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# NEWSLETTER FOR BIRDPWATCHERS

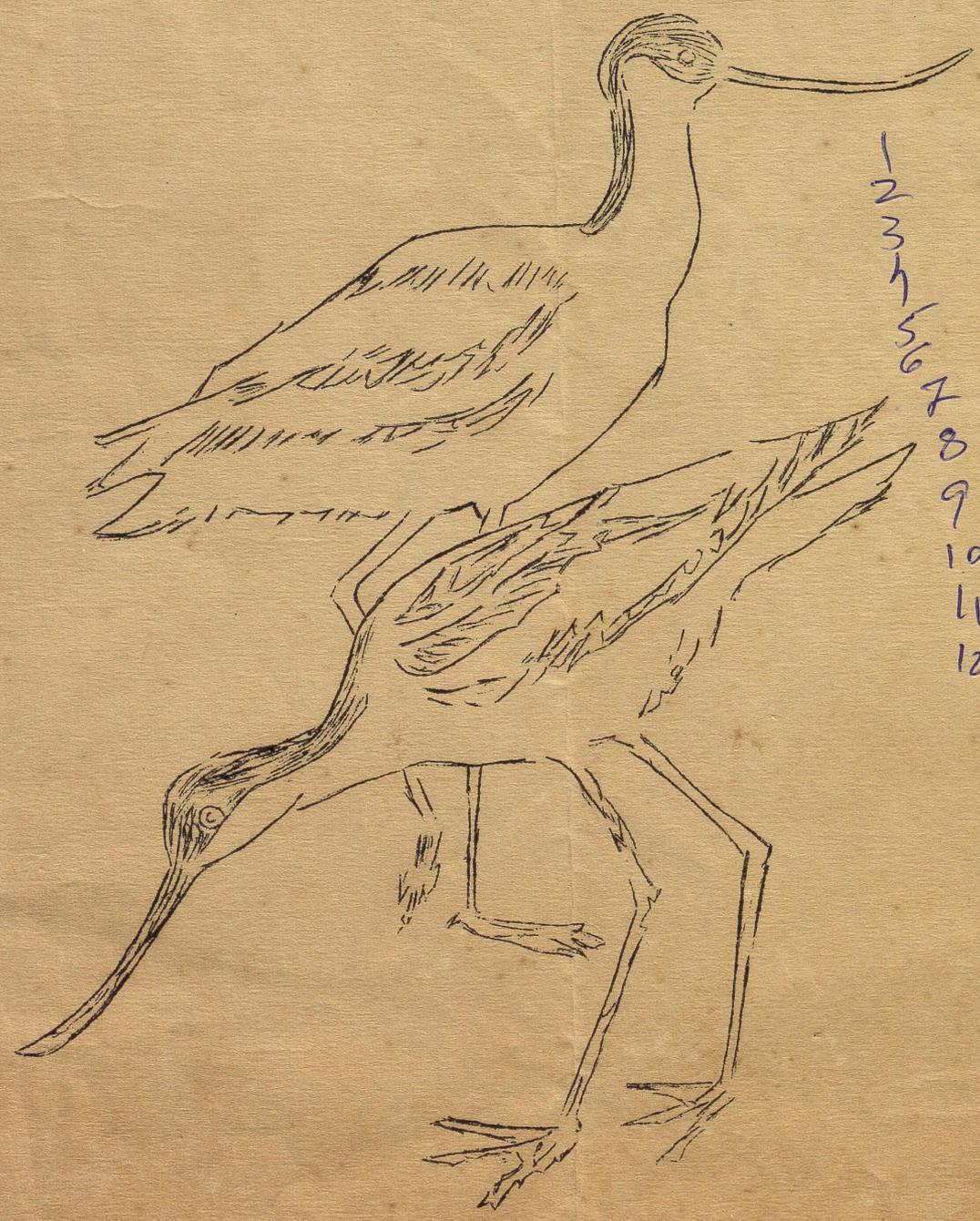
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S.V. NILAKANTA -

NEWSLETTER  
FOR  
BIRDWATCHERS

Vol. 8, No. 1

January 1968

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THE SHIKRA (*Accipiter badius*)

By

Zafar Futehally.

For the past several weeks there has been a Shikra in our garden, and it is thrilling to watch it on every occasion. It is not an easy bird to see, but fortunately it calls quite frequently and so indicates its presence in the neighbourhood. Its loud, sharp, double note ti tiu ti tiu alarms all the creatures: the hen tending its brood, the palm squirrels on the trees, and all the birds. The crows, of course are not alarmed, but they all flock around the hunter from a safe distance indulge in the jeering which characterises all creatures with a debased character.

Our garden has many large trees, and below the Queens Flower tree there is a small pond. For some reason, from time to time, there is a population explosion of frogs in the pond, and this year there are more than ever before. It is this situation which has attracted the shikra to our garden. A few evenings ago I saw the bird alight silently on the Queens Flower, and stay there surveying the scene and the opportunities for a meal. For a quarter of an hour it was almost motionless. Then it started to fidget a bit and I could sense that it had decided to pounce on one of the frogs in the pond. It glided down from the branch, lifted a frog from the water with its talons, and settled down on the ground with the victim helpless, pierced with its sharp claws. The frog squealed for a while but was soon silent, and the shikra tugged away at it with its sharp beak for quite a while. It is obviously slow work dealing with a frog and the bird then flew away with it on a Mango tree and was lost to view. It was curious that while the shikra was tearing the frog to bits, two other frogs looked placidly on from the edge of the pond, and seemed quite oblivious to the danger to which they were exposed.

Incidentally, a couple of years ago when there was such a population explosion of frogs, a Pond Heron (*Ardeola grayii*) came to deal with them. Lacking the sharp talons of the Shikra, the heron had great difficulty in dealing with the frogs only by its bill, and several frogs escaped after the initial lightening thrust had paralysed them. Dealing with such a slippery customer as a frog only by a bill with no assistance from its weak toes, made the problem difficult for the heron, but nevertheless, it quickly reduced the frog population drastically. Perhaps the Shikra will do the same.

A few days ago the Shikra pounced on a Jungle Babbler (*Turdoides somervellii*) scrounging on our lawn. In the normal course the Babbler would have been killed, but the Shikra suddenly saw us in the verandah and flew away. The Babbler remained stunned for several seconds and then joined its community, which incidentally had flown away, without a thought for their unfortunate companion.

Like all birds of prey the female Shikra is much larger than the male. Though the usual method of hunting is to take the quarry by surprise by lying in wait quietly in a leafy tree, the birds often soar in circles in the air. A good description of this is given by G.M. Henry in his *Birds of Ceylon*.

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#### WILDFOWL COUNTS

Readers will recall that last year a Wildfowl Count was organised in January by Mr. C.W. Savage, and the process has now got to be repeated. The letter reproduced below tells all about it, and the form which follows should be filled up carefully and sent to the Editor who will forward it to Mr. Savage. Please be certain about your identifications before entering the data on the form. When in doubt always put a question mark after the entry. I hope many of our readers will participate in this interesting and useful exercise. To put you in the proper frame of mind, an extract from the *Time Magazine* (kindly sent by Kunvar Shri Lavkumar) is also reproduced here: [Ed.]

#### GETTING THE BIRD

The name of the operation is called variously the "May Run", the "Grim Grind" or the "Big Day." Its object is to identify, by sight and song, as many species of birds as possible in a 24-hour period. The time is now, when, because of the late spring, the northward migration is still going strong. Across the nation, bird watchers - they number over 8,000,000 in all - are out in full force.

The basic equipment for birders, who operate in teams of two or more so that there is at least one corroborating witness, is simple: binoculars, a copy of Roger Tory Peterson's *A Field Guide to the Birds*, and a car to enable them to cover a greater variety of habitats quickly. Thus, beginning at dawn, 20 members of Florida's Pelican Island Audubon Society raced through the boondocks south of Cape Kennedy to cover a 15-mile-wide circle of fresh-water marshes, piny woods and citrus groves; whenever their cars stopped, their binoculars popped up and down like yo-yos. They quit early at dusk, satisfied at having spotted 129 species, including such rarities as the upland plover and the western kingbird.

**Cherry Bombs & Tapes:** In Delaware, Dave Cutler, who can identify more than 200 birds by song alone, led his five-man team over 500 miles of rain-swept back roads. Armed with a supply of cherry bombs (to startle sleeping birds into song) and a portable tape player programmed with 42 different calls (to trick them into answering), the team identified 187 species.

For some 150 New York City birders, the search centered on Long Island's Jamaica Bay, where the stealthier spotters bellied through the wet marsh grass as if sneaking up on a machine-gun nest. Though they found a number of rare birds, they were disappointed at total counts, which were as small as 100 species. And in Illinois, 50 members of the Champaign County Audubon Society slogged through mud and rain, uphill and down, for views of herons and chimney swifts, wood ducks and Blackburnian warblers - and a day's total of 100.

So dogged were the birders that even the birds far at sea were under surveillance. Nearly 100 members of California's Golden Gate Audubon Society set out in a three-ship flotilla for the three-hour cruise to the offshore Farallon Islands. In the process, the birders had to weather a sickening swell, the pungent aroma of the guano-splattered Farallons and the even more pungent smell of overripe suet, thrown overboard for bait. For their fortitude they were rewarded with such rarities as Brandt's cormorants, tufted puffins, pink-footed shearwaters and a couple of black-footed albatrosses.

Backyard Beginnings: The birder must be physically fit to slog through swamps, intellectually alert to recognize the innumerable species he might encounter, keen enough to thrill at the sight of a great blue heron overhead. But what gets him started in the first place? "We began watching birds in our backyard," explains Seismologist James Ellis. "Then we didn't recognize a bird, so we bought a cheap book. Then there were more birds, so we bought a more expensive book. It grabbed San Francisco's Raymond Higgs so hard that he bought an \$800 Questar telephoto lens in order to photograph them better.

What keeps them birding, despite such avocational aches and pains from gazing skyward as "warbler's neck" and "Audubon back"? Partly, it is the challenge of building an ever bigger lifetime list. "It gets to be a game to see how many species you can find," says Florida's Maggie Brown. Chirps Sharon Lumsden, of Champaign, Ill., who has 279 birds on her list. "We've seen 96 birds in our backyard alone." Adds San Francisco's Valeria Da Costa, whose list contains 600 of the U.S.'s 700-odd birds: "There are only two warblers I haven't seen in the entire country."

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ASIAN WILDFOWL WORKING GROUP

WILDFOWL SURVEY.

Under the auspices of the International Wildfowl Research Bureau  
and

The Wildfowl Trust, Slimbridge, Glos, England.

C/O, Post Bag 704,  
11-F Gulberg,  
Lahore, West Pakistan.

To all correspondents

WILDFOWL COUNTS - 1967/68

Last year most of you collaborated in the January 1967 Wildfowl Census, and if any of you have not received individual acknowledgement and thanks please accept my apologies. Broadly speaking the results last year were a great success in that much new information came to light besides being the first step towards quantitative assessment of the wildfowl populations of Asia and the Middle East. In all we had records of over 1/4 million ducks from a hundred different localities covering possibly about 1/250 of the total wildfowl habitat range between Iraq and Assam/East Pakistan. This compares with European and North African counts of nearly 2 1/2 million in 3,400 localities. A further 3 1/2 million were estimated in the USSR based on aerial counts using 25 aircraft. The European counts appear to have covered the greater part of the

Wildfowl habitat, but in the USSR the counts still covered only a fraction of the total.

The last census has shown the tremendous potential value of these counts and has provided a valuable stimulus to development of International co-operation in wildfowl conservation. The results were presented and discussed at a recent meeting of the IUCN Ecology Commission in Turkey which was jointly sponsored by the International Wildfowl Research Bureau (IWRB). As a result of these discussions it is proposed that extra special efforts should be made this winter in order to provide a sound factual basis for proposals being prepared for presentation at the International Wildfowl Conference to be held in Leningrad in September, 1968.

This year it is specially important to include as many counts of geese as possible (this was serious defect in last winters counts); also Flamingos should be included, and Coots. The latter have declined markedly in recent years and Coots have been included this year at the request of the USSR.

I shall be writing to you again shortly with aerogramme forms for sending us the results of the mid-January counts. In the meantime I enclose copies of the new wildfowl Count forms which I should be grateful if you could use for keeping all records of counts/estimates/sightings. The most useful of all will be regular monthly counts.

Yours sincerely,

C.W. Savage.

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INTERNATIONAL WILDBIRD COUNTS

WILDBIRD SURVEY

11-F Gulberg, Lahore, West Pakistan.

Several observations on the SAME water may be recorded on this Form. Please enter the dates at the head of each column, and any remarks and comments on the local conditions on the back of the form.

COUNTRY:

DISTRICT:

EXACT LOCALITY:

NEAREST VILLAGE OR TOWN:

Name and Address of Reporter:

Date / /196 / /196 / /196 / /196 / /196 / /196

MALLARD

TEAL

GARGANEY

GADWALL

WIGEON

PINTAIL

SHOVELER

MARbled TEAL

REDCRESTED POCHARD

SCAUP

TUFFED DUCK

COMMON POCHARD

WHITE-EYED POCHARD

GOLDENEYE

LONG TAILED

V. SCOTER

C. SCOTER

GOOSANDER

MERGANSER

SMEW

COMMON SHELDUCK

RUDDY SHELDUCK

WHITEHEATED DUCK

GREYLAG GOOSE

BAREHEADED GOOSE

WHITEFRONT

LESSER WHITEFRONT

BEAN GOOSE

MUTE SWAN

WHOOPER SWAN

BEWICK SWAN

LESSER WHISTLING TEAL

LARGE WHISTLING TEAL

SPOTBILL

NUKHTA

COTTON TEAL

COOTS

REMARKS

The spaces below are for remarks and details of the visibility and local conditions on each of the dates on which observations were made.

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Please return completed forms immediately or not later than January 31st whichever is sooner - Thank you.

THE WORLD WILD LIFE FUND

By

Zafar Futehally.

On the 15th December, Lord Fermoy an Associate of the Fund gave a talk at the Bombay Natural History Society. H.H. Patesinrao Gaekwad of Baroda, a Trustee of the Fund presided. The Indian National Appeal will be formulated perhaps at the time of the IUCN General Assembly and we in India must help this cause, for the obvious reason that we will be helping our own country in the process. Lord Fermoy spoke of the work which the WWF is doing on a world scale and also gave an account of his recent visit to Pakistan, where a team of conservationists led by Guy Mountfort surveyed several areas with a view to their establishment as Sanctuaries and National Parks. Conservation policies in Pakistan are of particular interest to this country for obvious reasons.

Most of our readers are perhaps familiar with the objectives of the WWF, but in any case this appeal from David Attenborough, of the British National Appeal is worth pondering over: "I am asking for your help to prevent a disaster - A disaster which could affect us all. The situation is simply this:

There are more human beings in this country today, and indeed in the world, than ever before. We all need places to live, factories in which to work, roads on which to travel, fields in which to grow food. Next year we shall need even more. We are claiming these things, we must, but every time we do so we do it at the cost of destroying the natural world. Sometimes we do it carelessly, without thought, sometimes greedily, sometimes even unnecessarily, and the weapons and techniques with which we do so are more powerful, more devastating than ever before. Because we want oil we have hunted the whale until now it is almost extinct. We have invented poisons of appalling efficiency, and because we want to get rid of some insect pests, we have thoughtlessly spread them wholesale to kill not only those pests but also butterflies and whole populations of song-birds. Modern technology has devised powerful detergents, and when we have used them we empty them into our rivers and turn what was once a stretch of water rich with fish, flowering plants and dragonflies into a stinking sewer. Everywhere animals and plants are being destroyed wholesale and - and this is the point - only too often, unnecessarily.

Within three human generations man has totally exterminated one hundred different kinds of animals, and this thoughtless slaughter, far from coming to an end, is now rising to a crescendo. At this very moment no less than a thousand creatures are in desperate danger of extinction - the mountain gorilla, the birds of paradise, the Arabian oryx, the Javan rhinoceros - these and many more are on their way to being, like the Passenger Pigeon and the Great Auk, creatures which survive only as a few faded skins in museums. Even the commonest animals are now being forced out of the places where once they flourished.

Ironically enough, it is not just the animals that are paying the price of man's rapidly increasing numbers; it is man himself; it is us. For leaving aside all the benefits that the animals can bring us, both economically and scientifically, the natural world has always been a source of joy and solace to mankind. We are after all part of it, and yet in our headlong rush to provide for our immediate wants we seem set on creating a world that is not worth living in - a sterile and empty wasteland.

Yet I repeat, much of this destruction is unnecessary, even now at this late stage the disaster can be averted. We must make sure that no more woodlands and rivers and moorlands are destroyed simply because of lack of planning or because of greed; that no more animals are poisoned because they are pretty and rare. Above all we must select the really important wild places and keep them as refuges and sanctuaries where animals will truly be safe.

That is the long term need, but there are also urgent rescue operations that must be mounted if we are to save the last survivors of creatures that are on the brink of destruction.

The World Wildlife Fund is tackling both jobs. It has provided money to save the wilderness of Coto Donana in Spain which is a vital staging post for migrant birds coming to this country. In Africa it is paying for wardens to stop the poaching of big game.

In this country it helps the County Naturalist Trusts and the Council for Nature to create and support Nature Reserves.

Every day we get urgent calls for help. There are many that we cannot answer for lack of funds. For some of them next year will be too late. Please help us now."

India has more mammals, more birds, and more spectacular scenery than almost any other country. We must see that our National Appeal is well supported, and we wish H.H. Fatesinrao Gaekwad of Baroda every success.

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These are the recordings of some of the birds (migrants) which I saw first in each season (starting from the end of rainy season to the beginning of the other). Late days have been left out.

	<u>Name of birds</u>	<u>Date</u>
1.	Common Swallows (Hirundo rustica)	3.10.65 1.10.66
2.	Common Brown Headed Sea-gull (Larus Brunni Cephalus)	16.10.66 15.10.67
3.	Rufous backed shrike (Lanius schach)	25.9.66 24.9.67
4.	White Wag tail (Motacilla alba)	3.10.65 19.10.66 8.10.67
5.	Golden Oriole (Oriolus oriolus)	9.9.67
6.	Common Green Bee-eater (Merops orientalis)	7.10.66 1.10.67
7.	Paradise Fly catcher (Terpsiphone paradisi)	14.11.65 5.10.66

The bird seen in both the occasions was either a hen or just a pre-mature bird, for it had no streaming tail or had it white plumes all over the body. It was typical chest not red above and under parts drab white and in both the years the bird ceased to be seen afterwards.

- 8. Pied crested cuckoo  
(Clamator jacobinus)

The sound heard on 19.12.65 was followed with caw-cawing of crows, but the bird itself was not seen. The last 3 or 4 days sharp cry of the bird was heard but seen it on 11.6.67 in the hands of a boy with primaries clipped off.

As for Common sandpipers (Tringa hypoleuces), I am doubtful whether they ever migrate far away because their presence is not missed long. Not only that, if there is no rain for two or three days during monsoon season they

on the sea shore, piping sad, melancholy, note often and flying from one mud embankment to the other in a somewhat restless mood.

T.V. Jose  
Colaba.

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FIGHTING HABITS OF THE WHITE WAG-TAIL (MOTACILLA ALBA)

By

T.V. Jose

In my morning round on 10.12.67 I came upon two white wag-tails chirping excitedly on the sea-shore, and not feeding. I noticed there was something unusual about them, and I sat down on a clod of earth facing the birds, about 20 ft. away from me.

One bird would walk towards the other for sometime, while the other continued to move farther away from the advancing one; but the former soon returns. Immediately the latter turns about and approaches the bird now retreating. The latter's progress however stops the same way when it nears the former. This type of restless, seemingly purposeless, and monotonous movements continue. But sometimes I see, as one walks forward to the other, in one of its unaccomplished attacks, it flaps its wings and springs up closing them and down it comes in a loop. Generally this mark of pugnacity is ignored by the other, but there are occasions in which the other takes up the challenge and meets the other with pointed vehemence in the air. Both try to peck at each other face to face and at the same time try to avoid each other's charges.

After 15 minutes manoeuvre, and about half a dozen actual duels each lasting only seconds, I find their fighting mood is waning, and they are seen moving away from each other.

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ANTING

By

Pratap Singh

"Anting" by birds is a phenomena which the ornithologists are aware of but which they rarely witness. I had the good luck of watching this behaviour the other day and which may be of interest to the readers.

Early in the morning of 2nd December, I saw a female Magpie Robin (*Copsychus saularis*) alight on the ground near the fence, and then, in its typical purposeful manner, hopped up to pick up something and with it hurriedly started rubbing the under part of the tail and the wing feathers. It then dropped the pick, hopped upto another point and repeated the procedure with the other wing and the tail. My curiosity having aroused I watched closely. The bird repeated this procedure nearly 12 times in 7 minutes with several ants crawling at the place. In the majority of cases it would drop the ant, having rubbed it, but in three cases it ate them. The bird, undisturbed, continued the activity at leisure and having drawn full satisfaction flew up to the fence from where it was disturbed by a Montague's Harrier. I did not notice any expression of entrancement on the part of the bird, though that is consequential. As to the ants, there was nothing special about them; they were the ordinary large black ants commonly found everywhere.

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Review:

COMMON BIRDS by Salim Ali and Ilaeq Futehally, published in the Series "India - The Land & People" by the National Book Trust, India ( pp. 118, 5½" x 8", paper back edition) available for Rs.9/=.

It was the desire of the late Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, that this Series of books on India should provide a library of knowledge on every aspect of this country. This is yet another book in this Series.

It is the purpose of this book to enable the novice in bird-watching to learn to recognize with confidence, the common birds of his locality.

To enable him to do so this book provides 97 clear colour plates with descriptions of more than a hundred birds. The birds are arranged in the present practice of starting from grebes and finishing with the finches.

A brief description of each order is given and the relevant families under each order is named and when required described. The more common species have been described in detail.

In the descriptions the birds are alive. They are shown to be moving about in their natural locality, eating their habitual food, making their usual calls and generally behaving in their characteristic ways.

In the old days neither good field glasses nor adequately illustrated bird books were available. As such, the "respectable" naturalist killed birds and collected their skins and eggs. Books written by them give very minute details of the feathers on the dead skins and a somewhat guesome and scientific sounding account of the skull bones and leg tendons. Such things are completely avoided here.

The initial chapters of this book are devoted to Introduction, Ornithology & Birdwatching, Reproduction and Migration. The book instructs the bird watcher as to how to identify a bird in the field and stresses the importance of placing it in the right family. Even birds which are not in this book can be later on identified by reference to a more complicated work if the bird can be placed in the proper family.

In every way this book meets the requirement of the interested common man and the beginner in birdwatching. Being copiously illustrated the book will make an excellent birthday present for children and start them off on an instructive and rewarding hobby.

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CORRESPONDENCE:

Appearance of Brahmini Duck (*Tadorna ferruginea*) and Dabchick (*Podiceps ruficollis*).

Early in the morning of 12.11.1967 during my usual round I came across three ducks apprehensively floating in the centre of the back water, bordering Colaba Sea Shore. For the first time I saw such large ducks in these waters. They were, for added safety, trying to align themselves with a patch of brown headed gulls present there. The latter did not appear to be unfriendly towards the strangers, for they tolerated them in their midst. But straggling crows caught sight of the new-comers, and their typical reaction was one of envy. The Black fraternity hovered over, and

now made attempts to peck at the ducks in a clumsy way. Against this pestering pestilence, the concerned duck raised its head and protested "aenk", "aank".

Meanwhile corvine enthusiasm had worked itself out, and the crows left the scene. The ducks settled down to feed. They did not dive, but their probing head went at times deep down, their horizontality turning into perpendicularity and the black tips of tail sticking up into the air in a ridiculous fashion.

The whole day I saw them there but always they were wary and never approached the mud-banks. Perhaps they may have had experience of what humans are like.

I also observed a solitary dabchick which was the first one I had ever observed during the last 13 or 14 years.

T.V. Jose  
Colaba.

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

A Correction: In the October '67 issue, the article on Foster Parents has been written by Major J.C. Mahanti and not by Major M. Mahanti.

-ED.

