding your "Spelling" problem in Newsletter XXX 3 & 4, I suggest the first matter to resolve is to agree to a standard English name in the first place before tackling the niceties of the spelling (The scientific names, a Latin-Greek hotch-potch are not standardised because they keep changing to reflect taxonomic opinion). In my experience it has become the universal convention to write English species names with upper case initial letters eg Red-vented Bulbul, Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler, but group names eg bulbuls, babblers, with a lower case initial. Hyphenating double adjectives as here, is more debatable but all recent additions to my library follow that convention on capitals, hyphens, etc. which set a useful precedent. By using capitals and hyphens you would be in the mainstream of ornithology". Let us leave it at that for the time being.

## An Explosion of Shikras

From time to time one sees a greater congregation of birds in a small area than one would have thought existed in a wide region. I recall the sight of hundreds of kites in a poultry farm in Bangalore where dead birds were being disposed of. But Nazir Latif, 8-2-675, Road 13, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500 034, writes: "For the last couple of months or so, at a guess I'd say since April, there has been a huge increase in the population of Shikras. Previously, one saw the odd one hovering in the sky, looking for prey, and very occasionally you'd see one sitting on a tree particularly around areas, where caged birds or our chicken farm was. This year, however, the Shikras have multiplied several times. There is hardly any time of the day when you can't see at least a couple of pairs chasing each other". Some comments on this situation would be welcome.

## The Scavenger Vulture, a Tool using Bird

It is said that in Africa these Vultures carry stones in their beaks and drop them on the eggs of Ostriches to break them and eat the contents. Peter Jackson suggested that we carry out an experiment in India with our Neophrons. I wrote to J C Daniel of the BNHS, and his reply is "We do not have birds laying eggs the size of Ostrich eggs, and the only ground nesting bird having a large sized egg is the bustard. Asad Rahmani says the female bustard will not leave the nest if a Neophron is around though it will do so in the case of other vultures".

### Movements of House Martins *Delichon urbica*

L.H. Hill, 64 North Parade, Grantham, Lincolnshire NG31 8AN U.K. used to be Manager of Bolani Ores Ltd. in Keonjir, Orissa and readers will remember his interesting notes from that area. He is a keen bird ringer and writes: "My big project this year ringing-wise is on House Martins. I have been ringing 50 each year at one colony, and another 100 or so at colonies in nearby villages. I see from my literature that they do winter in India. Do you ever see them? If so when, where, and in what numbers? Do you see them roosting on telephone wires or reed beds. Perhaps you could spread the word in the Newsletter asking people to report on sightings. It is amazing how little is known about them in their winter quarters Africa and India.

We know that the W. European birds go to Africa but very few have been recovered south of the Sahara. The British Trust for Ornithology sent me a complete print-out of all recoveries to date, and I plotted the foreign recoveries and the birds ringed abroad that have been recovered in the U.K. on a map. I enclose a copy.

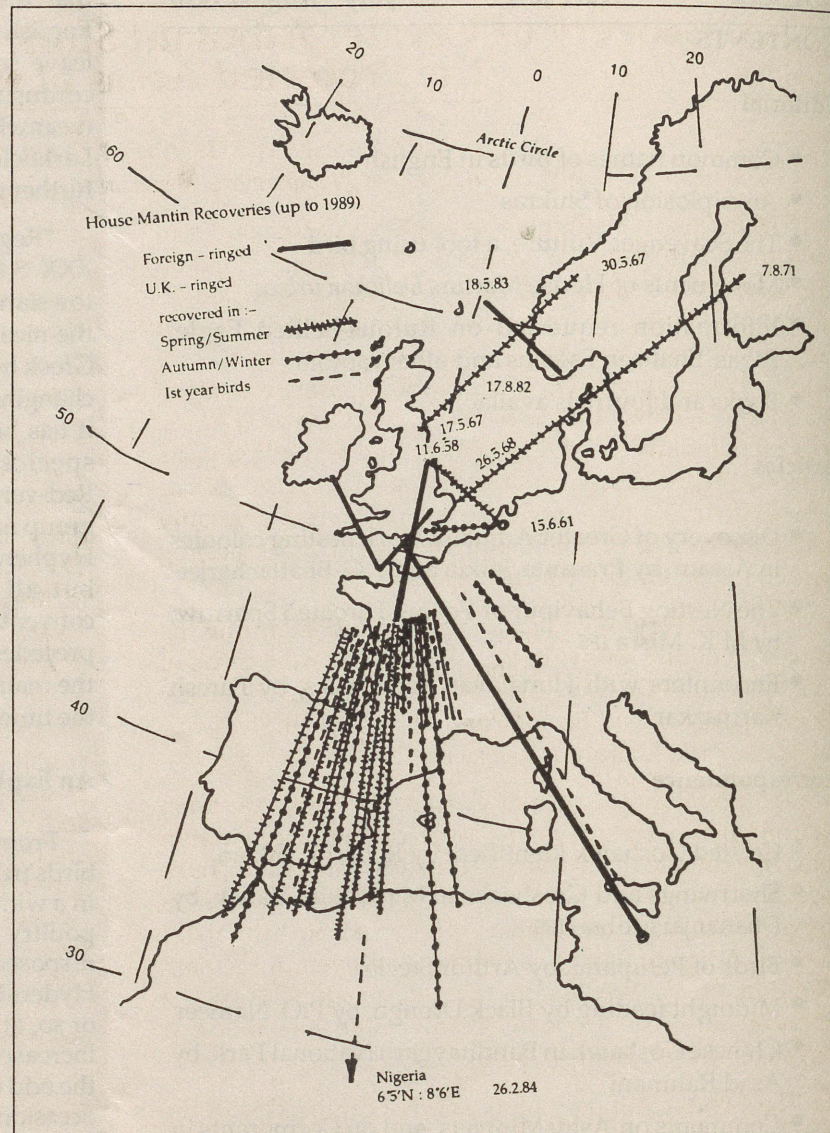
There is a theory, to which I tend to subscribe, that during the winter months, while they are in Africa, they tend to stay high up in the stratosphere, eating and sleeping on the wing like our European Swift *Apus apus*. As far as I can make out, and having read many books including R.E. Moreau's "The Palaearctic - African Bird Migration System", they are not commonly seen in Africa, and no one has seen them roosting on telephone wires, fences, reed beds, etc. In the Years I spent in Uganda and Zambia I never saw one at all. Swallows *Hirundo rustica* and Sand Martins were common sight during the European winter months.

Here, where they breed in considerable numbers, House Martins are a common sight on telephone wires near their colonies specially just prior to migrating south in the autumn - but no one sees them perched thus in Africa. I have written to my "spies" in Zambia, South Africa and Lesotto to get them to make enquiries. So far no replies.

So it would be very good if you could ask your wide-spread readers of the Newsletter to keep their eyes peeled for *Delichon urbica* during the months of October-March, and report any sightings with details (date, place, weather, numbers, what they were doing, etc.)

They are due to arrive back here at any moment and I am awaiting their coming with much impatience".

Let us keep our eyes open for House Martins.



### Information requested on Rufous-bellied Eagle, Bazas, Shaheen Falcons and other raptors

Rishad Naoroji writes: "Could you please send out an appeal to birdwatchers for nest information on these species... May be some talented youngsters could even accompany me on the survey. I shall arrange for all their expenses to be paid.... All correspondence to be addressed to Rishad Naoroji, Godrej Bhavan, Home Street, Bombay 400 001 (Tel 2048371, 8119588).

### Books and Journals Available

A wide choice of Nature Books, mainly on birds, and sparingly used and back numbers of "Journal of the BNHS" and "Hornbill" offered for sale. Contact : P.T. Thomas, 500 CMH Road, 1st Stage Indiranagar, Bangalore 560 038 (Tel:540384)

## Discovery of Greater Adjutant Stork Nesting Colonies Outside the Protected Areas of Assam, India

PRASANTA SAIKIA and P.C. BHATTACHARJEE

*Animal Ecology & Wildlife Biology Laboratory, Department of Zoology, Guwahati University, 781 014, Assam*

The Indian sub-continent has eight species of storks, of which six species breed in Assam. The Indian Adjutant Stork *Leptoptilos dubius* and *Leptoptilos javanicus*, which are distributed only in South-East Asian countries, breed sporadically and regularly in India respectively (Ali and Ripley 1983; Baker 1929). In India the breeding records of Greater Adjutant Stork were only from Uttar Pradesh, Bengal (Sundarbans) and Orissa, around a hundred years ago. During the seventies of this century, the records of one live nest in Kaziranga National park, was the only authentic record of the Greater Adjutant Stork nesting within Indian limits (Kahl 1970).

The discovery of 75 live nests of *L. dubius*, during the course of a long study, in the unprotected rural areas of Assam is noteworthy. This was first reported in the Seminar on Wetland Ecology and Management, Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur, February 23-25, 1990.

The population of Greater Adjutant Storks declined alarmingly in recent years. Most of the large known breeding colonies from Burma, Vietnam, Bangladesh, have been destroyed and only a few individuals are reported in recent years from those areas. The breeding habitats of Greater Adjutant Storks have been destroyed in Vietnam (Coulter et al, 1990), and the drastic decline of the population from their original range has made it endangered worldwide (Luthin 1987).

The Greater Adjutant Stork is often confused with the Lesser Adjutant Stork by the casual observer and their reporting may often be misleading. This is because the neck-pouch of the Greater Adjutant Stork is not always apparent. The habitat, foraging technique, flock size, are also the key factors for distinguishing the two adjutant storks. Although the Greater Adjutant Stork breeds later, compared to the Lesser Adjutant, the young ones leave the nests at the same time, adding to the confusion.

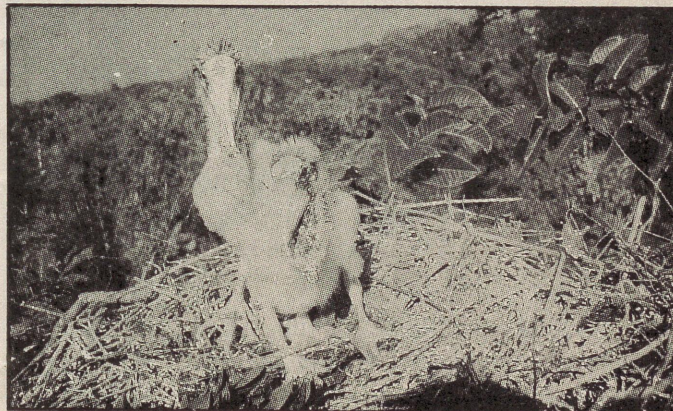
In Assam, the local names of the bird varies greatly even in the different districts. In eastern Assam, from Nowgang to Dibrugarh, it is known as "Hargila" (Bone-swallower), and "Bartokala" (Bald-headed). Bortakla in Assam, is itself a saying which points towards some village headman or chief, who without doing any job himself, extracts work or money from others. This characteristic is similar to the

prey-robbing behaviour of the Greater Adjutant Stork, hence the name. This is a derogatory word in general. In Borpeta district it is called "Hadong", whereas in Nalbari district and Rangia of Kamrup district, it is known as "Hargilla" and "Haramtukula" indicating that it is not for consumption by Muslims.

On November 11, 1989 the first live nest was traced by the side of A.T. Road in a place between Guwahati and Borpeta. Four live nests with chicks, three in each, of 2 to 3 days old, were found in a single simul tree *Bombax ceiba*. This is the first record of nests outside the protected areas in Assam. In the survey, in the same area, as many as 36 live nests were discovered. The second colony of nests was discovered in Nowgang district on 14th November 1989, with two sub-colonies, near Nowgang town at North-Hoibargaon (25 nests) and Kharampatty colony (4 nests). Both the areas are within the jurisdiction of the Municipal Corporation and in unprotected Government and private lands. The other two nesting colonies were traced in the Kamrup and Borpeta districts on 10.12.89 and 2.1.90. These nesting colonies were much smaller than the others. Altogether 75 live nests were located in the last breeding season, and the ICBP/IWRB specialist group on Storks, Ibis and Spoonbills has been informed.

### Acknowledgment

The authors are grateful to CSIR, Govt. of India, for financial support, and to the villagers who helped us in various ways during the survey. Thanks are due to Dr. Malcolm Coulter, Chairman SIS group of ICBP/IWRB, for his continuous encouragement.



*Nest of Adjutant Stork*

## OBSERVATIONS ON THE NESTING BEHAVIOUR OF YELLOW THROATED SPARROW

*M.K. MISRA IFS, Dy. Conservator of Forests, Institute of Deciduous Forests, Mandla Road, Jabalpur, M.P.*

### Introduction

"The Indian Yellow-throated sparrow *Petronia xanthocollis*, is a common resident and a marked local migrant of the Indian peninsula. It affects open dry deciduous forest and thorn jungle, groves, hedges and trees near villages and cultivated areas. It collects in flocks which break for breeding in February-March and reform after May-June. The nest is a loose pad of hair, feathers and grass placed in holes usually between one and six metres above the ground." (Ali and Ripley, 1983). This note describes the nesting behaviour and nest of a pair of Yellow-throated Sparrows observed over a period of 50 days in March-April 1988, within the campus of Central Forest Rangers College at Chandrapur in Maharashtra (19°58'N and 79°18'E, 193m AMS) in India.

### Observations

Observations were made regularly between 0630 to 0830 hrs, and also as and when time permitted.

- 4-3-88 to 7-3-88 A pair of sparrows was seen sitting on a 5.48m tall and 5cm wide, erect C.I. pipe. While the male (M) sat on the nearby electric wire and chirped, the female (F) was seen engaged in building the nest with dried grass stalks.
- 8-3-88 Female (F) brought only feathers 4 times approximately from 100m. Male (M) did not take part in nest building; seen to inspect nest twice. It rained heavily from 1415 to 1435 hrs.
- 9-3-88 Female (F) brought feathers approximately once every 20 min.
- 9/10-3-88 Mounting was seen on an elevated perch five times.
- 11-3-88 Mounting was seen.
- 12/13-3-88 No mounting was seen. But the nest was defended aggressively once from an Indian Myna, and another time from a pair of House Sparrows.
- 15-3-88 to 22-3-88 Each morning every time the female (F) entered the pipe, it remained within for 7-10 min. possibly incubating. Male (M), as in nest

building, took no part in incubation. Policed around and occasionally peeped into the pipe.

- 23-3-88 Average time spent on each visit by the female (F) within the pipe, possibly incubating, was 7 min.
- 30-3-88 Female (F) incubation averaged five minutes.
- 31-3-88 & 1-4-88 Birds were not seen.
- 2-4-88 A pair was seen in the nearby field unmindful of the nest.
- 3-4-88 The pair was not seen.
- 4-4-88 Male (M) was seen on the electric wire. Female (F) emerged out of the pipe after 10 min.
- 5-4-88 & 6-4-88 Female (F) was seen entering and coming out of the pipe. Male (M) sat on the electric wire, and chirped.
- 7-4-88 Female (F) brought feathers and rubbish.
- 8-4-88 Dust storm and rain. Next five days female (F) was seen bringing and depositing feathers.
- 14-4-88 Using a ladder placed against a similar pole erected for the purpose, and a torch, the nest was inspected and four eggs were seen.
- 15-4-88 Female (F) was seen depositing feathers in the other similar pipe which was placed nearby by the observer. The pipe was immediately removed.
- 16-4-88 Female (F) brought feathers. The nest was defended from a pair of House sparrows by the pair. Heavy rain towards evening.
- 17-4-88 The male (M) chased a pair of Brahminy Mynas. Sky overcast but no rain. F not seen.
- 18-4-88 Male (M) sat on the rim of pipe and looked inside but did not enter. On inspection at 1300hrs. on 20-4-88, nest was found intact but empty.
- 22-4-88 The pipe was taken down and the next was investigated and photographed.

### Sequence of Events

Based on observations as above, and on the general behaviour pattern of the sub-family *passerinae*, the sequence of events can be presumed to be as follows :

Towards the end of February, or start of March 1988, a male Yellow throated sparrow, appropriated a nesting hole and a willing mate. The female started building the nest, collecting and stuffing predominantly dried grass stalks into the nest pipe initially, and later ferrying and depositing mainly feathers, the male being a very vocal witness, and a protector throughout.

With the nest once built, in spite of attacks by other species like the mynas and sparrows, and sudden weather variations, the nesting birds mated and the female began to incubate. A sudden break in breeding activity was brought about, in all probability by the 'loss' of the clutch. Consequently, they mated again, with the female laying and incubating a clutch of 4 eggs, as well as reinforcing the nest. Again the eggs were presumably predated. As a result, first the female, and then the male 'renounced' the nest altogether.

Thus on the basis of the above sequence of events, the entire observation period can be divided into two distinct phases of activity—first from 4-3-88 to 30-3-88, and the second from 31-3-88 to 20-4-88, with each phase further sub-divided into the nesting, mating and incubating phases.

### Details of the Nest

The nest was a shallow cup with a diameter of 5cm and the entire nest column, largely of grass and some feathers was 45cm (18") long, and the depth of nest cup from the pipe rim was 24 cm. The nest was strongly secured with pipe interiors suggesting that the bird had used its saliva as a fixing agent. When the nest was dissected, it was found that the entire column of 45 cm could be broadly divided

into 12 cm of predominantly feather portion and 33 cm of predominantly dried grass stalks. Even these two divisions had distinct layers, three in feather column, each about 4 cm thick separate from one another by a piece of polythene and forming one compact closely packed mass and four in grass stalk column.

### Energy cost of Building

Many passerine birds make over a thousand trips in constructing their nest (Collias and Collias 1984). Naturally nest construction is an energy consuming exercise. The female Yellow throated sparrow utilised 347 feathers to build up the feathery column of the nest, bringing them from an average distance of 100 metres. Assuming a feather per trip the bird travelled  $347 \times 200 = 69.4$  km to collect them for the nest, the energy cost of feather collection would be:-

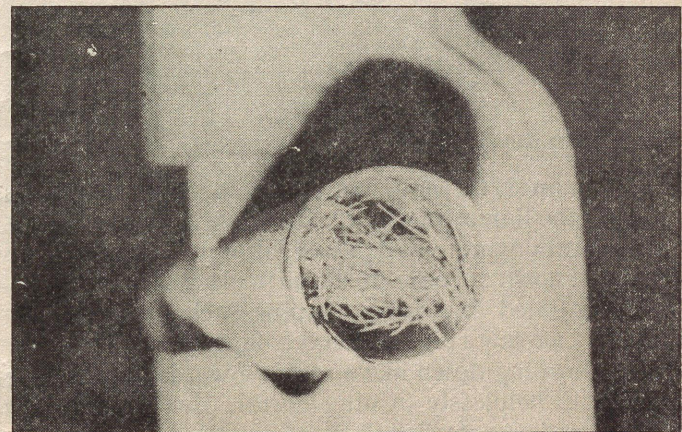
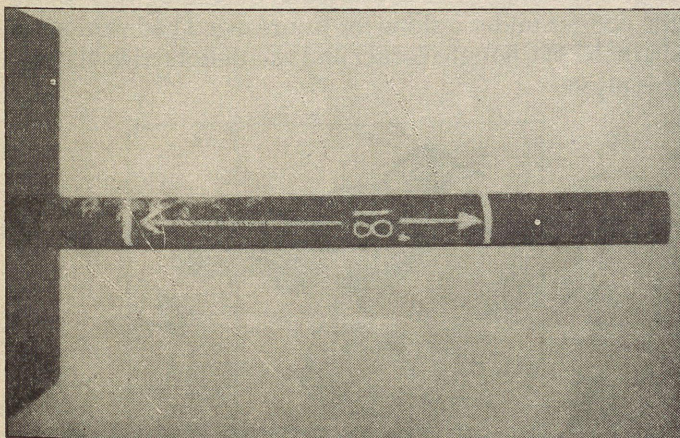
$$2 \times 2.9 \text{ kcal/kg/km} \times .018 \text{ kg} \times 69.4 \text{ km} = 7.2 \text{ kcal.}$$

### Related Observations

The male took no part either in nest building or in brooding. However, alone or with the female, it defended the nest. Three species, namely Brahminy and Indian Mynas and House sparrow, were observed to agonise the nesting pair. The clutch size was four. It was also observed that during the mid-hours of the day, the bird itself did not incubate but made good use of the heat of the sun, a behaviour also reported in Australian grass finches (Collias and Collias 1984).

### Acknowledgment

I am grateful to Dr. A.J.T. John Singh, Joint Director, Wildlife Institute of India, Dehra Dun, for valuable suggestions.



## ENCOUNTERS WITH THE HIMALAYAN SNOWCOCK

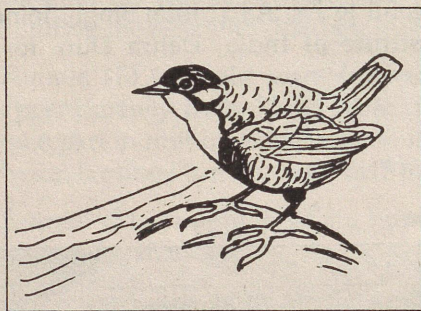
PARESH KARMAKAR, 20 Ganesh Prasad, Kirloskar Colony, Mahalakshmpuram, Bangalore 560 086

I was thrilled on my selection to partake in the expedition to the Himalayas organised by the Directorate General of N.C.C., New Delhi. After four days of travel by bus from Delhi via Raiwala and Dehra Dun, we moved in to Harsil, our Base Camp, on 20th May 1990. For four more days we practised to climb the mountain Bhaironghatti to acclimatize ourselves to the weather conditions. The landscape was suffocatingly lush, against the spectacular backdrop of snow capped mountains.

### Watching the dipper

On the 20th I spent the entire afternoon seated by a stream, admiring the White Breasted Dipper *Cinclus cinclus* at work. This chubby, short tailed bird, was jumping from rock to rock beside the rapid rocky mountain stream and deftly plunging itself under the water in search of aquatic insects like the whip scorpion, unmindful of the torrential force of the water.

On 26th May, we trekked towards Gangotri and after offering our prayers at the temple of goddess Ganga, we proceeded towards Bhujabasa, 14 km away, and were astounded by the picturesque scenery, clothed on all the sides with bhoja trees. But the steady climb along the mule track, among nature's dangerous route, against the steep rock face, barely cut in some places, was exasperating. One wrong step and the defaulter would tumble down over 600 feet into the ice cold waters of the river Bhagirathi.

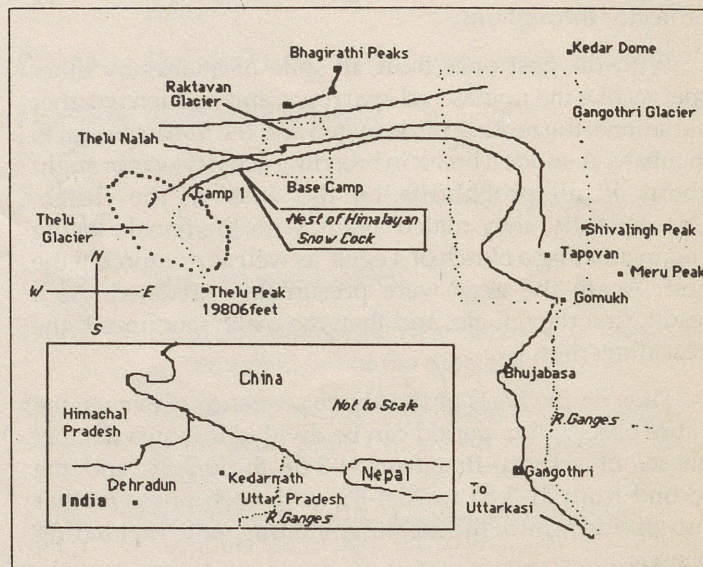


The Dipper

### Tragedy in the Alpine

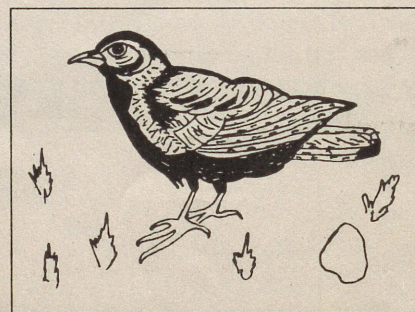
Early on 27th May, we continued our adventure towards the Raktavan glacier. The route to Raktavan was even more dangerous as it passed through a shaky rock fall zone, just north of Fomukh, the birth place of river Ganga. We negotiated this zone creeping inch by inch, then suddenly we saw a big boulder breaking loose with savage power, hurtling down like a rocket towards us. All of us looked up helplessly in utter horror. Then the boulder dashed against a small rock ahead of us and bounced over

our heads miraculously sparing us, but not before tragically crushing Mr. Bhadur Singh, the Sharpa porter to death. This macabre event rattled our nerves but we decided to continue with the expedition. After six hours of crawling on all fours, and a backbreaking climb we reached our Base Camp (14,300 feet)!



### The Chough's Cache

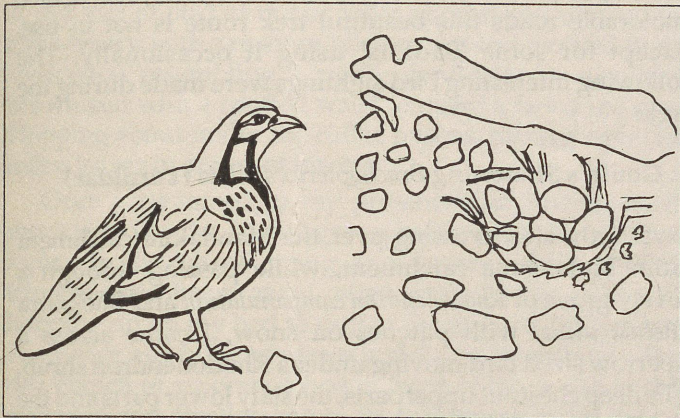
At Camp I, we were greeted by the harsh calls of the Yellow-billed Chough *Pyrrhocorax graculus* and I had the pleasure of the company of a particular bird. This active slim glossy black bird with bright red legs and bright yellow beak accepted titbits offered by me with a delightful chuckle. One day I offered three large chunks of poorie, and the Chough accepted them one by one, and took them to a particular spot. I followed the movements of the bird, and curiously enough, I discovered that the Chough had stored the poories under a stone for future use. I had read about this habit of Choughs earlier and was delighted to discover this myself.



The Chough

### Encounter with the Snowcock

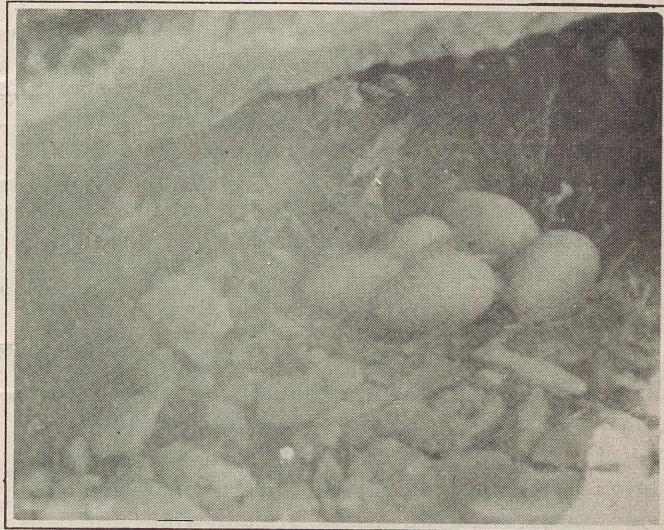
The sight of flower strewn meadows, and gem like lakes, amidst sun silvered streams helped us to forget the tedium. We went on to pitch our tents near a crystal clear water source. Later in the night we had a glimpse of the wonderful Snow Fox that had followed us to the camp in anticipation of some left over food. The Snow Fox's curious look and the gleam in its eyes against the torch light is fresh in my memory. Early next day we had a chance meeting with the magnificent Ibex at close quarters.



*The Himalayan Snow Cock*

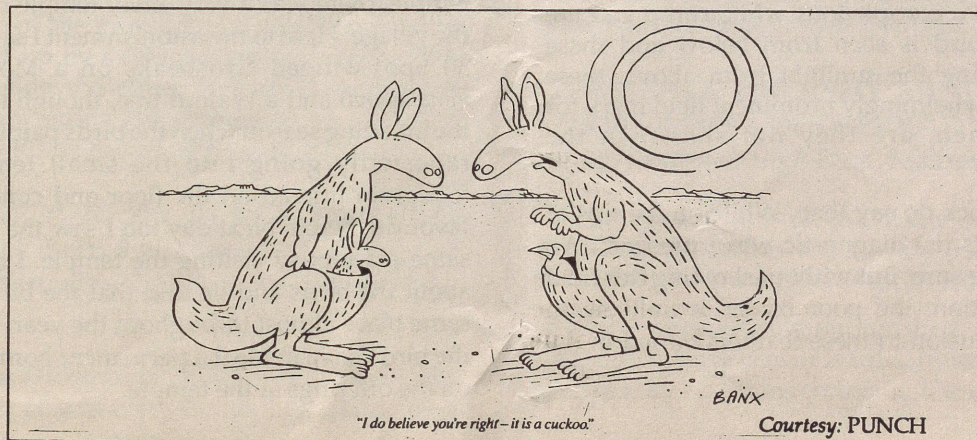
My vigil was interrupted by the penetrating Chuck...chukor... call of the bird my ears longed to hear; the spectacular Himalayan Snowcock *Tetraogallus himalayensis* announced its presence thus and it took off with a few initial wing beats followed by an extended glide towards another rock face, uttering its delightful calls. The bird popularly known as the Ram-Chukor is grey in colour from head to chest and has a brownish necklace, with dark-grey underparts. I could also see its white wing tips when the bird made flights like geese from one ridge to the other. I also watched them feeding quietly on the ground, with sparse growth of Juniper and smaller plants. Often I saw individual Snowcocks foraging around steep rock faces.

Whenever I tried to approach a Snowcock for a close look, the bird used to run like a duck, moving its tail up and down and showing its white under parts like a moorhen. On the 29th morning I was busy watching the birds and I saw a particular Snowcock going to the same spot near a rock more than once. I proceeded to inspect the ground and after a careful search, I was overjoyed to find the nest of a Snowcock, well concealed under a rock. The nest was a crude affair, with a sparse lining of juniper twigs and 3 or 4 feathers strewn in the middle to cushion the eggs. The eggs were slightly larger than the domestic hen's egg and the colour was greyish white with fine powdered brown spots. I continued my observations of the nest from 29th onwards.



*The Nest of The Snow Cock*

Later on, on our way back on 3.6.90 I went to inspect the nest of the Snowcock, and held my breath as I peeped in to the chamber, and was again happy to see the nest intact with the eggs. As I turned around, the call of the Himalayan Snowcock reverberated through the mountains. But I had to leave the mountains with a heavy heart on 4th June.



## CORRESPONDENCE

**CRESTED GOSHAWK IDENTIFIED** *Robert Sikora, 1911 Buena Vista Avenue, Alameda CA 94501, USA*

With reference to Andrew Robertson's mystery raptor (Birds of Kerala in Vol. XXX, Nos. 5&6, pp.1-2), the bird is a Crested Goshawk, *Accipiter trivirgatus*.

I had been baffled by this bird for a month as the conspicuously white rump and the 'puff balls' at either side of the base of the tail which often appear in flight (beautifully shown in Andrews photo from Naraikkadu) seemed to exclude it from anything shown in Ali and Ripley or King and Dickinson.

Then on 24 April 1990 a raptor landed and perched on a Sego Palm not far from our house from 0700 until 0826. I often find raptors very difficult to identify so an opportunity like that was not to be missed. I got out the old spotting scope and the above references. Under these ideal conditions it was not difficult to ascertain that I was looking at a Crested Goshawk. During the hour and a half that he was perched he preened, looked around and was indifferent towards (half-hearted) mobbings by an Indian Tree Pie (several times while the Pie's mate (?) perched some distance away in a tree and looked on), by two Black Drongos and by a Red Whiskered Bulbul. The Goshawk's behaviour gave one the impression that its stomach was recently filled.

Near the end of its stay the Goshawk was preening and inserted his bill into the upper tail coverts where the pygial gland is located. As it did this two brilliant white 'puff balls' popped out on either side of the base of the tail. The mystery was solved.

Shortly after the bird left its perch, flew in a few tight, steeply climbing circles and was gone, but not before it puffed out its upper tail coverts several times as well as performed the stereotyped 'hovering' or more like a shuddering behaviour with the wings in a negative dihedral as indicated in Robertson's drawing.

Now comes a second mystery. Since the upper tail coverts give the bird a conspicuous white rump and are brilliant when the bird is seen from below and these feathers are diffracting the sunlight from above, these feathers are the overwhelmingly prominent field mark for this bird. Why, then, are they not shown in the identification guides?

King and Woodcock do say that "White on the tips of the upper tail coverts (is) diagnostic when present". An understatement, to be sure. But without showing this field mark in the illustration, the poor birder is unlikely to stumble upon the allusion to these feathers buried in the written description.

As is often the case, when one mystery is solved, another takes its place.

**SHORTWINGS AND GROSBEAKS IN MANDAKINI VALLEY** *Dhananjai Mohan IFS. 28, Trevor Road, PO New Forest, Dehra Dun 248006*

In the last week of May I was trekking on the traditional Gangotri-Kedarnath trek link. The route was very much in use till the road network in Garhwal Himalayas was not developed properly. Now as most of the valleys have nice motorable roads this beautiful trek route is not in use, except for some 'Sadhus' using it occasionally. The following interesting bird sightings were made during the trek:

**1. Gould's Shortwing** *Brachypteryx stellata* (Turnidae)

Shortly after crossing over the Mandakini catchment from Bhilangana catchment, while passing through a lovely grove of *Rhododendron campanulatum* and Bhojpatra (*Betula utilis*) with patches on snow, I came across a Sparrow sized bird moving under a *Rhododendron* shrub. The deep chestnut upperparts, the slaty lower parts and the small white spots on the belly helped in quick identification of the Gould's Shortwing. The legs were proportionately longer. The altitude was approximately 3500 metres. The bird wasn't particularly shy and though it changed its position frequently through the shrubbery, it remained fairly close to me for a couple of minutes.

Later referring to the Handbook I was surprised to see that the bird has never been recorded west of Kumaon. So the sighting confirms the extension of its distribution westwards to the Chamoli district of Garhwal.

**2. Spot-winged Grosbeak** *Coccothraustes melanozanthos*

At Triyuginarayan, the well known Hindu shrine in the Mandakini valley, I made a night halt. Besides the main temple, there was a very small temple on the outskirts of the village. Here to my astonishment I saw a flock of nearly 30 Spot-winged Grosbeaks on a Moru Dak (*Quercus himalayana*) and a Walnut tree, though it was the heart of the breeding season when the birds pair up. The birds were repeatedly going into the small temple picking up foodgrain littered on the floor and coming back to their favourite perch. Next day too I saw the birds again at the same place busy visiting the temple. I asked a local man about the birds and he said that the birds are seen at the same place almost throughout the year. So I presume that the birds have made it a permanent home and are thriving on the offerings at the temple.

## BIRDS OF PETUPARAI, KODAIKANAL. Arthur Steele

Coming to live on a small coffee estate in the Palanis has given me an opportunity to observe the habits and antics of the avifauna, both resident and migrant. The estate is situated about 20 km from Kodaikanal and is at an elevation of about 4000 ft. The general area consists mostly of coffee plantations, grasslands and a few small patches of Shola.

Among the many resident birds is the Spotted Babbler. A shy sort of bird of rather sober appearance, dressed in olive brown with a rusty reddish crown and mottled front somewhat resembling a portly gentleman in an olive brown suit with a spotted waist coat and a faded red cap. Hopping about under the coffee bushes, turning over the fallen leaves in search of insects:

Once accustomed to my presence and finding itself unmolested by the dogs, it grows bold enough to enter the house in search of string and twine, which it then triumphantly bears away, often going to the extent of hopping up on my bed to pull at the ends of the blanket. Paying for any bits and pieces it picks up by sitting on the dry branch of an orange tree in front of the house in the evenings and treating me to its full repertoire of calls - musical bubbling whistles and trills - which have the quality of a composition by Chopin and lasting up to 15 minutes or so.

Another set of permanent residents is a pair of Magpie Robins who have brought up two lots of young since I've come to live here. These birds in their neat black and white plumage are the bandits of the area, often robbing a juicy insect from the Spotted Grey Creeper as it runs around the trunks of the trees in its nervous agitated manner. I once saw retribution for this behaviour - after taking a large green grasshopper from a Common Babbler, the Robin flew to a papaya tree where he tried to perch on a dry leaf stalk, which promptly dropped to the ground, bearing with it a most astonished looking bird, clinging on desperately as though unable to believe what was happening. When branch, bird and grasshopper hit the ground, the bird was so ruffled he let go of the grasshopper, which took wing only to be snapped up by a Drongo lurking nearby. The whole episode having the effect of a slickly rehearsed slapstick comedy including the expression of wounded dignity the Magpie Robin had as he flew off.

## MIDNIGHT FEEDING BY BLACK DRONGO P.O.Nameer, Final Year B.Sc. (Forestry), College of Forestry, Kerala Agricultural University, Vellanikkara, Thrissur 680 654

A Black Drongo *Dicrurus adsimilis* used to come and perch on the electric post near my house. In the beginning

I saw it feeding in the day time. But later I observed its activity extending beyond day time late into the evening. The bird used to appear around 7 p.m., as the sun set, and the street light was on, and its feeding continued until 12 midnight on most days. This continued from 15th March 1990 onwards. I also observed the Drongo competing with the Common Indian Nightjar *Caprimulgus asiaticus*, a regular visitor to the electric post, for feeding on the insects around the tube light.

## CHINESE GOSHAWK IN BANDHAVGARH NATIONAL PARK ASAD R. Rahmani Ph.D., Senior Scientist, Bombay Natural History Society

I read with interest in Hashim Tyabji's article 'Record of Some Birds from Bandhavgarh National Park ....' the presence of Horsefield's or Chinese Goshawk in Madhya Pradesh. On 24 March 1987, a colleague Dr Vibhu Prakash and myself saw this Goshawk in Similipal Tiger Reserve, Orissa. We have published our finding in the Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society (Vol.86, 1989, p.240). Shahid Ali, a very competent birdwatcher told me that he saw Horsefield's Goshawk in Kaziranga National Park in Assam on 4 April 1988.

Earlier the Horsefield's Goshawk was not recorded from the Indian mainland. Ali and Ripley in the Handbook described its range as 'Common (winter?) on Katchal Island and Great and Little Nicobar Is. (Abbott and Boden Kloss), Andaman Is.' There could be two major reasons for the recent sightings of this species from different places in the Indian mainland: (i) owing to the destruction of forests in east Asia (where this species is present), the birds have been displaced so they are moving (migrating?) out of their normal range; and (ii) the species was always present in small numbers in the mainland but overlooked by earlier workers. I read somewhere that before the advent of bird field guides and easy availability of binoculars and telescopes, only 250 species were known from the United Kingdom but now the list is above 400. With an increasing number of competent ornithologists and birdwatchers in India, I am sure in future we will get reports of many bird species earlier not recorded from our country.

## COMMENTS ON ASHY MINIVETS, AND ON CORMORANTS IN THEKKADY V. Santharam, 68, I Floor, Santhome High Road, Madras 600028

The occurrence of the Ashy Minivet *Pericrocatus divaricatus* in Madras has already been reported [NLBN XXV (5&6): 9-11 and JBNHS 85(2): 430-431].

I have been looking out for these birds each year and these efforts have been rewarded by several sightings. This species is by no means common. The calls of the bird with

which I am very familiar now have been useful to a great extent to detect the presence of the bird. I have seen/heard the minivet 24 times in the last five seasons, which indicates that the birds are now regular winter visitors to Madras. This was suggested by the late Dr Salim Ali, who in a letter said it is possible that this minivet may really be a scarce but regular winter migrant.

The Ashy Minivet has been seen in pairs or small parties, the maximum number seen at any given time being eight (on 15.3.1987) and recently, at least seven birds were seen on 18.3.1990. Although they have been seen in Madras between November (27th Nov) and April (5th Apr), most of the sightings have been between December and March. The birds have been seen in the wooded areas of both Guindy National Park and the Theosophical Society estates, within the city limits.

This year, I had the fortune of recording this species at Sriharikota (Nellore District, AP), which is about 80 km north of Madras. I heard the birds on 7th and 8th February and saw a pair on 9th February. These sightings has given rise to a speculation as to whether the Ashy Minivet has a more widespread winter range in India, especially in the southern parts. It would be worthwhile if readers could keep a lookout for this species in their future outings especially during the winter months.

For those interested, here is a description of the bird:

The Ashy Minivet is larger than the small Minivet, which is a familiar bird to most of us. It is about the size of a bulbul but with a proportionately longer tail and slimmer in appearance. The stance is a little more upright than in other minivets. The usual bright colours associated with minivets are absent in this species which is ashy-grey, black and white. The bird is uniformly ashy-grey above and white below. The male has black head and nape with a whitish patch on the forehead. A black line runs from the base of the beak through the eye to the crown. On the female, the black colour on the head is replaced by grey. The pale forecrown, though present, does not contrast well with the head, as in the males. The dark tail has white outer feathers. A white wing-bar is seen in flight. The birds call frequently and the call may be at best, compared with the notes of the Palm Swift's (*Cypsiurus parvus*), although somewhat softer and briefer, usually having three-four notes.

The bird's habits are like those of other minivets - seen on top branches of trees, especially bare and

caterpillar-infested. It occasionally feeds by hovering and battering the prey. It is a very active bird and never stays long at any perch or tree. It frequently calls both at rest as well as in flight.

I have the following comments on Mr Andrew Robertson's notes [NLBW, XXX (3&4): 3-6; 11-12]

I was surprised to read that cormorants have never been recorded nesting at Periyar. On my last visit to Thekkady between 23rd and 27th October, 1989, I was able to see some nests of little cormorants and at least one of a Darter (with two young). The nests were placed on the forks of the dead trees, standing in the lake and were located between the main boat landing and Edapalayam. I also saw several Shags with juveniles but I am not certain if these birds also nest here. Incidentally, the Shag has not been included in Salim Ali's 'Birds of Kerala'.

It was most interesting to read about the sighting of the Ashy Minivet in Thekkady. I have been seeing this bird regularly in Madras for the last five years in winter and recently saw it in Sriharikota, Andhra Pradesh. It appears that this bird is more widespread than believed.

I have already written [see Newsletter XXVIII (9&10); XXVIII (1&2) and XXIX (1&2)] about the local movements of the Pond Heron (and Cattle Egrets) in the Madras and Pondicherry areas. These birds are usually absent between June and August and I have seen several birds on nocturnal flights in May at Pondicherry. It is surprising that these birds are absent in Thekkady also between June-August. One would expect their local movements in the drier, south eastern parts of the peninsula in summer where the South-West monsoon is not active. But their absence in Thekkady which receives the monsoon rains seems to be difficult to understand. Perhaps a survey of the Pond Heron all over the country in summer months could indicate their movement patterns and breeding sites.

#### RAREST BIRD

London : Conservationists issued an urgent appeal on Tuesday to save what is believed to be the last Spix's Macaw surviving in the wild. The International Council for Bird Preservation said the Spix's Macaw, a long-tailed blue parrot found only in a small area of Brazil's Bahia State, was unable to find a mate of the same species and had teamed up with a different bird, blue-winged Macaw, the council said. The last Spix's Macaw was being stalked by trappers as rich private collectors were ready to pay up to £30,000 (\$56,000) for a single bird.  
- Reuter

*The Hindu, Thursday, August 9, 1990.*

# Antarctica after the spill

by Ron Naveen

The past 14 months have been trying times for us "Antarcticists". The story surrounding Antarctica's devastating oil spill from the Argentine supply and tourist ship *Bahia Paraiso* at Arthur Harbor continues to unfold, with its grimy consequences still hidden from view. Part of the difficulty in keeping abreast of this incident is Antarctica's remoteness, thousands of miles and lots of satellite dishes away from our own backyards. The closest land mass is South America, and even from Tierra del Fuego "The Ice" is a long, emetic 600 miles away. This accident may have been the continent's worst-ever biological and environmental disaster and, with the stricken vessel (now almost completely below the waterline) continuing to leak oil, we must face the serious questions percolating from Arthur Harbor's fouled waters.

Antarctica's allure is as immense as the continent's own imposing grandiosity. This big desert contains 10% of the earth's landmass, and its surrounding ocean ecosystem equates to 10% of the earth's seawater. Ninety per cent of the world's ice is locked in the vast Antarctic icecap. Antarctica is home to millions of penguins and seals, and its remarkable landscape and seascape contain primary evidence about the evolution of life on earth. Visiting Antarctica is akin to being present at the Creation.

To date, we have thought it fortunate that 39 countries, representing more

than two-thirds of the world's population, have decided, under the Antarctic Treaty, to make Antarctica an unowned, peaceful, nuclear-free area devoted to scientific research. As one of our last relatively pristine ecosystems, Antarctica is a model of how earth must have looked before the ravages of modern society had an impact.

Such stigmata have rarely touched Antarctic shores — until now. Ominously, however, the *Bahia* accident comes at a time when the Antarctic Treaty countries are considering new

## Visiting Antarctica is akin to being present at the Creation.

controls for regulating potential mineral, oil and gas development, and when all sides seem to be clamouring for comprehensive environmental protection of The Ice. Does the *Bahia* accident represent what, ultimately, we might be bringing to Antarctica? The world needs to be watching closely.

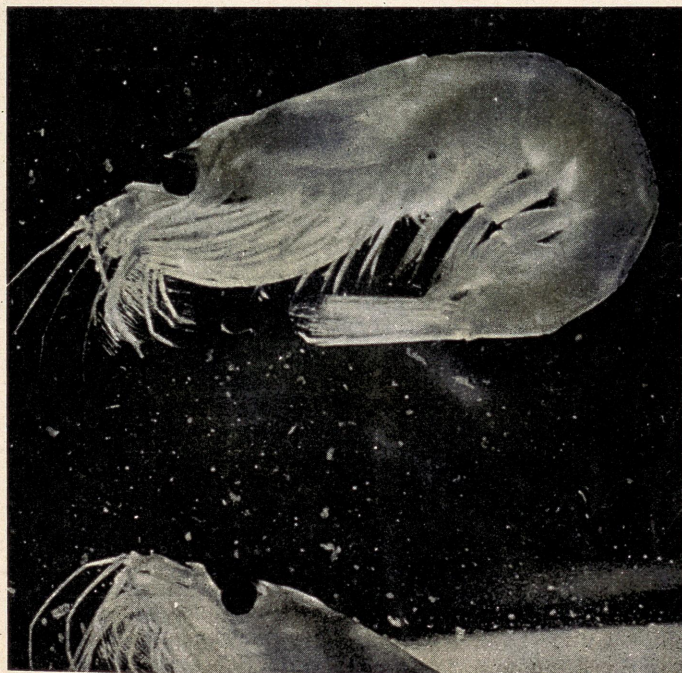
The news is heart-breaking. In late January 1989, the *Bahia Paraiso* ("Paradise Bay") hit underwater "rocks and pinnacles" while leaving Arthur Harbor on the Antarctic Peninsula, within two miles of the United States's Palmer Research Station, and close to Torgersen Island, a beautiful little island with a large Adélie Penguin *Pygoscelis adeliae*

colony. The weather was reported to be clear, with some blue sky and little swell. The rocks were charted but, despite warnings from Palmer personnel about its course out of harbour, the *Bahia* hit them full bore, producing a 30-foot gash and lots of spewing fuel.

Many rallied quickly to the cause. Palmer personnel and two Antarctic tour ships worked feverishly to unload all passengers and crew safely from the damaged ship. Palmer Station rapidly became a refugee camp. The "Antarctic Spirit" prevailed once again. All human lives were saved, but the outlook for Arthur Harbor's marine life was much less hopeful.

Within a week, the *Bahia* shifted position and sank in shallow water, its stern protruding slightly. The risk: a total spillage of *Bahia's* 250,000 gallons of diesel, and of untold amounts of other contaminants like aviation fuel and bottled gas that were being delivered to Argentine research bases in the region.

Dead krill — the small shrimp that fuels the entire Antarctic foodchain — began washing ashore soon after the accident. Oil quickly reached most shorelines in the vicinity of Arthur Harbor and Palmer Station. U.S. scientists reported severe impacts to denizens of the rocky intertidal zone. Very obviously at risk were the seabirds and penguins of Torgersen and Arthur Harbor: approximately 12,000 pairs of breeding Adélie Penguins, as well as breeding or foraging



Krill — first victim in the Antarctic foodchain (Photo: I. Everson/Bruce Coleman Ltd)

## The weather was clear. The rocks were charted.

Wilson's Storm-petrels *Oceanites oceanicus*, Southern Giant Petrels *Macronectes giganteus*, South Polar and Brown Skuas *Catharacta maccormicki* and *C. antarctica*, Blue-eyed Shags *Phalacrocorax atriceps*, and Kelp Gulls *Larus dominicanus*.

Adélie's returning to Torgersen dripped oil and tramped it into their guano-covered walkways and nest sites, skuas began killing or eating their own chicks, and seals started to look lethargic and ill. The Adélie chicks were getting ready to fledge and go to sea, obviously unaware that their watery surroundings were laden with lethal oil and fuel. Also facing mortality were the long-standing projects and studies of Palmer's biologists.

The U.S. National Science Foundation, which operates the Palmer facility, acted in concert with the Argentines and Chileans in an attempt to contain the slick.

NSF sent 50 tons of oil-containment south. Damage assessment experts packed bags and flew down. Argentine and Chilean vessels raced to Arthur Harbor, bringing equipment to refloat the *Bahia* or drain its remaining fuel, although helicopters to extract dislodged fuel barrels were floating aimlessly in the vicinity.

The weather proved formidable. High winds and ice-laden seas caused some delay in the equipment's arrival and,

---

### *Potentially, 25,000 Adélie Penguins went to sea through the slick.*

---

sadly, began scattering the oozy film. The winds and tides produced many contractions and expansions of the slick.

The clean-up effort continued until the onset of the bleak Antarctic winter; but all plans, suggestions and possibilities for removing, sinking or destroying the *Bahia* were dashed. The ugly behemoth would stay put, its lingering damage unknown.

One year later, there still are no precise figures on how much oil was released or recovered, or how much may have evaporated. Scientists at Arthur Harbor suggest it will be a long time before the damage can be assessed fully.

Potentially, 25,000 Adélie Penguin chicks and adults went to sea through the slick, but no one knows how thoroughly the slick may have spread through the water column. Adélie chicks generally do not return to their natal areas – to attempt breeding for the first time – until their late second or third year of life; so there can be no quick assessment of the fate of the 1989 crop. Normally, the return rate of Adélie chicks is low – perhaps no more than 10-15% – even in good years, so precise correlations to the *Bahia* accident will be difficult.

In 1990, it appeared that numbers of Adélie adults were down about 10% in the area; which may represent normal fluctuation but may, perhaps, be tied to diminished krill availability. Indeed, for some other avian denizens of Arthur Harbor, the apparently severe conse-

quences of this accident are confused by the issue of food availability.

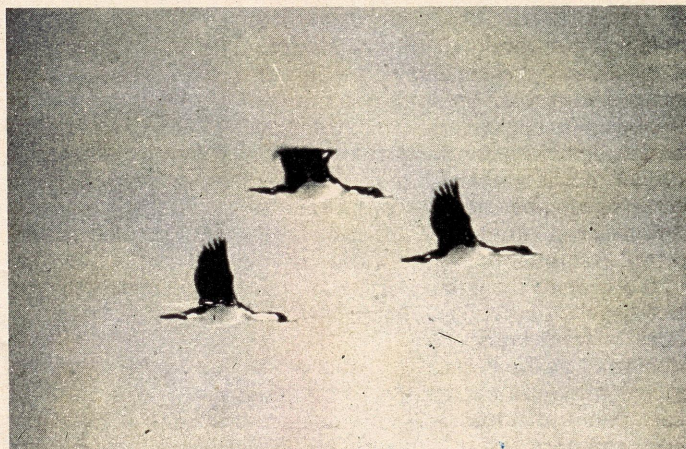
In 1989, entire year-classes of Brown Skuas, Kelp Gulls and Blue-eyed Shags were ravaged. The 1990 cohorts of these species were also down but, as was the case last season, there was a notable lack of krill in Arthur Harbor. Even had there been no oil spill, the lack of krill would probably have caused some depression in breeding success for these particular species.

Could the *Bahia* accident put the Antarctic Treaty itself at risk? The treaty has evolved positively for almost 30 years because the many participating countries have managed to cooperate, building the necessary consensus to deal with emerging problems. Hence, there is an increased emphasis on tourist and visitor rules (e.g. the Antarctic Traveller's Code that the Oceanites Foundation has distributed), and a late 1990 special meeting of the treaty parties will consider tourism as part of an overall package of comprehensive environmental measures for Antarctica.

However, oil spills are a major concern of everyone. Does the treaty contain appropriate environmental safeguards? Who is responsible for the clean-up of environmental hazards? Our worst dreams already drift on the surface of Arthur Harbor. The timetable for evaluating these concerns has moved forward rather dramatically.

The *Bahia* tragedy also renews questions about vessel safety in the Antarctic.

*Blue-eyed (and King) Shags (Photo: T. Salathé)*



*Courtesy: World Bird Watch – May 1990*

**Cover: YELLOW-WATTLED LAPWING** *Vanellus malabaricus* is a sleek and immaculate bird with a sandy brown suit, black cap, bright yellow wattle round the base of the beak and yellow legs. The call is a plaintive *deevit-deevit-deevit*. The nest is a shallow half hearted scrape on the ground and occasionally lined with small smooth pebbles of uniform size. The lapwing pair take turns to incubate the eggs.

*Photo by S. Sridhar*

---

**Editor: ZAFAR FUTEHALLY, 'Moitaka', Bear Shola Road, Kodaikanal 624 101**

**Printed and published by S.Sridhar at Navbharath Enterprises, Seshadripuram, Bangalore 560 020, for Private Circulation only**