

# Indian Birds

Vol. 1 No. 5

September-October 2005



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English and scientific names should follow Manakadan, R., and Pittie, A. 2001. Standardised common and scientific names of the birds of the Indian Subcontinent. *Buceros* 6 (1): i-ix, 1-38.

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- To publish a newsletter that will provide a platform to birdwatchers for publishing notes and observations primarily on birds of South Asia.
- To promote awareness of bird watching amongst the general public.
- To establish and maintain links/liaison with other associations or organized bodies in India or abroad whose objectives are in keeping with the objectives of the Trust (i.e. to support amateur birdwatchers with cash / kind for projects in ornithology).



# Indian Birds

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**Front cover:** Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo*, Shey marshes, Ladakh, Jammu & Kashmir. One of four adults hunting dragonflies. **Photographer:** Clement Francis M.

## Some significant records of birds from the central Indian highlands of Madhya Pradesh

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### Introduction

The central Indian highlands in the state of Madhya Pradesh comprise the Satpura and Vindhya Ranges which are separated by River Narmada. They are ornithologically little explored, with just a handful of papers published on local avifauna: Moss King (1911) from Damoh and Sagar, Whitehead (1911) from Sehore, D'Abreu (1912) from Balaghat, Osmaston (1922) from Pachmarhi, Briggs (1931) from Mhow, Hewetson (1939) from Betul, Newton et al. (1986) from Kanha, Tyabji (1994) from Bandhavgarh, Mehta (1998) from Bori and, more recently, Pasha et al. (2004) from Pench. Extensive surveys were however carried out in western and northern Madhya Pradesh, mostly north of the Vindhyas (Edwin-Barnes 1886; Ali and Whistler 1939, and 1940). Hewetson's (1956) comprehensive account of all his bird observations across the region was another major document on central Indian avifauna. The only published scientific collections from the central highlands were by D'Abreu (1912, and 1935) for Nagpur Museum. The other collection, by Dr Walter Koelz (1929-1950), currently housed at University of Michigan Museum of Zoology, remained largely unknown till Rasmussen and Anderton (2005) catalogued it.

The Wildlife Institute of India (WII) undertook a survey of breeding land birds of the central highlands in Madhya Pradesh as part of an ongoing project on the Protected Area network in central India. The survey was conducted between February and July from 2002 to 2004, with its base-camp at Pench Tiger Reserve (Madhya Pradesh), where we carried out year-round observations. We divided the region into eleven areas and surveyed them as per the following itinerary [Note that the coverage of districts under each subregion may be whole or in part]:

- Malwa Plateau (Jhabua, Dhar, Indore, and Dewas districts): 25-27.v.2004.
- Nimar Hills (Barwani, West Nimar, and East Nimar districts): 22-30.v.2004.
- Lower Narmada Valley (West Nimar, Dewas, Harda, Sehore, and Hoshangabad districts): 24-26.ii.2002; 22-30.v.2004.
- Sagar-Damoh Plateau (Sagar and Damoh districts): 14-21.vi.2004.
- Betul Plateau (Betul district): 26.iv-5.v.2004.

- Satpura Range (Hoshangabad, Betul, and Chhindwara districts): 6-13.v.2004.
- Seoni-Chhindwara Plateau (Chhindwara, Narsimhapur, and Seoni districts): Most part of the study period.
- South Maikal Range (Mandla, Balaghat, and Dindori districts): 10-21.vi.2002.
- East Maikal Range (Shahdol, Umaria, and Katni districts): 18-26.vi.2003.
- Kaimur Hills (Jabalpur, Katni, Satna, and Rewa districts): 18-26.vi.2003.
- Vindhya scarplands (Chhatarpur, Panna, and Satna districts): 27-30.vi.2003.

We took great care in species identification, supporting each record with meticulous observations on field characters, including vocalizations. All the doubtful observations were treated as unconfirmed records. This survey is, however, neither exhaustive nor complete, as several localities (e.g., Panna Tiger Reserve and Nimar Hills) were under sampled due to logistic and time-constraints. We hope further intensive studies in the field will yield more accurate information on distribution and status of central Indian birds.

Several significant records and breeding range extensions noticed during our surveys are reported below.

**Crested Goshawk *Accipiter trivirgatus*** In Kanha Tiger Reserve a pair was seen near Kisli on 15.vi.2002 and another pair at Salghat on 18.vi.2002. Probably a scarce resident in and around Kanha (south Maikal Range). D'Abreu (1935) collected one specimen (*A. t. indicus*) from this locality.

We also have two more disjunct records from Satpura Plateau: From Bori Wildlife Sanctuary, a male at Churna on 9.v.2004 and a female (?) near Dhain on 13.v.2004. Also a couple of winter records at Pench Tiger Reserve (a male on 11.i.1997 and a pair on 26.ii.2004).

**Red Spurfowl *Galloperdix spadicea*** Found all along the forested hills from Indore district in the west (one record at Simrole, 24.v.2004) to south Maikal in the east (Kanha Tiger Reserve, common) through Nimar Hills (Ashapur / Aulia, uncommon), Betul Plateau (Bhainsdehi Range, fairly common and Rampur, common), Satpura Range (Bori Wildlife Sanctuary, common), and Seoni-Chhindwara Plateau (Pench Tiger Reserve, common). Absent north of Narmada, in eastern Madhya Pradesh, where only

Painted Spurfowl is found (see below).

**Painted Spurfowl *G. lunulata*** Found in similar habitat as Red Spurfowl but mainly in eastern and central Madhya Pradesh. Quite frequent north of Narmada (Sagar-Damoh Plateau, Vindhya scarplands around Panna Tiger Reserve, Rewa Plateau, and east Maikal Range (Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve). South of Narmada River, found in sympatry with Red Spurfowl in Bori-Pachmarhi Plateau and Pench Tiger Reserve, often in the same locality. However, its apparent absence from Kanha Tiger Reserve (south Maikal Range) is intriguing and requires further investigation. Hewetson (1956) had recorded it from Balaghat district.

**Red Junglefowl *Gallus gallus*** Occurs in the sal *Shorea robusta* forests of eastern Madhya Pradesh from east Maikal through south Maikal Range south to the teak-*Tectona grandis* dominant Pench Tiger Reserve in Seoni district.

**Grey Junglefowl *G. sonneratii*** Found in southern Madhya Pradesh from East Nimar Hills (Aulia Range, very scarce) through Betul Hills (Bhainsdehi Range and north Betul division, fairly common) up to Satpura Range (Bori Wildlife Sanctuary, very common). Ali and Whistler (1940) had a doubtful record of a female, further west from Manpur, Indore district. Apparently, River Pench, running north-south, forms a barrier between *G. gallus* and *G. sonneratii* in central India. But the reported (Dhange and Banubakode 2000) occurrence of Grey Junglefowl in Pench Tiger Reserve (Maharashtra) west of River Pench requires confirmation, as we did not encounter either of the *Gallus* species during our four visits to the Maharashtra section of Pench Tiger Reserve.

Not seen in western Madhya Pradesh, i.e., west Nimar Hills and Malwa Plateau, from where there are historical records (Ali and Whistler 1940). We speculate that the current central Indian population might have now become separated from the Western Ghats population.

**Oriental Turtle-Dove *Streptopelia orientalis*** The peninsular population (*S. o. erythrocephala*) is found along the hills of southern and eastern Madhya Pradesh, breeding commonly at c.600m a.s.l., and higher (Betul Plateau, Satpura Range, Mahadeo Hills and south and east Maikal

Range including Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve). Not seen west of Betul (e.g. Nimar Hills). In winter, it spreads widely over well-wooded parts of the entire region, along with the Himalayan migratory form *S. o. meena*. Both are often seen together in the same locality.

**Emerald Dove *Chalcophaps indica*** Occurs in moist deciduous forests of central and eastern Madhya Pradesh from Satpura Range (Bori Wildlife Sanctuary-Pachmarhi) east through Pench and Kanha Tiger Reserves up to east Maikal Range in the north-east (e.g. Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve). Absent from Vindhya (e.g. Panna and Sagar-Damoh Plateau). Frequent in bamboo forests of the sal biome but less so in teak forests.

**Indian Cuckoo *Cuculus micropterus* and Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*** Both cuckoos are commonly heard in summer and early monsoon throughout well-wooded areas of the entire region. *C. micropterus* was, however, not heard or seen west of Simrole (Indore district).

**Drongo Cuckoo *Surniculus lugubris*** Song commonly heard between June and September throughout the forested tracts of central and eastern Madhya Pradesh (including East Nimar Hills, Betul Plateau, Satpura Range, Seoni-Chhindwara Plateau, east and south Maikal Ranges, Vindhya scarplands, and Sagar-Damoh Plateau). Not seen west of Khandwa. Surprisingly few records from central India in the past (e.g. Tyabji 1994, Bandhavgarh). Host species imperfectly known, though twice seen chased aggressively by nesting Ashy Drongos *Dicrurus leucophaeus* (near Karmajhiri, Pench Tiger Reserve on 15.vi.2003 and at Mukki, Kanha Tiger Reserve on 19.vi.2002).

The local movements of this population are, however, unclear. It is most probably a summer / monsoon breeding visitor to central India. We had no winter records in Pench Tiger Reserve, during our stay in 1996-1997, 2002-2003, and 2003-2004. But the possibility of birds having been overlooked when they were not calling cannot be ruled out.

**Oriental Scops-Owl *Otus sunia*** Found along the hill-forests of southern and eastern Madhya Pradesh from Betul Plateau east through Satpura Range, Mahadeo hills, Seoni Plateau, south and east Maikal. The distribution range in the region almost identical to that of Oriental Turtle-Dove (further spatial analyses planned). Not heard west of Betul. Very vocal from early

March to late May. Surprisingly few historical records from central India (Osmaston 1922 from Pachmarhi,; Hewetson 1939 from Betul).

**Forest Eagle-Owl *Bubo nipalensis*** Rare resident in Pench Tiger Reserve, Seoni district. Seen one adult roosting on a huge *Terminalia arjuna* tree along the banks of River Pench in Cheetaghat area on 18.iv.2004. Another bird was photographed at Raiyagazza (date unknown) (Sen and Dungriyal 2004). Apparently an addition to the central Indian avifauna.

We also suspect seeing one bird near Churna, Bori Wildlife Sanctuary on 9.v.2004. Interestingly, Mehta (1998) has recorded it as a rare resident in Bori Wildlife Sanctuary.

Further field surveys are required to determine its status in central India.

**Brown Hawk-Owl *Ninox scutulata*** A scarce resident in central and eastern Madhya Pradesh confined to the dense forests of Satpura Range, Mahadeo Hills, Seoni Plateau, south and east Maikal Ranges, and also in and around Panna Tiger Reserve in the Vindhya (calls heard near Hinauta barrier on 27.vi.2003 and one pair was observed being mobbed by other birds near Pawai on Panna-Katni route on 29.vi.2003).

**White-rumped Needletail-Swift *Zoonavena sylvatica*** Occurs from Chorbahuli on Nagpur-Seoni Highway (26.vii.2002, 7.iv.2003; 2.vi.2003) north through Mahadeo Hills, Seoni Plateau, and south Maikal Range till east Maikal Range in Umari district (Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve). Not seen west of Chhindwara town.

**Blue-bearded Bee-eater *Nyctyornis athertoni*** Two small disjunct populations exist in Madhya Pradesh. One in the Satpura Range (Bori Wildlife Sanctuary and Pachmarhi) and another in and around Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve. Possibly also in Deogarh hills in Shahdol district, not far from Bandhavgarh where calls were heard in a dense sal patch near Kumerhin on 19.vi.2003. Not seen anywhere else. Our observations largely agree with the distribution map in Kazmierczak (2000). However, the range in Rasmussen and Anderton (2005) includes the entire stretch of central Indian highlands.

**Malabar Pied Hornbill *Anthracoeros coronatus*** Distributed in central, southern, and eastern Madhya Pradesh. Our survey yielded four disjunct populations: 1) North Betul Division (Rampur) and Satpura Range (Bori Wildlife Sanctuary-Pachmarhi), 2) Seoni Plateau (Pench Tiger Reserve) and

south Maikal Range (Kanha Tiger Reserve), 3) East Maikal Range (Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve), and 4) Deogarh hills in Shahdol district (Kumerhin Reserve).

**Rufous Woodpecker *Celeus brachyurus*** Central and eastern Madhya Pradesh including Satpura Range, Seoni-Chhindwara Plateau, and south and east Maikal Range. Distribution limits in the region remarkably identical to that of Emerald Dove (further spatial analyses planned). More frequent in sal biome than teak forests.

**Small Yellow-naped Woodpecker *Picus chlorolophus*** Fairly common in less-disturbed forests in Satpura Range (Bori Wildlife Sanctuary and Mahadeo Hills), Seoni Plateau (Pench Tiger Reserve), and south Maikal Range (Kanha Tiger Reserve east to Amarkantak). Not found north of Narmada. Our observations agree with the range map in Kazmierczak (2000), but not with Grimmett et al. (1998) or Rasmussen and Anderton (2005).

**Little Scaly-bellied Green Woodpecker *Picus xanthopygaeus*** Commonly found in a wide variety of forest types in central and eastern Madhya Pradesh, from north Betul Division through Satpura Range, Mahadeo Hills, Seoni-Chhindwara Plateau, and south and east Maikal Ranges. One unconfirmed sighting around Panna Tiger Reserve (a bird in flight near Akola on Panna-Amanganj road on 29.vi.2003). Contrary to existing literature (Grimmett et al. 1998; Kazmierczak 2000), we did not come across it in western Madhya Pradesh including Malwa Plateau and Nimar Hills (Shahpur in Betul district is our westernmost record) nor in Sagar-Damoh Plateau.

**Singing Bush-Lark *Mirafra cantillans*** Locally distributed in western and southern Madhya Pradesh. Absent from most of central and eastern Madhya Pradesh especially north of Narmada River.

**Red-winged Bush-Lark *Mirafra erythroptera*** Widespread in the region except sal-dominant eastern Madhya Pradesh (Maikal and Kaimur Hills). Also absent in Satpura Range. Very common on Malwa Plateau (Simrole-Mhow road) and Sagar-Damoh Plateau (Nauradehi Wildlife Sanctuary). Generally scarcer elsewhere.

**Indian Short-toed Lark *Calandrella raytal*** Very few historical records from the region (Hewetson 1956 from Narmada). Certainly, more widely distributed in the region than past records indicate. All our sightings were invariably along sandy river banks, as follows: Along Narmada River: Near Jabalpur (21.vi.2004), near Hoshangabad

(26.ii.2002; 2.xii.2002) and, several between Omkareshwar and Mandleshwar (26.v.2004). Along Ken River: Near Rajgarh, Panna district (29.vi.2003). Along Bearma River: Near Kudpura, Damoh district (21.vi.2004). Along Kanhan River: One pair near Pandhurna, Chhindwara district (22.v.2004). **Sykes's Crested Lark *Galerida deva*** Quite common in western and northern Madhya Pradesh. Absent from higher hills (above c.500m a.s.l.) of Satpura Range and the eastern sal country. Ken River in the north and River Pench in the south probably form the distribution limits, east of which we have no records. Our easternmost record in the north is near Rajgarh, Panna district (29.vi.2003), and in the south near Kumbhapani, Chhindwara district (26.iv.2004).

**Scarlet Minivet *Pericrocotus flammeus*** Occurs in two disjunct breeding populations. One in north Betul Division (Rampur) and Satpura Range (Bori Wildlife Sanctuary-Pachmarhi) but not Mahadeo Hills. Another in south Maikal Range (Kanha Tiger Reserve east to Amarkantak). Not seen anywhere else.

Reports of its occurrence (Tyabji 1994; Pasha et al. 2004) in other parts of the region is probably owing to confusion with the similar-looking Long-tailed Minivet *P. ethologus*, which is a common winter migrant to central India.

**Pied Flycatcher-Shrike *Hemipus picatus*** We recorded this species in three disjunct localities: 1) South Betul Division (Bhainsdehi Range), 2) North Betul division – Satpura Range (Bori Wildlife Sanctuary), and 3) South Maikal Range (Kanha Tiger Reserve east to Amarkantak). There is an old record from Sagar-Damoh district (Moss King 1911), but we do not have any records from north of Narmada River.

The birds in central India are seemingly more withdrawn and less confiding than northern population in the Himalayas.

**Black-crested Bulbul *Pycnonotus melanicterus*** We have only two records of this species and both are restricted to north Betul Division - Satpura Range. A pair near Rampur, Betul (27.iv.2004) and a small flock of four near Tamia, Chhindwara district (22.v.2004). Not seen elsewhere, including Bori Wildlife Sanctuary, which lies between these two localities. Apparently, there are old records from Pench Tiger Reserve (Sterndale 1887), but this population is not seen anymore.

**Red-whiskered Bulbul *Pycnonotus jocosus*** Recorded only in Betul Plateau (both south

Betul and north Betul divisions) and Satpura Range (Bori Wildlife Sanctuary – Pachmarhi extending down to Mahadeo Hills, Tamia in Chhindwara district). Despite its very restricted range in the region, it is curiously abundant wherever it occurs. Apparently there is another disjunct population in Kanha Tiger Reserve (Newton et al. 1986), but we could not locate it.

**White-browed Bulbul *Pycnonotus luteolus*** Occurs only in Seoni-Chhindwara Plateau, the northern limit of its distribution in central India. Very scarce, though reportedly locally common in Nagpur city. Our records include two pairs near Pandhurna in Chhindwara district (22.v.2004) and birds sighted on three different occasions in Pench Tiger Reserve, Seoni district (a pair at Karmajhiri in 1996 and on 6.ix.2003, and another pair near Turia gate on 18.ii.2004).

**Malabar Whistling-Thrush *Myophonus horsfieldii*** We have four records: South Betul Division (Kukru, Bhainsdehi Range: fairly common), north Betul Division-Satpura Range (also frequent in the adjacent Mahadeo Hills, Tamia, Chhindwara district), near Shahpura in Dindori district (two sightings on 18.vi.2003), and in Deogarh hills near Kumerhin in Shahdol district (one sighting on 19.vi.2003).

**Orange-headed Thrush *Zoothera citrina cyanotus*** Found commonly in the forests of southern and eastern Madhya Pradesh from East Nimar Hills (our western-most record: Ashapur, Aulia Range on 23.v.2004) east through Betul Plateau, Satpura Range, Seoni-Chhindwara Plateau, and south and east Maikal Range north to Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve. Apparently occurs in Vindhya scarplands (Panna Tiger Reserve, K. Yoganand, verbally). Absent from western Madhya Pradesh (Malwa Plateau and West Nimar Hills?), and north-central Madhya Pradesh (Sagar-Damoh Plateau).

**Indian Blackbird *Turdus simillimus*** Seen all along the southern hills from Malwa Plateau (Mandu, 26.v.2004; Simrole, 24.v.2004), Nimar Hills (Ashapur, Aulia Range, 23.v.2004), Betul Plateau (Kukru, Bhainsdehi Range, 27.iv.2004-5.v.2004), Satpura Range (Mahadeo hills, Tamia, Chhindwara district, 22.v.2004), Seoni Plateau (Rukhad and Kurai, Pench Tiger Reserve), and south Maikal east to Amarkantak and also Deogarh hills, Kumerhin, Shahdol district (19.vi.2003). We have, however, no records from east Maikal Range (e.g. Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve).

Only a summer / monsoon visitor to Pench Tiger Reserve (from early May to September), and presumably so in other parts of the region.

**White-rumped Shama *Copsychus malabaricus*** All our records confined to south-eastern Madhya Pradesh. From Pench Tiger Reserve (Very rare. Only three sightings: one male near Bodanalla tank on 25.xii.1996, another in a bamboo thicket along Kadasi Nalla on 17.ix.2003 and, a pair near Bodanalla on 27.ii.2004) to south Maikal Range (Kanha Tiger Reserve: quite common) east to Amarkantak south of Narmada River.

**Indian Chat *Cercomela fusca*** Occurs west of a diagonal line from Panna to Khargon along the Narmada River. Our easternmost records along this line from north-east to south-west in the region are as follows: Panna-Amanganj road (29.vi.2003), Bilayatkalani on Katni-Umaria road (17.vi.2003), Jabalpur city (30.vi.2003; 22.vi.2004), Suatala on Narasimhapur-Sagar road (13.vi.2004), near Hoshangabad (26.ii.2002), between Omkareshwar and Mandleshwar (26.v.2004), and Khargon town (28.v.2004).

Our observations largely agree with the range map in Kazmierczak (2000). Curiously, we have one doubtful sighting far from this line near Mansar on Nagpur-Seoni Highway on 29.v.2004.

**Spotted Babbler *Pellorneum ruficeps*** Recorded from central and eastern Madhya Pradesh: South Betul (Kukru, Bhainsdehi Range), north Betul (Rampur), Satpura Range (Bori Wildlife Sanctuary-Pachmarhi, but not found in the adjacent Mahadeo Hills), south and east Maikal Ranges north to Bandhavgarh. Not seen west of Betul.

**Indian Scimitar-Babbler *Pomatorhinus horsfieldii*** Range nearly identical to that of Spotted Babbler, often found together in the same locality. In addition, also recorded from Mahadeo Hills, near Tamia in Chhindwara district (22.v.2004), Pench Tiger Reserve (a pair at Kadasi Nalla on 17.ix.2003; also see D'Abreau 1935), and Vindhya scarplands (Panna Tiger Reserve: K. Yoganand verbally; also distinct dueting calls heard from a dense bamboo forest near Shikarpura, Panna district on 29.vi.2003).

**Common Babbler *Turdoides caudatus*** Widespread but generally less common. We did not have any records from most parts of south and east Maikal Ranges (except one flock at Manpur near Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve on 25.vi.2003); probably absent from south-eastern Madhya Pradesh.

**Quaker Tit-Babbler *Alcippe poiocephala***

A bird of the hill-forests. Its range nearly overlaps with that of Spotted Babbler. However, we have one record from west of Betul, near Dhulkot, West Nimar district (28.v.2004).

Both, this species and Spotted Babbler are curiously absent from several localities where seemingly suitable habitats are present (Aulia in East Nimar Hills, Mahadeo Hills in Chhindwara district, and Kurai hills in Pench Tiger Reserve).

**Rufous-fronted Prinia *Prinia buchanani***

Mainly found in western Madhya Pradesh extending east to Rukhad (in Pench Tiger Reserve, very scarce) in the south and Satna in the north (a pair seen near Satna River bridge between Nagod and Satna on 26.vi.2003). No records [absent?] from central (Satpura Range and Mahadeo Hills) and eastern Madhya Pradesh (Maikal Ranges).

**Ashy Prinia *Prinia socialis*** Recorded almost throughout the region except north-eastern Madhya Pradesh including Bandhavgarh (Absent from east Maikal Range north of Narmada River?). See Tyabji (1994) for his comments on its reported absence from Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve.

**Striated Marsh-Warbler *Megalurus palustris*** Very few historical records (D'Abreu 1935). Possibly more widespread than old records indicate (Rasmussen and Anderton 2005). We have recorded from three localities: Along Narmada River: several between Omkareshwar and Mandleshwar (26.v.2004). Along Ken River: One individual near the bridge between Rajgarh and Panna (29.vi.2003). Along River Pench: One pair close to Tikari village, Pench Tiger Reserve on 15.viii.2003.

**Asian Brown Flycatcher *Muscicapa dauurica*** Earlier known to breed only around the hills of Malwa Plateau (Briggs 1931; Ali and Ripley 1982). We discovered another disjunct breeding population in south Betul Division (Kukru, Bhainsdehi Range, scarce) and also possibly in the adjacent Gawilgarh hills, Melghat Tiger Reserve, Maharashtra. Hewetson (1956) recorded it from Melghat as a probable breeder, but not from Betul. Our westernmost record is from the hills of Simrole (24.v.2004), where it is not uncommon.

Rasmussen and Anderton (2005) show that the species breeds extensively across the central Indian highlands east to Maikal Ranges. Though we did not come across this species east of Betul, intensive searches

may yield further breeding records. Mehta (1998) recorded it as an uncommon resident in Bori Wildlife Sanctuary. Incidentally, we have three winter records from Pench Tiger Reserve, Seoni district (16.xi.2003, 23.xii.2003, 2.ii.2004; see also Pasha et al. 2004).

**White-throated Fantail *Rhipidura albicollis*** Recorded from three disjunct areas, all south of Narmada River: 1) South Betul Division (Bhainsdehi Range, Kukru), 2) North Betul Division-Satpura Range (Bori Wildlife Sanctuary-Pachmarhi) both these populations belong to the race *R. a. albogularis*, and 3) South Maikal Range (Kanha east to Amarkantak), belonging to *R. a. orissae*. There is one unconfirmed sighting (apparently *R. a. albogularis*) from Pench Tiger Reserve, Seoni district (Sayantan Biswas, verbally.).

Curiously, some individuals observed in Bori Wildlife Sanctuary and Kukru Reserve, Betul district, looked very similar to *R. a. orissae*.

**Spotted Creeper *Salpornis spilonotus*** Only two sightings during the survey, both from Nauradehi Wildlife Sanctuary, Sagar district. One pair near Mohali on 19.vi.2004, an individual near Chevla Talab on 20.vi.2004. Apparently not uncommon in Panna Tiger Reserve (K. Yoganand, verbally.).

**Purple-rumped Sunbird *Nectarinia zeylonica*** All our records are from south-central Madhya Pradesh. Uncommon in Bhainsdehi Range, south Betul Division and one pair near Pandhurna, Chhindwara district on 22.v.2004. Reportedly occurs in the adjacent Satpura Range as well (Mehta 1998, from Bori Wildlife Sanctuary), though we did not see any there.

**Grey-headed Starling *Sturnus malabaricus*** Recorded from forested tracts of central and eastern Madhya Pradesh from Satpura Plateau (Bori Wildlife Sanctuary-Pachmarhi) east to Maikal Ranges (Kanha and Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve) through Seoni-Chhindwara Plateau (Pench Tiger Reserve), Sagar-Damoh Plateau (Nauradehi Wildlife Sanctuary) and Vindhya scarplands (Panna Tiger Reserve) in the north. All the records were between April and July, indicating a breeding population, and presence of juveniles further confirms their breeding status in the region. Not recorded west of Bori (including Betul Plateau?). Probably widespread in winter across the entire region.

**Jungle Myna *Acridotheres fuscus*** Observed only from south Maikal Range in south-eastern Madhya Pradesh. Is quite

common in and around Kanha but very scarce east to Amarkantak. Distribution intriguingly very local and patchy. Records from other parts of the region are questionable (Pasha et al. 1998, from Pench Tiger Reserve).

**Ashy Drongo *Dicrurus leucophaeus*** The most surprising finding of the survey. Widely thought to be a winter visitor from the Himalaya Range (Ali and Ripley 1983). We found several breeding birds during our survey, mostly in central, southern, and eastern Madhya Pradesh from the Satpura Range (Bori Wildlife Sanctuary-Pachmarhi), Mahadeo Hills (Tamia, Chhindwara district), Seoni Plateau (Pench Tiger Reserve), south Maikal Range (Kanha Tiger Reserve east to Amarkantak), and up to east Maikal Range (Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve) in the north-east. Not found west (including Betul Plateau) or north of Bori. Quite common wherever found. Territorial fights and courtship behaviour are rather prolonged, beginning in the second week of April, while nest construction starts around the first week of June. The fledglings are usually seen in the first week of July.

The only breeding record from the region, in the past, was from Bandhavgarh (Tyabji 1994). Poor coverage during the south-west monsoon (when most parts of the region become inaccessible) and similarity to the commoner Black Drongo *D. macrocerus* might explain why the bird has been consistently under-reported from the region. Interestingly, Rasmussen and Anderton (2005) have shown a small resident population in southern Madhya Pradesh, citing Walter Koelz's unpublished collections from central India.

Widespread in winter throughout the well-wooded parts of the region, when the local population is probably augmented by wintering birds from the Himalayas.

We strongly recommend further intensive surveys between May and July in other peninsular hills as well (e.g. Eastern Ghats) for further breeding records.

**Spangled Drongo *Dicrurus hottentottus*** We identified four disjunct populations: 1) Satpura Range: common in Bori Wildlife Sanctuary-Pachmarhi, (but not found in Mahadeo Hills), 2) Seoni Plateau: very rare in Kurai Valley, Pench Tiger Reserve (only two sightings: one pair on 3.v.2002, and another nesting pair on 7.vii.2003), 3) South Maikal Range (common in Kanha Tiger Reserve and scarce east to Amarkantak), and 4) East Maikal Range (fairly common in Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve east to Deogarh

Hills). Probably spreads in winter.

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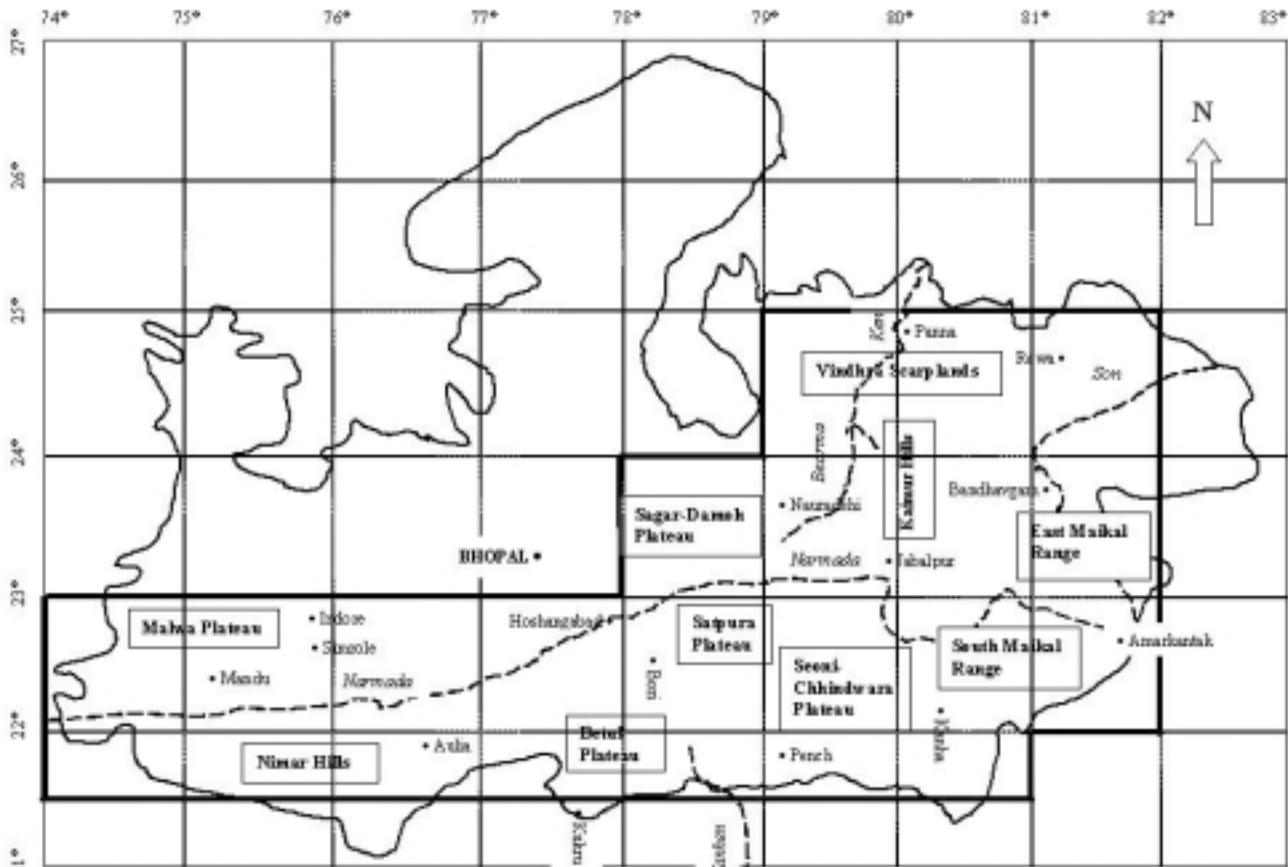


Fig. 1. Central Indian highlands of Madhya Pradesh.

## Additions to the avifauna of the Biligirirangan Hills, Karnataka

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**B**iligirirangan Temple Wildlife Sanctuary (hereafter called BR Hills: 11°47'-12°9'N 77°0'-77°16'E) is situated in the Chamarajanagar district of south-eastern Karnataka and covers an area of 540km<sup>2</sup>. To the north and east lie the town of Kollegala and the Kollegala Forest Division respectively. Westward the plains of Yelandur and Gundlupet separate the sanctuary from Bandipur National Park. To the south, the range merges with the Satyamangalam Hills, which further to the south drop down to the Coimbatore plains. Eastwards, the Kollegala forests and a few villages separate the range from the Mahadeswara Malai Hills. Situated thus at the tail end of the eastern ghats, the BR Hills form a part of the hill ranges that connect the Eastern Ghats with the Western Ghats, with avifaunal elements of both these areas. (Ramesh 1989)

BR Hills comprises roughly four parallel hill ranges running north to south. The central pair is taller, with the highest peak, Kattari Betta, rising to over 1,800m a.s.l. These hills bear tropical moist deciduous forest, and at higher elevations, tropical evergreen forest. The hilltops are covered with mosaic patches of shola-grassland.

BR Hills receives rainfall from both the south-western and the retreating (NE) monsoon, with an average annual precipitation of c.600mm in the periphery and c.3,000mm in the higher elevations. (Aravind *et al.* 2001)

BR Hills has been designated as an Important Bird Area (IBA) – a priority area for conservation (Islam and Rahmani 2004). In view of this, the results of over two years of field surveys by us are significant. For instance, the Grey-headed Bulbul *Pycnonotus priocephalus* an endemic Western Ghats species (Stattersfield *et al.* 1998) and a Threatened species (Collar *et al.* 1994; BirdLife International 2001) has not been reported from the sanctuary previously. The occurrence of the Tickell's Thrush *Turdus unicolor* from the area is the southernmost winter record of the species till date.

The avifauna of the Biligirirangans has been the subject of scientific study since the early part of the last century. R. C. Morris, a coffee planter and keen big game hunter in the BR Hills, was also an

enthusiastic bird watcher and published several notes in the Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society on the birdlife of the area. As his guest in November 1939, Dr Sálím Ali surveyed the area as part of his 'Birds of Mysore' survey. Baskaran (1992) reports the occurrence of the Dusky Eagle-Owl *Bubo coromandus* from the area. Srinivasa *et al.* (1997) published the Faunal Survey of BR Hills and recorded a total of 229 species from the sanctuary. More recently, Aravind *et al.* (2001) reported an additional 28 species of birds from BR Hills, of which 15 are waterbirds. A consolidated checklist of the bird species recorded till 2001 from BR Hills, comprising a total of 245 species, is appended to the above work. Later works include trip reports listing birds seen in BR Hills (Uttangi 2000; Shyamal 2003; Nani *et al.* 2004; Subramanya *et al.* 2004; Krishna *et al.* 2005).

We undertook extensive field surveys, covering all the habitats and areas of the sanctuary in all seasons from May 2003 to August 2005. GPS readings were used to determine altitudes and coordinates. In addition to recording a majority of the species reported from the sanctuary till date, nine bird species as yet unreported from BR Hills were met with. An annotated list of these species is given below. Taxonomy follows Manakadan and Pittie (2001).

### Accipitridae

**Crested Goshawk *Accipiter trivirgatus***  
Two records from the sanctuary. A pair was seen circling over moist deciduous forest just beyond Maruladakadu c.1,200m a.s.l., on 7.xii.2003. A single individual seen in flight over moist deciduous forest on Jyothi Betta on 18.iv.2005 at c.1,300m a.s.l. Silent on both occasions. May be resident in BR Hills.

The north Indian race *A. t. indicus* has been recorded up to 2,000m a.s.l., in the Himalaya whereas the south Indian race *A. t. peninsulae*, "...affect moist deciduous and evergreen forested foothills and broken country and up to at least c. 1100 metres elevation in the Western Ghats system and Nilgiri Hills." (Ali and Ripley 1987). This species may thus affect higher elevations in the peninsula than previously recorded.

**White-eyed Buzzard *Butastur teesa*** A single sighting from a scrub and dry-deciduous interface in the northern part of

the sanctuary, sitting on the ground by the Krishnayyana Katte reservoir in May 2003.

**Long-billed Vulture *Gyps indicus*** A single record of an individual soaring over low scrub-covered hillside near the Gumballi forest check-post in the northern part of the sanctuary on 10.x.2003.

### Picidae

**Speckled Piculet *Picumnus innominatus***  
This species was recorded frequently at all times of the year in moist deciduous habitat during our field surveys, but has not been recorded earlier from the sanctuary. Seen singly or in pairs, it keeps to the mid-storey, sometimes descending to tangled undergrowth. Most often met with as part of large mixed hunting parties, keeping company with species such as the Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker *Dendrocopos nanus*, the golden-backed woodpeckers *Dinopium* spp., White-cheeked Barbet *Megalaima viridis*, Grey Tit *Parus major*, Velvet-fronted Nuthatch *Sitta frontalis* and Bronzed Drongo *Dicrurus aeneus*, but "...liable to be overlooked amongst the restless itinerant hunting parties of tits, warblers, nuthatches and small timelines, etc., with which it usually associates." (Ali and Ripley 1987).

**Black-shouldered Woodpecker *Chrysocolaptes festivus*** A single record of a female in moist deciduous forest on 1.ii.2003. The bird was on the ground and flew up into a tree on being approached closer. A second individual, probably the male, also took flight at the same time but was not conclusively identified. Both individuals called from the trees, the call being similar to that of the Greater Golden-backed Woodpecker *Chrysocolaptes lucidus*. Although it is considered to be "fairly common but local in low-elevation deciduous forest, and scrub with scattered trees" (Rasmussen and Anderton 2005), our record is from moist deciduous forest at c.1,200m a.s.l.

### Pycnonotidae

**Grey-headed Bulbul *Pycnonotus priocephalus*** A poorly known Western Ghats endemic (Stattersfield *et al.* 1998), restricted to heavy rainfall areas. We have recorded the occurrence of this species from BR Hills on three occasions. All sightings were significantly in the same area, in a ravine with moist deciduous and semi-evergreen

forest at c.1,200m a.s.l., near the '40km' milestone on the BR Hills-Chamarajanagar road. A pair was seen in the treetops of this ravine, at eye-level from a road that runs along the top edge of the ravine, on 1.vi.2003, and a single birds seen on 8.xii.2003 and 31.i.2004. These records extend the known range of this species and may indicate that the species is resident in the area.

#### Muscicapidae

##### Yellow-eyed Babbler *Chrysomma sinense*

One individual recorded from scrub jungle at c.800m a.s.l., in the northern part of the sanctuary, in May 2004, near the lake after the Gumballi checkpost.

##### Blue-throated Flycatcher *Cyornis rubeculoides*

A single male recorded on 11.x.2003 in a bamboo clump in the garden of a coffee plantation (Watapi Coffee estate) at c.1,200m a.s.l. We also heard it uttering a song very similar in pattern and quality to that of Tickell's Blue Flycatcher *Cyornis tickelliae*. Although a winter migrant to "SW Ghats and possibly Eastern Ghats" (Rasmussen and Anderton 2005), this is the first record of this species from BR Hills.

**Tickell's Thrush *Turdus unicolor*** A single record of a female from the edge of a coffee plantation near Bangli Podu in March 2004 at c.1,200m a.s.l. The bird was foraging in leaf litter in the typical thrush manner. This is the southernmost winter record of this species till date, having previously been recorded "...in the peninsula to eastern M. P. (Bastar, Raipur), Orissa (Mayurbhanj, Nilgiri), north-eastern Andhra (Anantagiri, Lammasinghi), southern Bengal. In winter frequents edges of forests and, in the Peninsula groves and well wooded areas," (Ali and Ripley 1987). Most recently, it has been recorded at Lalbagh botanical garden in Bangalore (Prashanth 2005).

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## Bird watching in Kedarnath Musk Deer Sanctuary, Chamoli district, Uttarakhand: the upper Garhwal Himalayas

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E-mail: singhap@icfre.org. With 8 colour photos on the inside back cover.

A bird survey was carried out from 13-16.v.2003 in areas lying in the south-eastern part of Kedarnath Musk Deer Sanctuary (975km<sup>2</sup>) comprising Mandal (1,720m), Kanchula Kharak (2,665m), Chopta Chatti (2,840m), Tunganath (3,600m) and Duggal Bitta (2,360m), all located

between c. 30°27' -30°33'N, 79°10' -79°20'E along an altitudinal gradient, situated about 350km north of Delhi. This was done during a continuous 40km trek on a stretch of forest road from Mandal up to Duggal Bitta (on the Gopeshwar-Okhimath road). Besides this, a 3.5km trek uphill to Tunganath temple

and peak from Chopta Chatti in between this route was also done.

The entire sanctuary lies in the northern catchments of Alaknanda River, which is the main tributary of River Ganga (Fig. 1). The area has one of the best, undisturbed forests designated as Himalayan wet-evergreen,

sub-tropical, temperate, sub-alpine and alpine (Champion and Seth 1968; Agrawala 1973; Green 1986). In Garhwal, this forest-patch is a biodiversity hotspot as it has over 650 plant species. The forests here spread over the mountain slopes in large dense continuous patches, with a closed canopy. Lichens (on oak trees), dwarf bamboos (e.g. *Arundinaria falcata*), numerous freshwater streams and a high rainfall [c. 3,093mm annually at 3,050m (Green 1986) are characteristic of the area besides enormous plant diversity (Pande et al. 2001)].

79 avian species were identified during this study of which 14 were not reported by Green (1986) who worked the same area from 1979 to 1981 (these are marked with the superscript "1" after the scientific name). In addition, two species identified are globally threatened (species marked as "2" in superscript) while two species are westward range extensions (species marked as "3" in superscript) in the Himalayas.

At the forest rest house (FRH) in Mandal (base camp) the calls of Rufous Sibia *Heterophasia capistrata*<sup>1</sup>, Great Barbet *Megalaima virens*, Indian *Cuculus micropterus* and Common *C. canorus* Cuckoo, Streaked *Garrulax lineatus* and Striated Laughingthrush *G. striatus*, Black Bulbul *Hypsipetes madagascariensis*<sup>1</sup>, Green-backed Tit *Parus monticolus*, Grey-winged Blackbird *Turdus boulboul*, and Wedge-tailed Green-Pigeon *Treron sphenura* filled the morning air. Pairs of Kaleej *Lophura leucomelanos hamiltoni* pheasants roamed along the FRH compound. They were numerous in the jungle too. Other common birds in the broad-leaved forest at Mandal included the Red-billed *Urocissa erythrorhyncha*<sup>1</sup> and Yellow-billed *U. flavirostris* Blue Magpie, Grey Treepie *Dendrocitta formosae*, Eurasian *Garrulus glandarius* and Black-headed *G. lanceolatus* Jay, Rusty-cheeked Scimitar-Babbler *Pomatorhinus erythrogenys*, Long-tailed Minivet *Pericrocotus ethologus*, Oriental Turtle-Dove *Streptopelia orientalis*, Ashy Drongo *Dicrurus leucophaeus* and, Slaty-headed Parakeet *Psittacula himalayana*.

In the dense lush green 'nullahs' around Mandal, Chestnut-headed Tesias *Tesia castaneocoronata*<sup>1</sup> (1+2; pair probably nesting) were observed in undergrowth thick with ferns and climbers. Close by, near flowing water, a rufous morph of the Nepal Wren-Babbler *Pnoepyga immaculata*<sup>1,2,3</sup> fed near its nest, which was located beside the stream in a dense tuft of ferns, fallen

branches, grass and boulders. It came out to feed in the open along the bases of tree trunks on the rocky slopes and retreated to its hideout on being disturbed. Overhead, a sailing Collared Falconet *Microhierax caerulescens*<sup>1</sup> made short downward sweeps while circling and calling. A Crested Serpent-Eagle *Spilornis cheela* was also circling and calling. A few Alpine Swifts *Tachymarptis melba*<sup>1</sup> were also recorded in the sky above the forest slopes of Mandal.

Daily, at dusk in Mandal, Indian Jungle Nightjars *Caprimulgus indicus* chased each other around the FRH garden and nursery beds. Their calls, "chuk-chuk-chuk-chuk-chuk" and "chuckoo-chuckoo-chuckoo", ending with a "woo-wo-woo-woo" were continuous and engine-like. A Brown Wood-Owl *Strix leptogrammica*<sup>1</sup> was spotted perched on a tree behind the FRH, twice, at dusk and dawn. Its call, uttered by bending its body and inflating its throat, started with a short "wuh" at dusk, and when it became darker, lengthened to "wuh-wu-who", repeated at short intervals of 5-10sec. Another owl responded to these calls, from a distance of about c.50m.

Trekking in the morning through the jungle on a trail towards Kanchula Kharak (13km from Mandal), small parties of Stripe-throated Yuhina *Yuhina gularis* (2-4 birds), three Yellow-naped Yuhinas *Y. flavicollis*<sup>1</sup>, and six Bar-throated Minlas *Minla strigula* were noted feeding on berries in low canopy among bushes. Maroon Orioles *Oriolus traillii* were common and sang all along this route. On the sloping forest floor amongst the dry leaves, pairs of Common Hill-Partridges *Arborophila torqueola* were common. Their call, a deep, mournful, hollow ascending whistled "whooha", ended abruptly. It was given off several times with small gaps and often followed by an excited rapid whistle, "bobwhite-bobwhite-bobwhite". Sometimes there was a response to such calls by other individuals present in the same or other nullahs. Along the forest streams, Spotted *Enicurus maculatus* and Black-backed *E. immaculatus* Forktail, a Greater Long-billed Thrush *Zoothera monticola*<sup>2</sup> and a pair of nesting Green-tailed Sunbirds *Aethopyga nipalensis*, were noted. The twittering song of a Verditer Flycatcher *Eumyias thalassina* was heard in the canopy of small trees.

Nearing Kanchula Kharak I encountered Grey-headed Flycatcher *Culicicapa ceylonensis*, White-throated

Laughingthrush *Garrulax albogularis*, White-browed Tit-Babbler *Alcippe vinipectus*, Spotted Laughingthrush *Garrulax ocellatus*, Rufous-bellied Niltava *Niltava sundara*, Yellow-naped Yuhina and Black-lored Yellow Tit *Parus xanthogenys* in the forest alongside the road. Of interest along this patch, and a first for me, were two Yellow-browed Tits *Sylviparus modestus*<sup>1</sup>, feeding singly on insects on leaves of a large deciduous tree. An unidentified bird, which looked like a Gold-headed Babbler *Stachyris chrysaea* in plumage and size, was also noted in the dense wet undergrowth. In the foliage were Grey-headed Flycatcher-Warbler *Seicercus xanthoschistos*, Grey-faced *Phylloscopus maculipennis* and Blyth's *P. reguloides* Leaf-Warblers besides a species that could not be identified.

At Kanchula Kharak, a white morph Nepal Wren-Babbler was photographed feeding and hiding in bushes / hole on an open damp muddy slope with grass and bushes along the roadside. It was also heard a few times as it gave its typical call, "tii-ti-ti-ti-it-it-ti-ti" (starting with a high rapid series of "ti's" and descending in tone after half way through to almost a sudden break in the end, as if being generated by a motor engine that starts and accelerates with full power but soon slows down and stops suddenly).

A Large Hawk-Cuckoo *Hierococcyx sparveriioides* was heard and identified from its song. Its call sounds similar to the 'brain fever' notes of a Brainfever Bird *H. varius* but is more subdued and less shrilly. The Oriental Cuckoo's *Cuculus saturatus* "oop-ooop-ooop" was heard from time to time. At the Musk Deer farm and breeding center were Grey Bushchat *Saxicola ferra*<sup>1</sup> and Large Scaly-bellied Green Woodpecker *Picus squamatus*.

Further ahead, in the *Rhododendron arboreum* (flowering was over for the season) forest, along the meadows at Chopta Chatti (located below Tunganath peak), a pair of Orange-gorgetted Flycatchers *Ficedula strophilata*, Spot-winged Crested *Parus melanolophus* and Red-headed Tit *Aegithalos concinnus*, and Rusty-flanked Tree-Creeper *Certhia nipalensis*, moving low on the tree trunk, were observed. While on the open ground, collecting nesting material (moss / lichens,) was a pair of Himalayan Pied Woodpecker *Dendrocopos himalayensis* and White-tailed Nuthatch *Sitta himalayensis*.

The alpine scrub enroute Tunganath peak had *Rhododendron campanulatum*

blossoming and a beautiful purple colored *Primula* sp. at the higher reaches. Here, in the shrubbery, a Golden Bush-Robin *Tarsiger chrysaeus* pair was observed in courtship display. Amongst Rhododendron bushes, the male chased the female, running on the ground, with a fanned tail, displaying the black inverted 'T' on his golden tail. Besides, Orange-barred Leaf-Warblers *Phylloscopus pulcher*<sup>1</sup> were numerous (10+) in the bushes and on silver fir *Abies* sp. (probably nesting). The Rhododendron shrubs also held Variegated Laughingthrush *Garrulax variegatus*, Blue Whistling-Thrush *Myophonus caeruleus*, White-browed Bush-Robin *Tarsiger indicus* (singing from tree top), Blue-fronted Redstart *Phoenicurus frontalis* pair, three Striped-throated Yuhina, Oriental Tree Pipit *Anthus hodgsonii* and Rufous Sibia.

At Tunganath peak (near the temple), Jungle Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos* was common and a White-capped Redstart *Chaimarrornis leucocephalus* was seen along a small stream. Two Himalayan Griffons *Gyps himalayensis* sailed close by several times.

Further down, on way from Chopta Chatti towards Duggal Bitta village, in rocky alpine meadows of Kharsu oak *Quercus semecarpifolia* a pair of White-collared Blackbirds *Turdus albocinctus* was feeding on the ground and a Rufous-bellied Pied Woodpecker *Hypopicus hyperythrus* on a tree. Returning towards Mandal, near Chopta, a Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* flew along the rocky slopes.

Birds seen close to Mandal village, in lower cultivated areas along the forest's periphery were: Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*, Common Stonechat *Saxicola torquata*<sup>1</sup>, Cinnamon Tree Sparrow *Passer rutilans*<sup>1</sup>, Red-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer*, Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia*, Chestnut-bellied Rock-Thrush *Monticola rufiventris*, House Swift *Apus affinis*, etc.

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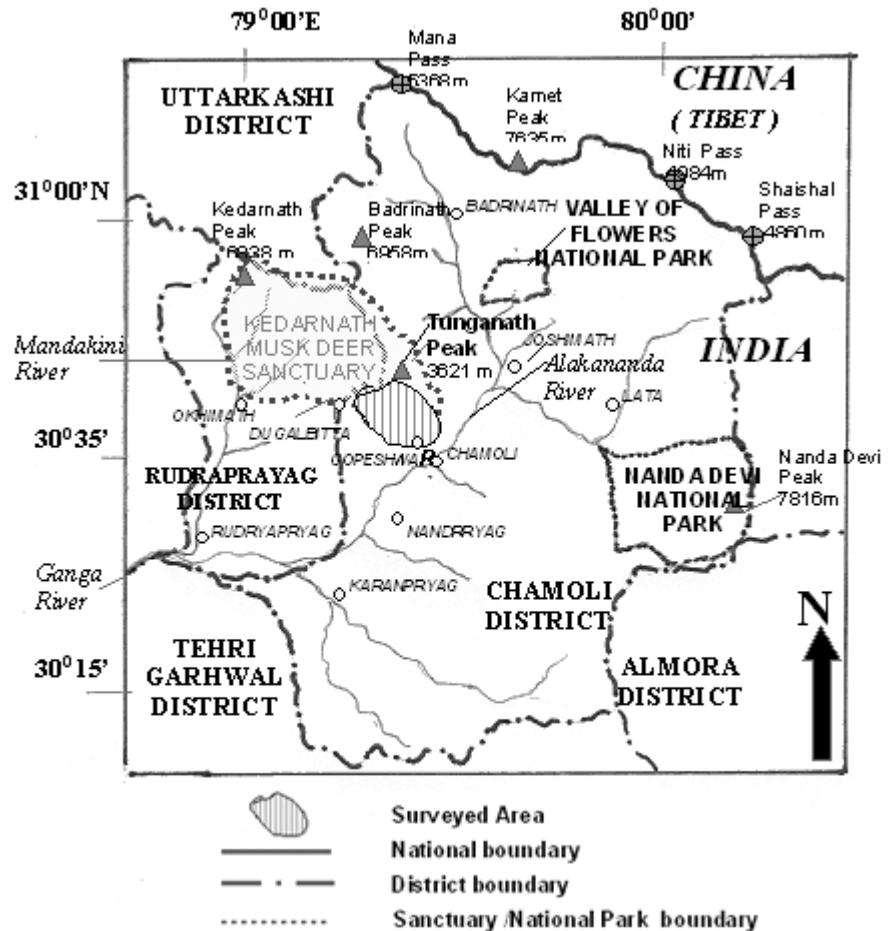


Fig.1 Map of Chamoli district in Uttarakhand state depicting the location of Kedarnath Musk Deer Sanctuary, surveyed area and sites as mentioned in the text.

## Notes from a drought year in Rishi Valley

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This (2004-2005) is the fourth consecutive year that rains failed in Rishi Valley (Chittoor district) and the surrounding Rayalseema region of Andhra Pradesh (India). There has been no surface water anywhere on the campus; the last bit of water in the "Last Pond" had dried up

long ago. Even in early December (2003), trees had begun shedding leaves and a few dry branches came crashing down. The mighty banyan *Ficus benghalensis*, the veteran of the campus, lost a couple of large branches.

There have been hardly any waterbirds

on the campus for several years now. The ubiquitous White-breasted Waterhens *Amaurornis phoenicurus* that used to advertise their presence with loud calls were now conspicuously absent. So were the Little Grebe, Common Moorhens *Gallinula chloropus*, egrets *Egretta* spp., waders, and

Small Blue *Alcedo atthis* and Lesser Pied Kingfishers *Ceryle rudis*. The Indian Pond-Herons *Ardeola grayii* that had put up with the water shortage all these three years became scarce this season (December 2004 onwards). All these days they had eked out a living foraging on the dry ground close to the paths frequented by people, feeding on insects. Now even these became scarce and it was time to leave. Yet one or two individuals still frequent and occasionally flush out from quieter corners.

Raptorial birds too have become less conspicuous. Till recently, we had regular sightings of Short-toed Snake-Eagles *Circaetus gallicus*, Tawny Eagles *Aquila rapax*, Bonelli's Eagle *Hieraaetus fasciatus*, White-eyed Buzzards *Butastur teesa*, Oriental Honey-Buzzards *Pernis ptilorhynchus*, harriers (*Circus* spp.), Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*, Shikra *Accipiter badius* (that used to nest regularly in the campus), occasional Changeable Hawk-Eagles *Spizaetus cirrhatus* and Crested Serpent-Eagles *Spilornis cheela*, and the Black-shouldered Kites *Elanus caeruleus*. There were only irregular sightings now. The female kestrel that used to patrol the low hills was missing after the recent fires (January 2005) that raged on the scrub-covered hillsides in the valley, deliberately set by the shepherds. Earlier, I had seen it boldly attacking tawny eagles that I suspect had a nest in a tree up on this hill.

We had not undertaken the annual waterfowl counts for the second consecutive year around Rishi Valley as all the waterbodies in the neighbourhood had dried-up. So when I visited Ghattu village – c. 20km from where we had earlier reported seeing the Grey Herons *Ardea cinerea* nesting on a banyan tree by the road [NLBW 39 (1): 3-4, 1999] – on 22.i.2005, I was hardly surprised to see the bone-dry irrigation tank on whose bank the banyan tree stood. Yet I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw over 25-30 Grey Herons on the tree, building nests, mating or incubating! It was incredible that birds dependant on water for their food chose to nest even in a drought year. I had to wait for over three weeks to solve the mystery.

A colleague drew my attention to a news report in the vernacular newspapers in mid-February. It mentioned that several hundred waterbirds had converged at an irrigation tank, some 25km from our campus. A visit on 16.ii.2005 confirmed the report. There were over 1,200 ducks and another 200-300

waterbirds and waders. A second visit with student-birdwatchers gave a good idea of the birds of this little tank, which was rapidly drying up. It was, as the birds flew, less than two kilometers from Ghattu village and a few Grey Herons kept flying in and out.

On this tank were six species of ducks – Lesser Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna javanica*, Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*, Spot-billed Duck *Anas poecilorhyncha*, Northern Shoveller *Anas clypeata*, Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*, and Garganey *Anas querquedula* – Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*, a single Large Casmerodius *albus* and Median Egrets *Mesophoyx intermedia*, several Pond Herons, about a hundred Little Grebes, Common Moorhen and Common Coots *Fulica atra*, Black Ibis *Pseudibis papillosa*, a Painted Stork *Mycteria leucocephala*, Little Cormorants *Phalacrocorax niger*, Black-winged Stilts *Himantopus himantopus*, snipe *Gallinago* sp., Green *Tringa ochropus*, Wood *T. glareola* and Common Sandpipers *Actitis hypoleucos*, Little *Calidris minuta* and Temminck's Stints *Calidris temminckii*, Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*, Little Ringed *Charadrius dubius* and Kentish Plovers *Charadrius alexandrinus*, besides Lesser Pied and Small Blue Kingfishers and Yellow Wagtails *Motacilla flava*. What a treat this was for eyes that have been seeing only dried, parched landscapes! We wondered how long the water would last and where these birds would go thereafter.

Even in early March, though the day temperatures were high, the nights were cool to cold and in the early mornings, it was very cold. On my morning walks, I could see several birds like the Sirkeer Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus leschenaultii* and the Small Bee-eaters *Merops orientalis* sunning themselves in the golden, slanting rays of the sun that turned the rocks pink and the hillsides into burnished gold. The landscape was enlivened by the *Pongamia* bushes that, despite the dry conditions, put up a new flush of tender leaves, which appeared translucent in the sunlight. *Capparis* sp., bushes and an occasional *Alangium* sp., in bloom added to the beauty of the arid countryside. *Ficus* trees along the road leading to the main road were in fruit near the Rural Health Centre. First two banyan trees came into fruit. A week later, the Pipal trees *Ficus religiosa* started fruiting – and what a profusion of fruits they produced – a veritable oasis in the desert! Hordes of Bonnet Macaques *Macaca radiata* and a variety of birds converged on to the tree to

feast. Coppersmith Barbets *Megalaima haemacephala*, bulbuls (three species – *Pycnonotus cafer*, *P. luteolus* and *P. jocosus*), Asian Koels *Eudynamis scolopacea*, Common Mynas *Acridotheres tristis*, Indian Treepies *Dendrocitta vagabunda*, cuckoo-shrikes (*Coracina macei* and *C. melanoptera* and orioles (Oriolidae) were all there. Another bird that turned up was the Indian Grey Hornbill *Ocyrceros birostris*.

One unforgettable sight was the presence of three species of orioles on the same tree, next to each other, facilitating comparison. The Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus* with its bright golden plumage contrasting strongly with the black of its wing and tail feathers; a lone Black-headed Oriole *Oriolus xanthornus* looking slightly smaller but with an orange tinge to its plumage with its thin, long pink beak and the give-away calls; and the Black-naped Oriole *Oriolus chinensis* with its greenish-yellow back rimmed with black wing feathers and the black mask that went around its nape. It seemed that one of the plates in the field guides came to life! (Incidentally, the Black-naped Orioles turned in again this year in bigger numbers, outnumbering the Eurasian Golden Orioles.)

The impact of drought on the smaller passerines was somewhat less apparent. With the loss of vegetative cover, they were easier to spot. Some birds (especially the hole-nesters) were going about on their business of breeding as though the drought did not bother them. Several Common Hoopoes *Upupa epops* nested in the campus and one afternoon I located the birds carrying food to the nest-hole, located in a *Peltophorum* sp., tree. Both birds came with morsels of food that they passed to the chick(s), spending less than a second at the entrance of the nest. A fledgling Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri* landed in a thorny hedge on its maiden flight, being pursued by crows (*Corvus* sp.). It became entangled and I had to intervene. With the help of a small twig, I released the wing feathers from the thorns and offered the twig as a perch to the bird. Fortunately, the young one caught hold of it and I lifted it clear. As soon as the bird realized that it was not likely to get further entangled, it took wing and flew straight to a low branch of a nearby tree.

I was surprised one evening to find myself staring at a Collared Scops Owl *Otus bakkamoena* that peeped from a tree-hole. I had never seen one on the campus so early

in the evening. As I had to go past the tree, I watched the bird and found it staring at me, peering directly below as I went under the hole. I returned a little later to observe it closely. The bird was a little shy and tried concealing itself. Not wishing to disturb it, I observed it from a distance. A couple of colleagues joined me and had a look at the bird. As we watched, another bird peeped out, obviously a young one. Ten days later, in early March 2005, I could see the nest occupied by the youngster. It looked greyish, lacking the distinct "horns" as well as the mottled pattern of its parent and instead appeared to have fine vermiculations. I could not see the adult, which no doubt watched from a nearby perch. It was surprising that the numerous crows present nearby did not harass the bird.

A male Asian Paradise-Flycatcher *Terpsiphone paradisi* has been haunting the car park for several years, each winter without fail and, was there this year too. He was used to people and would continue to carry on with his business of snapping flies in mid-air and returning to the same or an adjacent branch giving excellent views. I noticed that he was not alone and was in the company of three females! The three

female birds had spread out over a distance of just 100m along the path. The male took the liberty of visiting their territories whenever he fancied and even chased them away when he located a juicy morsel!

Oriental Magpie-Robins *Copsychus saularis* were in song and this season more birds were seen in the campus than in earlier years. Had there been a population explosion or was it because of the dry conditions that more birds were easily spotted? Last year birds had started using a nest-box put up for them and had successfully raised young ones. It is always wonderful to begin the day with a concert from this lovely songster. Another bird that I often heard each morning (January-February) was the Brown Flycatcher *Muscicapa dauurica* that called from the bare, flowering *Plumeria* sp., next to my house. Apparently, the bird roosted on the tree and called a few minutes after sunrise before leaving the roost to forage. On days when I woke up early, before the sun was up, I would hear the loud calls of the Mottled Wood Owls *Strix ocellata*. The Painted Spurrow *Galloperdix lunulata* is another regular bird that calls in the mornings from the scrub-covered hillside opposite my house.

The hordes of Common Rosefinches *Carpodacus erythrinus* that were noticed four years ago (c. 2,000 in number), were no longer seen in the valley. Their absence was linked to the lack of food crops in the vicinity. Nevertheless, there was some compensation. There was possibly a Jack Snipe *Lymnocyrtus minimus*, a new bird for me and for the campus, on 21.ii.2005. I noticed it flying up almost vertically from the dried bed of the "Lost Pond" and landed a few meters away under a bush. The small size, long bill, the mottled plumage and the flight pattern suggested it to be this bird but I would like to have a better view before jumping to any conclusion. On 31.iii.2005, three Ashy Woodswallows *Artamus fuscus* turned up on a pylon close to the main road. They called and flew around hawking insects for a while before flying away and disappearing from view. I had never seen these birds here or in the neighbourhood earlier in the past seven years of my stay in Rishi Valley.

Even in a drought year, things do happen, at times taking one by total surprise. If we are not alert just imagine the kind of interesting things we could fail to observe!

## Distribution and extent of Pond Herons *Ardeola grayii* with red legs in India

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During the breeding season, Pond Herons *Ardeola grayii* in India change the colour of their tarsi and feet from dull green to yellow or red (Hancock and Kushlan 1980). In other species of the same genera, red legs have been seen on breeding Chinese Pond Heron *A. bacchus* in Hong Kong, China (N. McKilligan, in litt. 2005), on females of the Maldivian subspecies of the Pond Heron *A. g. phillipsi* whose legs are reported to turn rose-coloured during the breeding season (Ali and Ripley 2001), and the Madagascar Pond Heron *A. idea* whose legs turn distinctly reddish during the breeding season (BirdLife International 2005). For the nominate subspecies, this phenomenon is barely documented and it is not known if all individuals obtain the flush briefly during the breeding season, or whether it is restricted to some individuals in an area. Reddish colouration on tarsi and feet in breeding adults was previously

thought to be rare. However, in some locations, red-legged Pond Herons occur regularly each year throughout the breeding season though they constitute a small percent of the population (Etawah-Mainpuri districts: 2.1 - 2.6% of the total population; Sundar 2004). Red-legged Pond Herons have been seen in Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Kerala in India (Abdulali and Alexander 1952, Parasharya and Naik 1987, Relton 1996, Wesley 1993, 1996, Sundar 2004). In addition to change in leg colour, Pond Herons acquire a distinct blue colouration on the base of the bill and bluish-green facial skin during the breeding season. This change in colour of the beak is well documented and is widespread with birds in Thailand and Sri Lanka also sporting this colouration (Dharmakumarsinhji 1955, Grimmett *et al.* 1998, Rasmussen and Anderton 2005, www.orientalbirdimages.org). In this note I report new locations in India with red-

legged Pond Herons, and present information on the percentage of Pond Herons with red legs in the population from some locations. These findings are discussed in the light of known information on this aspect.

### Methods

Records of red legs in Pond Herons were obtained opportunistically during travels in India. In addition, experienced bird watchers were consulted to determine if they had sighted Pond Herons with red legs. Requests for observations on red-legged Pond Herons were sent out on web-based discussion groups that focussed on birds.

To ascertain the population-level incidence of this phenomenon, standardised road transects were conducted in Gujarat, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh. Counts of non-breeding Pond Herons and those with red and yellow legs were

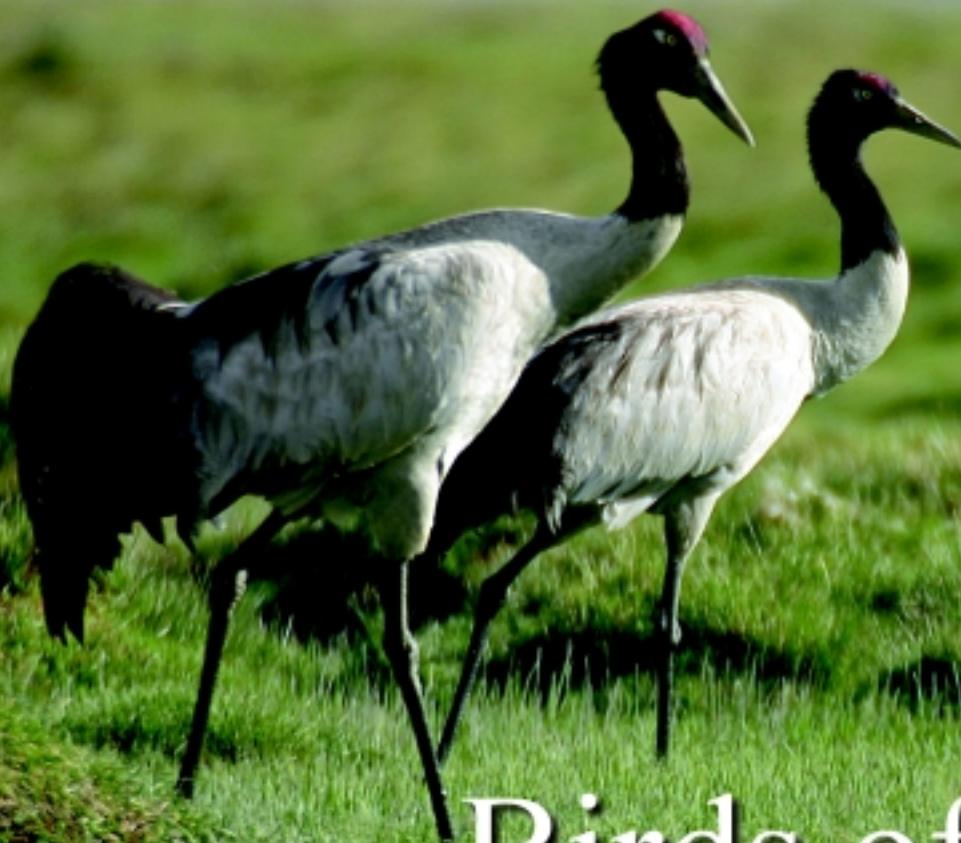
...Contd. p. 113

**Black-necked Crane**  
*Grus nigricollis*  
(Local Name: *Cha Thung-thung*)

We saw eight adults and two chicks (2005 season) at Hanle (Mahe and Tsokar). What can a birder / wildlife photographer tell about this magnificent bird? Words cannot express the awe and wonder that one feels seeing it walk majestically through the cold marshes of Ladakh. One cannot imagine a wilderness without this crane. It is the heart and soul of avian life in Ladakh. Yet its survival hangs by a thin line. The local dogs (Tibetan Mastiff) are the greatest threat to the cranes' eggs and young ones. Even adults are taken. Four crane nests were decimated at Hanle itself by these dogs this year (2005).



Photo: Niranjan Sant



# Birds of Ladakh

Clement Francis M.



**Ruddy Shelduck**  
*Tandorna ferruginea*  
(Local Name: *Muru*,  
*Nguru*)

These birds were seen near water throughout western Ladakh. At Hanle, Mahe, Puga Valley, Tso-Moriri, Tsokar, Shey and Tikse marshes we found them with ducklings. Adults flew fearlessly at intruders, local dogs, Upland Buzzards *Buteo hemilasius* and kiangs, to protect the young. At Hanle we spotted an adult with ducklings, grazing on the grassy marshes and feeding on the abundant flies.

**Bar-headed Goose**  
*Anser Indicus*

(Local Name: *Nangpa*) Scores of these birds were present with young at Tso-moriri. The grassy banks of the lake are good feeding grounds for these birds. There is an abundance of insects and grasses for the adults and the young. It was an enthralling to see a few pairs with as many as 16 young! Tso-moriri is well protected and the only predator that threatened the young was the Brown-headed Gull *Larus brunnicephalus*. We did not spot any land predators.





**Hill Pigeon *Columba rupestris*** (Local Name: *Angoa, Mukron*)

We found this bold bird almost everywhere that we traveled in Ladakh, at Leh, Mahe, Hanle, Tso-moriri and Tso-kar. Also at the Shey and Tikse marshes. They fed on gravel and also near restaurants. On the highways at Leh they were seen feeding on left over food. They look bulky and very sturdy to survive the harsh climatic conditions of Ladakh. Their survival skill were great and we found them feeding on seeds and partially digested edibles from the dung of kiang. We even found them feeding on the undigested food from the stomachs of dead kiangs at Hanle, which were ripped open by local dogs and birds of prey.



**Little Owl *Athena noctua*** (Local Name: *Ugpa*)

At Tso-kar, a pair had nested inside a wolf-trap. These are designed by Pashmina tribals to trap and kill wolves, which prey on their Pashmina goats. There were four fully grown chicks, which never allowed us to photograph them; they hid themselves well inside the stony construction of the wolf trap. Tso-kar did not have much water, as we expected, but had lots of voles, which are part of the owl's prey. The adult sat under the shade of a boulder and allowed us to take a few pictures. The sun light was very harsh for photography and we left the area happy with the knowledge that the pair had bred successfully and the young were in good condition.



**Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris*** (Local Name: *Rizit*)

Horned Larks are among the commonest birds in Ladakh. We found them very active even after sunset. At Tso-moriri, where there is enough sunlight even at 20:00hrs, these birds fed on grass seeds and tubers even as late as 22:00hrs. Their fledged young (top photo) are beautifully marked in buff, black and brown on the back. July being almost the end of their breeding season, we found many juveniles flying around adults and feeding on grass seeds and tubers. They were even digging for maggots in the marshes. (Middle: Female. Bottom: Male.)





**Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola*** (Local Name: *Sterzi*)

At Tikse marshes we found more than ten pairs of these birds breeding. Some were feeding fledged young while others had young in nests. All the nests were placed on the ground inside thick grass. Plenty of fly maggots were present in the marshes and these birds feasted on them. They arrived at their nests, with beak-fuls of maggots, every 5-10 minutes. A pair of Hume's Whitethroat *Sylvia althaea* was also nesting five feet from a pair of wagtails. When adults of both the species arrived in the nesting area, with prey for their young, they tried to aggressively chase each other out of the nesting area. There were many grass-cutters in that area and the birds were seldom shy of them. We found a few pairs nesting at Shey marshes as well.



**Black-billed Magpie *Pica pica*** (Local Name: *Chiatsaga, Katang-putit*)

Found all over Leh and surrounding areas. They seem to fill in for crows in Ladakh, virtually ruling the urban sky. In the Leh area we found a few active nests around the city on trees, which David Sonam said had been nests of Pond Herons *Ardeola grayii* and were usurped by these birds. They were seen around garbage dumps and marshy areas. In marshy areas they dug for edible items. Some hung around roadside restaurants for easy meals. By July we found most adults with fully-fledged young and the adults were teaching them to dig the loose soil for food. At higher elevations like Tso-moriri and Hanle we did not see this bird at all.



**Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti oreophila***

(Local Name: *Chiu-logzi*)

At Hanle we saw at least four pairs of these birds with young ones. They had nested in crevices on the hills. Many different kinds of flies were breeding in huge numbers in the marshes and their maggots were harvested by the adults. It was amazing to see these small birds withstanding the harsh climatic conditions of Ladakh. Males were clothed in breeding plumage. Quite tolerant of humans – one male came as close as four feet from me to dig out a maggot. Their beaks are fantastically designed for digging loose soil for insect larvae. (Left: Male. Right: Juvenile.)



...Contd. from p. 108 maintained along pre-determined road transects. All Pond Herons seen beside the road up to 10 m and in wetlands along the transects were included. The vehicle was stopped briefly to determine leg colour for each individual heron along the road, and wetlands were scanned along the side for herons. All transects were adequately far away from each other to safely assume that each sighting was independent. Proportion of individuals with red and yellow legs was determined.

In Bangalore, a road transect of 30 km was covered by volunteers along the Kanakapura road and included the wetlands of Nelaguli and Horahalli. In Uttar Pradesh, transects were carried out in Rae Bareli and Unnao districts in various road transects totalling 130 km in an area bounded by the towns of Basaha, Bihar, Chanrauli, Gurbakshganj, Ketarkhera, Maurawah, Purwa, Oonchar, Rae Bareli, Raghuraj Singh, Salon, Samaspur, Semri, and Umran. The third transect was carried out in Another transect of 95 km were carried out in Etawah-Mainpuri districts covering the towns of Begumpur, Etawah, Hawaii Patti, Karhal, Kudaiyya, Kumhavar, Kurra, Lohia, Saman, Sarsai Nawar, and Takhrau.

## Results

### Opportunistic observations and secondary reports

Red-legged Pond Herons were seen in multiple locations in Gujarat, Haryana, Kerala, and Rajasthan, and one location each in Bangalore, Delhi and West Bengal (Table 1). The colour on the legs varied from bright coral-red to a much lighter fleshy pink, and was always seen on individuals that were in full breeding plumage. Sightings of individuals were made during opportunistically and are not indicative of periods of maximum occurrence of red legged individuals. Blue coloration on the beaks was present on herons with breeding plumage in all locations. Observations for red-legged herons were carried out in Himachal Pradesh (J. den Besten, verbally 2005), Jammu and Kashmir (T. Sinclair, verbally 2005), and Assam (B. P. Lakhar, verbally 2005) but none were seen.

Four reports of observations at nesting sites were obtained through discussion groups. One was from the heronry at Saras Baag in Pune with observations carried out in the 1990s (K. Kunte, in litt. 2005) and the second was from Kumarakom in Kerala when detailed observation were carried out in 2004

(P. Narayanan, in litt. 2005). No red-legged individuals were seen in either heronry. However, in the third observation from the Pamburuthi heronry in Kerala, red-legged Pond Herons were seen nesting alongside others with yellow legs (Sashi Kumar, in litt. 2005). About 15% of all Pond herons had red legs in 2005 and in four nests both birds had red legs (Shashi Kumar, in litt. 2005). In the observation in West Bengal, red-legged Pond Herons were apparently engaged in nesting activities suggesting completion of courtship. The late date of the observation suggests that egg-laying was also very likely completed.

### Road transects

Details of road counts are presented in Table 2. In Bangalore, very few Pond Herons were counted and none had red legs though all were in breeding plumage. In Uttar Pradesh, individuals with red legs were comparable at 38% and 30% respectively in the Rae Bareli-Unnao districts and Etawah-Mainpuri districts. Again, the red colour varied from pale pink to bright coral-red and was on individuals with complete breeding plumage. Blue beaks were present on all breeding birds irrespective of the colouration of the legs, but individuals with red legs appeared to have a higher extent and darker blue on the beak.

### Discussion

Breeding Pond Herons with red legs are clearly wide-spread in India and likely to be present throughout its distribution range. Very few records were obtained from eastern states and more focussed observations are required from these areas to better understand the distribution and extent of Pond Heron individuals with red legs.

The road count in Bangalore was carried out in an area that is experiencing rapid development and may explain the few Pond Herons counted. Sightings of red-legged individuals in Lal Bagh may mean that breeding areas are close by. Road transects in Uttar Pradesh in two areas with similar land use and habitat conditions showed that about the same proportion of the population has red legs. In the Etawah-Mainpuri region, the percent of individuals with red legs varied greatly between years (Sundar 2004, Table 2). This variation is likely due to the fact that transects during 2000-02 were carried out at the onset of the breeding season and the recent transects were during the peak breeding season (see Sundar 2004 and Table 2). During 2000-02, rainfall was

normal in the districts while in 2005, the monsoon had barely begun when the transect was carried out. This probably caused a shift in the breeding period thereby causing a shift in the incidence of individuals with red legs.

The ubiquitous nature of red-leggedness indicates that this phenomenon is more related to individual differences and to a lesser extent to food or related specific parameters. Observations of pale pink colour on some individuals and bright red on others at different times may be indicative of the colour being prevalent on the individual throughout the breeding season. Observations of red-legged birds at heronries after pairing/ mating has occurred indicates that the colouration is not a partial flush but more long-lived. Lighter colours may be present on individuals just getting into breeding plumage, or on individuals that have already paired up and/ or mated, and may retain this colouration for the entire breeding season before becoming greenish, which is characteristic of non-breeding individuals. This requires confirmation through observation of colour-banded individuals.

The observations of rose-coloured legs in the females in the Maldivian sub-species (Ali and Ripley 2001), and on a female in India (Relton 1996) has led to the formation of a hypothesis that only females obtain this colouration in this species. However, at least in one heronry in Kerala, both individuals at nests had red legs suggesting that this hypothesis is not accurate. Verification of this information by observations at other heronries is required. Other specific reasons for individuals obtaining the red colour are unknown though many specific surmises have been made (Relton 1996, Wesley 1993, 1996) and are worthy of specific attention.

Descriptions of changes in bare part colouration of the Pond Heron in published literature have been inadequate (Table 3). This has been primarily due to lack of information previously and need to be updated in future descriptions.

### Acknowledgements

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**Table 1. Locations in India with red-legged Pond Herons *Ardeola grayii*.**

Date of sighting	Location (district, state)	No. with red legs	Source of information and comments
28.iv.1988	Palayamkottai (Kerala)	2	Wesley 1993
v.1990s	Goa	2	K. Kunte, in litt., August 2005.
1996	Ramankary (Alappuzha, Kerala)	1	P. Narayanan, in litt., August 2005.
Undated.	Neelamperoor (Alappuzha, Kerala)	1	P. Narayanan, in litt., August 2005.
Undated.	Chengalam village (Kottayam, Kerala)	1	P. Narayanan, in litt., August 2005.
Undated.	Kannur (Kerala)		S. Kumar in litt., August 2005. Individuals with red legs seen for past several years.
Undated.	Heronry at Pamburuthi (Kerala)		S. Kumar in litt., August 2005. About 15% of nesting population with red legs; in four nests, both individuals with red legs.
21.iii.2004	Colaba Seaface (Mumbai, Maharashtra)	1	M. Macker, in litt., August 2005.
25.v.2005	Delhi Zoo (New Delhi)	1	Pers. obs.
vi. 2005	Bhubaneshwar (Puri, Orissa)	2	M.S. Chaitra and Padmawathe, verbally, 2005.
5.vi.2005	Kishore Sagar (Kota, Rajasthan)	1	Pers. obs.
6.vi.2005	Keoladeo National Park (Bharatpur, Rajasthan)	2	Pers. obs.
14.vi.2005	Sultanpur National Park (Jhajjar, Haryana)	3	Pers. obs.
18.vi.2005	Right wing Ganga canal (Sonipat, Haryana)	1	S.C. Sharma, verbally, July 2005.
10.vii.2005	Lalbagh Botanical Gardens (Bangalore, Karnataka)	4	J.N. Prasad, in litt., August 2005.
vi.2005	Thol Lake (Mehasana, Gujarat)	2	K. Kathju, verbally, August 2005.
2.viii.2005	Mehasana district (Gujarat)	1	K. Kathju, in litt., August 2005.
24.viii. 2005	Shamshernagar heronry, Sundarban Tiger Reserve (24 Paraganas, West Bengal)	2	Sujan Chatterjee, in litt, August 2005.

**Table 2. Details of leg colour in Pond Herons *Ardeola grayii* from road transects.**

Date transect was conducted	Location (district, State)	Transect length (km)	Total counted	% with red legs	% with yellow legs	Source
16.iv.2001	Etawah and Mainpuri districts (Uttar Pradesh)	85	1,075	2.6	–	Sundar 2004
25.v.2002	Same as above	85	904	2.1	–	Sundar 2004
16-19.vii.2005	Rae Bareli and Unnao districts (Uttar Pradesh)	130	50	38	54	Pers. obs.
31.vii.2005	Kanakapura road (Bangalore, Karnataka)	30	8	0	100	J. Pathak, Sahastrarashmi and B. Venugopal, in litt. August 2005
4-5.viii.2005	Etawah and Mainpuri districts (Uttar Pradesh)	95	64	30	62.5	Pers. obs.

**Table 3. Expressions used to describe reddish colouration on legs of Pond Herons *Ardeola grayii* in published literature.**

Source	Description
Hancock and Kushlan 1984	“sometimes show a salmon-pink flush early in the season”; “legs turn red before individuals acquire full breeding plumage”.
Wesley 1993	“coral red legs”
Grimmett <i>et al.</i> 1998	“legs can be bright yellow or even reddish”
Ali and Ripley 2001	“salmon pink in some breeding individuals”
Rasmussen and Anderton 2005	“legs briefly pinkish”

### Notes on pelagic and uncommon offshore records from Mumbai

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A naval officer in Mumbai (Maharashtra, India) has many opportunities to watch birds at sea, which are hard to come by for land-locked birders. Also, defence being a large landowner in the city, there are many areas in Mumbai that remain largely inaccessible to local birdwatchers. Many of these defence areas are also extremely nice habitats for birds. I have now been stationed in this city for over two years. Some of my birding experiences including a few notable pelagic and offshore sightings are described here.

Occasionally, as part of my current duties, I embark ships for daylong trial sorties at sea. The fringe benefits, a much-used phrase these days, are quite obviously, the opportunity to watch some pelagic and offshore birds.

The first sailing, on 17.vi.2005, was just before the monsoons reached Mumbai and therefore we had fairly calm seas, very clear visibility and lovely blue skies. The second on 23.vi.2005 was in the thick of the monsoons with sheets of rains hitting almost continually and the accompanying rough seas making almost everyone seasick. Under such conditions, one would undoubtedly need to be a mad birder to stand in the bridge of the ship without any compulsions of duty and constantly gaze at sea in the hope of catching sight of a stray pelagic!

On 17.vi, about 10 miles off Mumbai, I sighted a frigatebird species flying low over the water a few hundred meters away. The large dark bird with forked tail and long wings was quite likely a Lesser Frigatebird *Fregata ariel*. Although seen in clearly from the high vantage of a warship's bridge, it was difficult to conclusively identify the species.

During the second sailing on 23.vi, in spite of rough seas that tossed the ship mercilessly, I managed to spend a couple of hour's sea-watching from the bridge. The highlight of the day, undoubtedly, was a

Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus* that was swimming in the sea as the ship sailed past, barely 100 feet from it. There are very few records of this magnificent ocean tern from here. I have, however, had some good experience of watching the Brown Noddy near Cochin in late April 2004 while I was posted on a ship. They were particularly numerous during the five days that we spent sailing within about 30-40 miles from coast.

On both days, just offshore near the outer approaches to Bombay harbour, White-cheeked Terns *Sterna repressa* were fairly common. Great Crested Terns, *Sterna bergii* were also sighted on both days but were not as common. Great Crested Terns are large birds with rakish wings and a prominent lemon yellow bill that is hard to miss even at a distance. White-cheeked Terns have gray upperparts, with concolorous rump and tail. The thin tail streamers and the white cheeks were prominent in many. It is likely to be confusable with Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* and Roseate Tern *Sterna dougallii*. However being a winter visitor one is unlikely to encounter Common Terns around Mumbai in early July. While the Roseate, besides being larger, with its variable amount of white in the tail feathers and different flight action, is also rarely reported around Mumbai.

On 06.vii.2005, at end of the day about a dozen terns gave us company, following the wake of the ship as we were returning to harbour. They were all Lesser Crested Terns *Sterna bengalensis* and White-cheeked Terns. However, a lone Sooty Tern *Sterna fuscata* flew in briefly. Interestingly, all these terns followed the ship till about the fairway buoy that indicates the outer entrance to the harbour, which is about two miles out from the southernmost tip of the land. The offshore nature of these terns also explains why the local birders in Mumbai rarely ever report any of these species.

Recently, on 11.ix.2005, after a morning of

family birding at Karnala Bird Sanctuary and Uran mudflats, we ended up for lunch at Admiral Perriera's resort at Peeranwadi beach near Uran town. Stormy winds blew that day bringing with them plenty end of the season rains that, generally, ruined our day's birding. The saving grace on this wet Sunday turned out to be close views of a lone Bridled Tern *Sterna anaethetus* that flew low along the surf line at the beach. The tide was high and the tern flew low, trying to feed over the breaking surf at the beach while, simultaneously, maintaining its balance in the strong winds. Bridled Terns breed at Vengurla Rocks, but they are rare along the shore of Mumbai.

In Bridled Tern the upper parts, including the mantle, wings, rump and tail were uniformly brownish-gray. The underparts, in comparison are quite strikingly white. The dark crown and mask was clearly prominent. Once familiar with the tern sp. that we can see around Mumbai, the only species that can really be confused with Bridled is the Sooty Tern. In flying birds, trying to figure out the size of forehead white patch to differentiate Bridled from Sooty is, in my opinion, quite a vain exercise. In my experience, besides the obvious darker and bulkier appearance of Sooty the best differentiator in flying birds at a distance is the extent of white in underside of primaries. The Bridled Tern, which I saw at Uran, had extensive white in the underwings primaries with black restricted to the extremities only. Interestingly, Bridled, Great Crested and Roseate Terns have been reported to be breeding at Vengurla Rocks during monsoon months (Lainer 2001).

Easily accessible by a naval ferry that regularly runs between Colaba and Karanja naval base near Uran, Peeranwadi beach and the rocky shores north of it, adjacent to the naval base, were one of my regular stomping grounds for birding during my earlier tenure in Mumbai in early 1990s. Going through my notes, I discover that on

16.ix.2000, while on a visit from Delhi, I had seen a Crab Plover, *Dromas ardeola*, here on the rocky seashore adjacent to the naval base, which is another good record for Mumbai. More recently in 2004, for four months during the rainy season, as part of a study course, I had the opportunity to commute daily from Colaba to Karanja by the naval ferry. An interesting pelagic record in July 2004 was a Parasitic Jaeger, *Stercorarius parasiticus*. On 14.vii.04, in the middle of the channel, it flew right over the ferry. Just ahead of the boat, it swooped low over the water with its characteristic falcon like powerful flight and flew away towards the Middle Ground Island. It was my first sighting of a Jaeger species. The identification is therefore based on the slightly built size, all dark colour and pointed central tail feathers that became visible briefly as the bird swooped low ahead of the ferry. The similar Pomarine Jaeger, *Stercorarius pomarinus* is described as a larger bird compared to the one that I saw.

During my daily trip to Karanja last year, another interesting record was a Great

Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* that flew past the ferry in the middle of the harbour channel on 17.vii.2004. This Great Bittern laboured against strong opposing sea winds and light rains, as it flew southwards from Chembur side that morning. I had good views of it through my binoculars, which I always carried with me during those days for exactly such opportunities. The identification was conclusive since the bird overtook the ferry from behind and flew past quite close, giving me ample time to observe it closely. Great Bittern is a winter visitor and rare in peninsular India. There are no records from Mumbai region for over fifty years (Prasad 2003). This mid July record in 2004 from Mumbai is therefore particularly interesting.

On 3.ix.05 and on an occasion earlier, early one autumn morning two years ago, I encountered migrating flocks of over a hundred Common Terns sitting on rocks alongside the seaside promenade at the United Services Club (US Club), Colaba. They were gone by the afternoon and not again seen during subsequent visits on other days. Compared to the concolorous upperparts, tail and rump of the White-

cheeked, the rump and upper tail coverts in Common Tern are prominently white. In spite of their name, Common Terns are also fairly uncommon winter visitors around Mumbai.

Interestingly, the seashore near the US Club at the southernmost tip of Colaba, together with the 1km long causeway that connects to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Prong's Reef Lighthouse, is truly a shore birders' delight.

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### Nesting of Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus* in Kumarakom, Kerala.

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We report here the nesting of the Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*, which is believed to be a migrant or resident in India (Ali and Ripley 2001) at Kumarakom, which is, situated 14km west of Kottayam and forms a boundary of the Vembanad estuary. Vembanad-Kole wetland has been designated a Ramsar site in November 2002.

On 18.vi.2005 we visited the recently drained, muddy, Malikkayal paddies in Kumarakom where 42 Black-winged Stilts were observed at different locations in the paddies. One of them was found in the cultivated paddy field. We approached that bird in the muddy field for details. The bird was very alert and responded to our presence in no time and it flew away and started giving out alarm call and acted 'broken-wing-drama'. That broken wing action is somewhat similar to the action of the nesting Little-ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*. It was an alarm signal to all other individuals of the species; immediately they

started flight and encircled the area and made similar call as that of the other bird. It was an indication that some nesting activity was going on that area.

With this inference in mind, keen searching of the muddy field for nest was carried out. We succeeded in finding a nest with two eggs. The nest was situated in the muddy and watery part of the field. It showed a peculiar pattern of construction. The nest had a raised platform with a small disc like central depression. There is no human intervention in this area because of some legal problems, which therefore provided favourable habitat for the birds for nesting. As a result, about four acres of the land remained untouched, which is covered by luxuriant growth of cattails *Typha elephantina* and swamp rice grass *Leersia hexandra*. In a detailed observation fourteen nests at various stages were found at different locations in the same field; two nest are on construction, three nests with two eggs each, five nest with four eggs and

the rest without eggs. Two juveniles were observed in the grassy part of the area. Three nests were found adjacent to the *Leersia hexandra* community. All these nests were placed nearby as a loose colony.

Another five nests were found on 03.vii.2005 in the Vattakkayal paddy fields near to the Malikkayal paddy field; three nests close by and other two slightly apart. Totally, eight eggs were found in these nests. Of these, two nests were made only with clay, without the addition of any other nest materials. The eggs were dull in colour. In the two nesting sites, the material used for constructing the nets were the stems *Leersia hexandra*.

Only two nesting reports were noted from Kerala; the first was from the Karali marshes of Kollam district (12 nests) and the second from Rajagiri College campus, Ernakulam district (1 nest). In total, nineteen nests were found in the two paddy fields of Kumarakom making this the biggest nesting colony ever reported from Kerala.

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## Further comments on White-winged Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* distribution in the Indian Sub-continent

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I read with interest the article on the distribution of White-winged Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* in *Indian Birds* 1 (4): 81-83. I have only visited north-western India twice. Rajasthan and Gujarat, on a birding trip, between 5-17.i.1999 and Harike Lake, Punjab, between 6-10.ii.2001. On both these occasions I recorded this species, which led me to conclude that perhaps White-winged Tern is a regular winter visitor to these parts.

Earlier I had spent most of my birding hours in the winter season near Pune, Maharashtra and Goa where I had failed to record this species. However during the monsoon of 2003, between 16.viii-23.x., I spent three or four early morning hours sea-watching from Fort Aguada (Goa) and between 3.ix.-29.x.2003, I made frequent and regular trips to the Chapora estuary tern and gull roost. White-winged Tern was recorded at Chapora on nine days between 9.ix-21.x., with the maximum number of at least eleven on 21.x. (Prasad 2004). It is obvious these terns were on passage as this species is extremely rare in Goa in winter.

On River Mula-Mutha near Pune, Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybridus* was fairly common in the winters of 1992-1996 when I became very familiar with this species. In Goa too there was a large flock of Whiskered Terns present on virtually all visits to Chapora estuary in September-October 2003, with 50-60+ birds present from 16.ix.2003 to 11.x.2003, which allowed for good comparison between the two species. I made detailed drawings and notes (available on request) of each White-winged Tern record to confirm identification, except in Goa, where in the larger flying flocks it was not always possible to get a detailed description of each bird.

In winter the plumage of White-winged Tern is usually more marked than that of

Whiskered and any such bird with a more contrasting wing pattern (dark secondaries, outer primaries and leading edge) is worth investigating, but it is the white rump that is diagnostic, although good views are needed to see this feature. In September and October juvenile birds are present at Goa and the colour of the rump is more difficult to detect because of the contrasting brown 'saddle' but Whiskered has a more scaly patterned saddle and usually a less marked upper-wing pattern than White-winged. In perched birds White-winged has a more noticeably fine bill and a distinctive dark spot behind the eye on the ear coverts, often crescent-shaped, curving up towards the crown, which is diffusely marked on the adult. Whiskered is larger, stockier and less elegant than White-winged and more similar to one of the smaller *Sterna* species. In Goa the small White-winged Tern flock was usually separate from the Whiskered Tern flock except whilst roosting and after a disturbance of the roost. Often the White-winged Tern flock would appear together from along the river where they had presumably been foraging. Even when the roosting flock was disturbed, which was frequently by Black Kites *Milvus migrans* the White-winged Tern flock would keep together within the larger flock, slowly separating out if time allowed. My records of the White-winged Tern are as follows: Little Rann of Kutch, Gujarat: Three on 4.i.1999 a few kilometers from the Desert Coursers camp, Zainabad.

Harike Lake, Punjab: At least one present from 6-10.ii.2001.

Goa: Chapora estuary: At least six on 9.ix.2003, three to four on 28.ix.2003, nine on 29.ix.2003, at least one on 4.x.2003, one on 5.x.2003, at least one on 9.x.2003, one on 11.x.2003, six on 13.x.2003, and up to 11 on 21.x.2003.

Sri Lanka: Tissamaharama: One on 25.i.2002. Hambantota Lewayas: 15 on 25.i.2002 and six on 26.i.2002.

White-winged Tern records by other observers from western India and Maldives:

Goa: Mandovi estuary, Goa, two adults, three juveniles on 17.ix.1999, Lainer (Pittie 1999). Anjuna sea-watch, Goa, 29 on 18.xi.1999, Lainer (Pittie 1999). Chapora estuary, Goa, one on 18.viii.1998, Lainer (Pittie 1998). Sea at Candolim and Mandovi River, Goa, one in iii.1993, Willoughby, "A scarce winter visitor which has been seen on single occasions," (Willoughby 1996; Harris 1996). Carambolim, Goa, one on 6.ii.1998, Holt (2000). For full review see Lainer (2004).

Maldives: L. Maandhoo, one on 12.xi.1993 and near L. Maavah one on 2.x.1992 (Anderson 1990-1994). "The above are the only records away from Seenu Atoll, where it is fairly regular winter visitor in small numbers, up to six together." (Ash and Shafeeg 1994, who cite the following for this remark: Ali and Ripley 1987; Anderson 1990-1994; Ash et al. in prep.; Gadow and Gardiner 1903; Phillips 1963; and Strickland and Jenner 1978).

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## Records of Red-winged Crested Cuckoo *Clamator coromandus* from Bhitarkanika National Park, Orissa

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The Red-winged Crested Cuckoo *Clamator coromandus* is found in north India, Nepal, east China, Indo-China and, Myanmar (Hoyo et al. 1997). Previous records have shown it to be a resident in north India, a passage migrant through central India, wintering in south India, Sri Lanka, Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, Java and Borneo (Hoyo et al. 1992). However, Grimmett et al. (1999) have referred to it as being a passage migrant in India that breeds in Himalaya, north-east India and Bangladesh.

Other records of the bird from different countries have mentioned it as a local breeding summer visitor in Bangladesh breeding there in March-August (Harvey 1990) and as a very local summer visitor at lower reaches (Grimmett 2000) in Nepal, a regular but scarce winter visitor to Sri Lanka arriving about October and departing in April (Henry 1971) and in Myanmar (former Burma) it is found in light forest, scrub and open country frequently visiting gardens and probably breeding in April-June (Smythies 1940).

In peninsular India it has been recorded as a passage migrant, or a rare straggler along the eastern coastal areas, or scarce but regular rainy season or winter visitor, in Kerala, Karnataka, Tamilnadu and Maharashtra states (Ali and Ripley 1969).

Spread over an area of 164km<sup>2</sup> on the east coast of India, Bhitarkanika mangroves (20°30'-20°48'N, 86°45'-86°03'E) are famous for being the largest known nesting beach of Olive Ridley Turtles *Lepidochelys olivacea* in the world. Pandav (1996) has recorded at least 173 species of resident and migratory birds from the area.

However, sightings of Red-winged Crested Cuckoo are quite rare from Bhitarkanika National Park. Pandav (1996) saw one bird in March 1993. Chadha and Kar (1999) did not record it. In fact it appears to be a rare, scarce or uncommon species everywhere except for few areas of Nepal (Jerdon 1862; Henry 1971; Hoyo et al. 1997). Though not globally threatened the population levels are inadequately known (Hoyo et al. 1997). I first spotted the bird on 30.ix.2001 at about 11:00hrs, in Dangmal forest block from 5-6m without binoculars. It was perched on higher branches of an approximately 2.5m tall *Tamarix dioca* tree, in a comparatively open area with a water body nearby.

The present record of the cuckoo is of a dead bird, found at about 18:00hrs on 9.iv.2002. I found a dead bird that was badly entangled in the fishing nets used for fencing a nursery (about 0.02ha) in the Dangmal forest block. The thin filaments were all entwined around the bird's head and both its feet. There were no signs of extreme decay apart from ant eaten eyes and it was inferred that it might have got entrapped during a gale-storm two days back.

This record confirms the earlier records of the bird being a shy forest loving species, most often seen in flight across a jungle road and preferring the lower levels of forest growth for its hunting grounds (Henry 1971). It is substantiated by the fact that this particular bird was found entrapped quite low at a height of only 1m. Also, the bird is not strong on the wing (Smythies 1940). This character makes it quite vulnerable to

strong winds. Driven by strong winds it apparently did not see the 2.25m high fishing net fence. The forest department has subsequently replaced the nylon nets with thick plastic covered wire nettings of fixed mesh size.

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## Report of an injured Ceylon Bay Owl *Phodilus assimilis* from Karnataka, India

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Bay Owls (*Phodilus* sp., Family Strigidae, Order Strigiformes) are among the rarely sighted owls of India (Ali and Ripley, 1987). The bird is a rare resident of semi-evergreen and evergreen forests; and perhaps owing to its nocturnal habit and restriction to the dense forests, the records of its sightings are very few. In India, it has been reported from two distant geographic regions namely, north-east India (Oriental

Bay Owl *Phodilus badius*), and Western Ghats of Kerala / Tamilnadu (Ceylon Bay Owl *Phodilus assimilis*) (Baker 1897; Robinson 1927; Inglis 1945; Ali and Ripley 1987; Kannan 1992, 1993, 1998; Sugathan and Jacob 1995; Muddappa 1998; Uthaman 1999; Johnsingh 2001; Raman 2001). Rasmussen and Anderton (2005) treat the races of this genus as distinct species, as shown above. This species has been

sighted only once before in Karnataka at Bandipur National Park (Ahmed and Yekanthappa 1998). Here we report a rare sighting of this species and share our experience in the initial rehabilitation of the bird.

On 6.i.2005, a helpless, strangelooking owl was sighted in the nursery area of the College of Forestry, Sirsi, Uttar Kanara, Karnataka (14°36.33'N, 74°50.98'E; 619m

a.s.l.). The bird had taken shelter in a small crevice beside a water tank. It apparently had an internal injury in its right wing and could neither fly nor flap the wing properly. It appeared to be in a state of shock. The bird was carefully taken out and placed in a carton box. Based on the characteristic bay colour on top of its head, broad bridge above beak and on forehead, short ear-like tufts above sides of head, yellowish grey hair on tarsus, and black and white bands on primaries, the bird was identified as a Bay Owl (Grimmett *et al.* 1998).

The carton was later shifted to a partially darkened room. The bird was not active, inside the box, during day and sat quietly with eyes shut. But as the night progressed, it became restless and made some attempts to come out of the box. We had intended to release it in the forest on the night of its recovery. However, when we tried to release it at night in the forest, about 12 hours after it was rescued, it only sat quietly for many minutes. When it tried to walk, it got entangled in herbs and shrubs, and could cover only a couple of meters in about 3-5 minutes. As the bird seemed totally helpless, it was decided to retain it for a few more days.

In captivity, the bird, which weighed 230g, was fed at night with about 20-50g boneless chicken / mutton mashed into small pieces, provided on a small plate. The bird sensed the presence of the meat only when a small piece was brought near its beak, indicating that it possibly used an olfactory cue. Later it fed on its own directly from the plate. It fed only once in a night even when sufficient meat was offered.

After a couple of days of feeding, the bird gained strength to freely move around and looked energetic. However, its right wing remained drooped and showed no

signs of recovery from the internal injury. The bird was given preliminary veterinary attention in the form of an injection to treat the internal injury of the wing. Later it was handed over to the Forest Department (Sirsi Division) for further care. At the Sirsi zoo, the bird recovered quite well and exhibited the characteristic bobbing of the body.

On 29.i.2005, the bird was examined by Mr Saleem Hameed from the Bannerghatta Rehabilitation Centre, Bangalore. An X-ray of the damaged right wing showed a major fracture of the humerus. The bone could not be set, as the bone had moved away after the fracture. We realised that the severe injury completely incapacitated the bird and there was no question of rehabilitating it. The bird was shifted to Bannerghatta National Park, Bangalore.

This is an important sighting of the Ceylon Bay Owl, as it happens to be only the second sighting of the species in Karnataka and the northern most record within the Western Ghats.

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## Predation by Forest Eagle-Owl *Bubo nipalensis* on Mouse Deer *Moschiola meminna*

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The Forest Eagle-Owl *Bubo nipalensis* (Strigidae) inhabits humid and riparian forests up to an elevation of 2,100m in South Asia (Sibley and Monroe 1990) and is rare in distribution in India (Grimmett *et al.* 1999). It is a large owl, and though chiefly nocturnal, has been observed hunting opportunistically during the day (Ali 1984). The Forest Eagle-Owl is known to predate

on mammals like golden jackals *Canis aureus*, young barking deer *Muntiacus muntjak*, hares *Lepus* sp. (Ali 1984), Indian giant flying squirrel *Petaurista philippensis* (Henry 1971), civets (Viverridae) and carrion of tiger *Panthera tigris* and goat (Bovidae: Caprinae) (Baker 1927), and also on large birds like Indian Peafowl *Pavo cristatus*, junglefowl *Gallus* sp., and Kaleej Pheasant

*Lophura leucomelanos* (Ali 1984), monitor lizards *Varanus* sp. (Baker 1927), snakes and fish (Ali 1984).

An incident of predation on Indian chevrotain or mouse deer *Moschiola meminna* (Artiodactyla: Tragulidae) by a Forest Eagle-Owl was observed in Pudukottam, a rain forest fragment (1,090m a.s.l.) approximately 90ha in size, bordering

Valparai town (Coimbatore district, Tamil Nadu) in the Anamalai Hills (Western Ghats). Walking up a narrow path into a clearing by a stream-bed between 13:00 and 14:00hrs, my field assistant and I flushed a Forest Eagle-Owl from the ground to our left. It had a small animal in its talons that it dropped as it flew across the stream ahead of us. On closer inspection, we saw it was a freshly killed young mouse deer, whose body was still warm. Its head had been completely torn off and was missing and the first few drops of blood began to flow as it lay on the ground.

The mouse deer occurs in Sri Lanka, peninsular India and possibly in Nepal (Corbett and Hill 1992). It is one of the smallest Artiodactyls in the world and weighs up to 4kg (Menon 2003). Mouse deer live in undergrowth on the edges of heavy lowland forests and are seldom found far from water (Nowak 1999). They are thought to be solitary, and females give birth to one or two young, usually by the beginning of winter (Prater 1971). Mouse deer are prey of Indian wild dogs *Cuon alpinus*, tigers and Leopards *Panthera pardus* (Easa 1995, Schaller 1972).

Mammals form an important component of the diet of other eagle-owls in different parts of the world (Serrano 2000). Eagle-owls are also opportunistic feeders, taking birds and mammals weighing up to 1.5kg (Frikke and Tofft 1997\*). Predation studies have also examined differential predation by owls, and it was observed that owls preferred juveniles and sub-adult individuals, and that they killed more often in open areas than in closed areas (Vaseallo et al. 1994, Rohner and Krebs 1996).

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### Common Mynas *Acridotheres tristis* robbing the eggs of a nightjar *Caprimulgus* sp.

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The Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis* is one of the most common and familiar birds of India. An accomplished omnivore and opportunist in feeding habits (Krishnan 1954, Murthy 1954, Narang & Lamba 1984, Ali & Ripley 1987) the birds are mostly seen feeding on ground pecking at fallen fruits or leap-frogging in associations with cattle in agriculture fields. They are known to occur in family parties except during the breeding season (Narang & Lamba 1984) and often congregate in large numbers for roosting.

On 14.v.2003, during a regular scanning survey, I was observing otters (*Lutra perspicillata*) at one of the vantage points at Khinnanauli in Corbett Tiger Reserve along the Ramganga River. It was close to dusk (18:20hrs) when I suddenly heard some loud repertoires of shrieking calls c.25m away. To my astonishment a group of three Common Mynas had attacked a nightjar (Caprimulgidae: unidentified species), which had been incubating in sand in the short grasslands. Incidentally, my attention was

diverted to the scene and I made the following observations:

The nightjar immediately ducked and turned its face nearly upside down to look at the attackers. These mynas wheeled around making frequent attempts to mob the nightjar, which ducked out of danger and made loud squawks of protests. Despite mobbing by mynas observed for about 10 minutes, the nightjar constantly defended its clutch. A few minutes later, four more mynas joined the group and all started mobbing the nightjar. With little choice left, the nightjar flew off reluctantly when the attacks became unbearable. Five mynas devoured the eggs while two kept the nightjar at bay. Meanwhile, the nightjar had made several futile attempts to drive away the mynas from the nest by flying close to it and calling out loudly. On close examination, I found that the egg contents were eaten while the eggshells remained scattered. The observations suggest an unusual opportunistic behavior of Common Mynas preying on eggs, so far unreported

and hence worthy of placing on record.

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This observation was made during the study on ecology of otters in Corbett Tiger Reserve: Impact of Kalagarh reservoir on habitat use pattern. I wish to place on record my indebtedness to the forest Department, Uttaranchal; Director, Wildlife Institute of India-Dehradun; Dr S. A. Hussain, Principal Investigator of the project; Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (HRD Group), New Delhi for their generous funding; Dr K. Ramesh, Mr R. Jayapal and Mr S. Iqbal for providing valuable comments. I am grateful to the anonymous referee for commenting on the earlier draft of this manuscript.

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pattern". He has recently been awarded the National Level Scholarship by the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, Government of India.

## Indian Blackbird *Turdus simillimus* breeding in Mt. Abu

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Indian Blackbird *Turdus simillimus nigropileus*\* is a common visitor to the hills of Mt. Abu (24°34'N, 72°39'E; 1,219m a.s.l.), Rajasthan, India. It arrives as early as 10.iii. However, it is common from May to September. No breeding record of this species exists from Gujarat and Rajasthan. We report here a first nesting record of the Indian Blackbird from Mt. Abu on 11.vii.2004. Males were heard singing from June to September from the top of the canopy of tall trees.

The most common areas for observing Indian Blackbirds in Mt. Abu are AVM School premises, St. Mary School area, Anil Mathur's garden, Honeymoon Point area, Achalgarh, Sunset road, etc.

Indian Blackbirds have four races in the Indian Subcontinent (Rasmussen and Anderton 2005). Butler (1875) mentions the Indian Blackbird as a breeding visitor to Mt. Abu, but confesses that he "was never fortunate enough to find a nest." In a footnote to that statement, A. O. Hume states, "This is quite the most northerly point attained by this species; it is unknown throughout the whole region with which we are dealing [Gujarat and Rajasthan] No one has yet taken the nest." Prakash and Singh (1995) did not come across Indian Blackbirds in Mt. Abu during their survey from January

1993 to August 1994. Devarshi and Trigunayat (1989) mention the occurrence of Indian Blackbird in Mt. Abu (1983-1988) but do not comment on nesting.

On 11.vii.2004, one nest of Indian Blackbird was seen in Anil Mathur's garden (Rising Sun retreat) at Mt. Abu. There were two chicks inside the nest. On 26.vii two chicks left the nest. A second brood was raised in the same nest after about 15 days, but this time the nesting was not successful. The nest was built in a Rubber tree plant at a height of 3m in a fork of the tree and the nesting tree was close to human habitation. The birds tolerated human presence and kept bringing food to the young even when there were people around the nesting tree.

Both the parents took part in raising the chicks, feeding them mostly with insects and caterpillars. On several occasions they were seen carrying food in their beak at Kodara dam and AVM area in August 2004 but nests (?) could not be located.

This species is absent from Mt. Abu during winter. Indian Blackbirds were even not seen at the foothills of Mt. Abu. They are breeding visitors to Mt. Abu where they are common above 1,219m from May to early September.

This note is to document the breeding of Indian Blackbirds in Mt. Abu.

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**J. K. Tiwari** worked with Bombay Natural History Society's Bird Migration Study Project and Grassland Ecology Project (1989-1995). He is presently setting up a Centre for Desert and Ocean in Kutch, for nature education, halophyte afforestation and ornithological research and conservation.

**Anil Mathur**, M.Sc. Zoology (fisheries), is a keen naturalist who owns an eco-resort in Mt. Abu.

\*Rasmussen and Anderton (2005) have split this taxon from the earlier conspecific taxon *Turdus merula*, and have grouped the following forms under *T. simillimus*: *T. s. nigropileus*, *T. s. simillimus*, *T. s. bourdilloni*, *T. s. kinnisii*. They state that, "All forms grouped herein differ markedly and in the same ways in plumage, proportions, wing formula, vocalisations, and egg colour from northern forms previously treated under *T. merula*. Despite their heterogeneity in plumage, they undoubtedly form a monophyletic group. While the *nigropileus* group (including *mahrattensis* and *spencei*) is the most divergent in terms of plumage colouratio, the Sri Lankan *kinnisii* is the most distinct in other ways, including its small size, plumage texture, near lack of sexual dimorphism, and vocalisations, and is probably better treated as a distinct species. A formal taxonomic revision is underway by P. Alström and co-workers," (p. 364).

## Recoveries from the Newsletter for Birdwatchers – 8

Zafar Futehally

Although the *Newsletter* had started appearing in 1960 as a smudgy cyclostyled sheet, it was only in 1962 that it was formally "born" and acquired a proper identity. On 16.xii.1961, at the Annual General Meeting held traditionally under the mango tree in the editor's garden, there were 23 persons present (quite a record), while suggestions for the formation of an Indian Ornithological Society were also received from several who were unable to attend. These included Dr J. C. George and Dr R. M. Naik (both from Washington), Mrs Jamal Ara (Ranchi), Mrs Desiree Proud (British Embassy, Nepal), Major W. W. A. Phillips

(England), Dr J. P. Joshua (Liberia), Mr Yusuf Patel (West Africa), and a telegram from R. A. Stewart Melliush, one of our strongest supporters from Madras. It was heartening that this amateur effort had so many well-wishers in different parts of the world. There was much discussion about the desirability of forming an Indian Ornithological Society. As I have said earlier in this column the BNHS was then opposed to this move as they believed that it might further erode their already limited membership. The meeting discussed the option of creating a Bird Wing in the BNHS rather than creating a new Society. The

Chairman, Dr Sálím Ali, summed up the views expressed and concluded that, "the contention was that a little more spade work should be done before an ornithological society was formed...For the time being the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* would be kept going..."

One constructive decision at the meeting was the establishment of an editorial board, whose members covered the various regions of the country, and the following members were chosen: Dr Salim Ali (Bombay), K. S. Lavkumar (Rajkot), Y. S. Shivraj Kumar (Jasdan), Dr R. M. Naik (then at Michigan State University) Mrs Usha

Ganguly (Delhi), Major D. G. Haig Thomas (Assam), Mr E. D. Avari (Darjeeling), Capt. N. S. Tyabji (New Delhi), Dr Biswamoy Biswas (Calcutta), Dr Joseph George (Dehra Dun), Mrs Jamal Ara (Ranchi), and Prof. K. K. Neelakantan (Kerala). Zafar Futehally was elected editor. There is no doubt that this spread of members of the editorial board was a wise move and gave the *Newsletter* an all-India character. 1962 was also the year when the importance of ornithology was increasingly recognised world-wide and several resolutions of the WWF and IUCN related specifically to the importance of monitoring bird species as a tool for understanding changes in the natural world, particularly the pollution of air and water, and the consequences of the shrinking forest cover. Apart from the WWF and IUCN, the International Council for Bird Preservation (ICBP, now BirdLife International) at its 13<sup>th</sup> meeting in June 1962, at which Sálím Ali was present, made strong recommendations against the then widespread use of pesticides like DDT. One of the resolutions read, "Having noted that pesticides will often a) have a lethal effect on birds and other animals though this may only become apparent after one or more years, b) kill insect predators of the pest so that in spite of a satisfactory initial control soon after an application, an exceptionally heavy infestation may follow recommends that governments adopt legislation by which all pesticides must only be applied at the minimum effective concentration since the cumulative effects are largely unknown..." Unfortunately our government did not take this seriously enough. I was for some time the Chairman of the Pesticides Environmental Pollution Advisory Committee, set up by the Ministry of Agriculture and our attempts to limit the use of DDT were always over-ruled by the government on the ground that the health of human beings was more important than the disappearance of a few bird species.

In the very first issue of the *Newsletter*, J. S. Serrao and P. B. Shekar produced an exceptionally interesting article about the breeding of the Pheasant-tailed Jacana *Hydrophasianus chirurgus* at a tank in Kalina in central Bombay. "Every morning we reached (the tank) at 6.30 to make such observations as we could during the two hours before we proceeded to our daily work. The 5 males out of the total of 7 pheasant-tailed jacanas present in the tank have established nesting territories and were now working on the nesting sites.

Later the numbers of the breeders increased to 13 individuals, 9 males and 4 females". As a result of careful observation they came to several conclusions about the family secrets of the species. They discovered 1) that the male selects a nesting territory which he jealously guards from other prospecting males and works single-handedly at the nest site, 2) Into such an established territory alights a roving female. If she accepts the working male as her mate, she takes over from him the duty of guarding the territory against intruders". The other findings, relating to the breeding biology of these birds, are now well known as a result of the work of other researchers. But I would like to mention that these two birders made a fervent appeal for the preservation of this tank. They pointed out that, apart from its value as a bird sanctuary, it also acted as a sponge for absorbing excess rain water during the rains. If the planners had heeded their request it could have resulted in far less destruction during the 1,000mm downpour in July this year. In November 1961 Sálím Ali, accompanied by E. P. Gee, visited Jatinga in Assam – the small village remarkable for its extraordinary phenomenon of birds being attracted to lights and killed in large numbers as food by the locals. I quote from Sálím Ali's report, "A successful night is one which is dark and moonless, cloudy and overcast preferably with a light drizzle and with heavy mist or fog near the ground and winds blowing south to north, i.e., against the flow of migrants. If the wind direction is not right no birds will come to the petromaxes, open fires or flares. The light is screened on the southern side for the hunter to remain invisible to the birds as they fly in from the north...As many as 500 to 600 birds are often killed in a single night at 50 to 60 lights". One curious thing noticed by Sálím was that all the species of birds killed during their presence were resident species, and all of them were non-migratory or diurnal, which should have been normally roosting peacefully at that hour, except for the bitterns.

Quite a sensational mist netting operation was carried out in Kerala between December 1961 and April 1962 as a result of information supplied by Dr P. V. George, one of the Baroda University post graduates who had assisted in field camps in Saurashtra and Rajasthan. After George sent his reports about the exceptional concentration of wagtails and other species at Eddanad, 96km south of Cochin, Sálím visited the area

between 21-26.iv. He reported that "the wagtails spent the day feeding in the dyked lands of Kuttanad and Vembanad Lake (near Alleppy) and commute 32-40 miles (32-40m) south-east every evening to roost among the sugar cane fields of Eddanad in fantastically large numbers. On arrival at the roosting ground they mill around 50-100 feet (15-30m) above the cane fields filling the sky from horizon to horizon, looking like a swarm of locusts. Gradually the birds begin to drop into the cane at a steep angle, first singly, then in two's and three's, then in scores and hundreds. By half an hour after sunset all the birds have settled in leaving the sky clear again. Soon their soft chattering also dies so that there is nothing to suggest the presence of the numerous numbers hidden within the canes".

I might mention here that P. V. George was an exceptionally energetic and intelligent mist-netter and later, I believe, went to work in the Museum in Baghdad, Iraq. I recall his letters which suggested that he was very happy with the work, and with the surrounding environment.

The second productive mist-netting session was in Bharatpur, again in April. In his report Sálím Ali wrote, "Local clues furnished by H.H. The Maharaja led to the discovery of a gigantic roost of migratory sparrows – the Eastern Spanish (*Passer hispaniolensis transcaspicus*) and the Turkestan House Sparrow (*P. domesticus parkini*)...They both visit northwestern India in winter, usually keeping in mixed flocks, but neither my own experience nor the literature had ever suggested such unbelievable hordes within Indian limits. Guesswork estimates are always unsatisfactory but a million birds for this roost would perhaps be on the cautious side".

One new assistant for Sálím Ali to assist him in his bird ringing project was Julian Donahue. He helped him to find rich bird localities in the Delhi area and I quote from his article in the June 1962 issue "One evening Mrs. Usha Ganguli and I went to Okhla, a part of the Jumna River south of Delhi where water is diverted to the Agra Canal. There we saw hundreds of wagtails on the sand bars – almost all of them were Yellow Wagtails, of the blackheaded and ashyheaded races. Just before dark the birds flew off in a southerly direction. The next day I got hold of a large scale map (one inch to the mile) of the area and tried to guess where the birds would roost. Three miles

south of Okhla, I could see on the map, was a marshy area next to the canal. That looked like as good a risk as any, so that evening I cruised up and down the canal road until I saw a flock of wagtails pass overhead. Matters were confused somewhat, though, because hundreds of weaver birds were also flying to their roosts. I managed to follow the flocks of wagtails as they were tossed around in the strong wind, and, sure enough, they came down by the marsh – which was almost entirely composed of a large expanse of cattails. I got out of the car and saw a field of stubble literally covered with birds, almost all of which were in full plumage...As a result of this discovery the Delhi bird-ringing effort will get a big boost.” And as expected, Julian Donahue’s effort has proved invaluable to Delhi birders.

Apart from these articles on bird ringing,

the 1962 *Newsletter* contained some exciting material. Like Donahue, K. K. Neelakantan, through the medium of a map, found a new pelican (Pelecanidae) area in Andhra Pradesh, Usha Ganguli found an unexpected visitor in the shape of a Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus* in her garden in Delhi. Dr Joseph George had a rare sighting of the mating of the Black Drongos *Dicrurus macrocercus*. It is difficult to do justice to everyone who wrote in the 12 issues of 1962 in this space. But I would like to include this piece by Professor A. A. A. Fysee, the noted Islamic scholar, and our first ambassador to Egypt, as an example of persons who had little interest in birds, occasionally keeping *such* careful notes about them. Writing about the morning calls of birds he noted, “It might interest readers of the *Newsletter* to know the sequence of

time when birds commence singing in the morning, or to use the language of Islamic scholars, when birds commence their paens to God, the Exalted, the Almighty”. This is what he observed: April 2<sup>nd</sup> 1962: 05.55hrs, Koel *Eudynamis scolopacea* 05:55hrs; Jungle Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos* 06:00hrs (chorus); kingfisher (Alcedinidae) 06:10hrs; Red-whiskered Bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer* 06:13hrs; *Dhaya* (Oriental Magpie-Robin *Copsychus saularis*) 06:13hrs; Pond Heron *Ardeola grayii* 06:15hrs (“koh koh”); Crow Pheasant *Centropus sinensis* 06:17hrs; Unidentified 06:25hrs (“*tooi tooi tooi*”); Tailor Bird *Orthotomus sutorius* 06:27hrs; Coppersmith *Megalaima haemacephala* 06:30hrs; flowerpecker (Dicaeidae) 06:45. The timings were about the same on April 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>”.

## Recent ornithological literature on South Asia and Tibet

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Website: www.tourduvalat.org.

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Email: bnhs@bom3.vsnl.net.in

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E-mail: dsh@early.com

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## Correspondence

With respect to the paper on munias of Mt. Abu in *Indian Birds* [1 (4): 77-79], I would like to make a few observations. I studied the avifauna of Mt. Abu extensively from May 2004 to May 2005 and observed that the Green Avadavat *Amandava formosa* was a common species found in some areas like Sunrise valley, Tiger path, Salgaon, Adhardevi, Dilwara Salim Ali watch tower area, Achalgarh area, etc. The maximum number of birds I observed at that

time, in a flock, was 22. During all these years I never heard of tribals trapping Green Munias. The authors should give more substantial evidence for their contention that Green Munias are trapped by tribals for medicinal use and for the trade in aviary birds.

I met many tribals (Devraj Alika, Raju Alika, Kalu Bheel, Dinesh Bheel, etc.) and local residents after reading the story published in *Newsletter for Ornithologists*

1 (6): 84-85. To my surprise none of the tribals that I met knew this species and neither did they have a local name for it.

The presence of Red Munia *Amandava amandava* and Black-headed Munia *Lonchura malacca* in Mt. Abu needs confirmation in the form of either photographs or sightings by different people. I know several birdwatchers from the region (Kiran Chavda, Anil Mathur, Shailesh Patel, Satish Kumar Sharma of Udaipur, and Dharendra Devarshi of Bharatpur), who have not spotted these two species in Mt. Abu or Sirohi district during many years of extensive work.

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## Editorial

### The local patch

To a birdwatcher, familiarity with his local patch need not breed contempt. On the contrary, it might increase his awareness. Twitchers are also birdwatchers, but the reverse generally begs the rule. A twitcher carries a shopping list of birds in his mind, like a preoccupied urbanite in a supermarket, hurrying from shelf to shelf, ticking off stuff to carry home. He is happiest when his list of 'ticks' is long. Not the birdwatcher. She dawdles in nature, listening to an iora's outpouring of territorial rights or admiring the tolerant division of nesting space in a crowded heronry. She wonders why the male Indian robin that sang from the stone pillar on her last visit is no longer there until she spies the female flit towards a crack in the loose-stone wall with a morsel in her beak and realises with joy that the time for song is over. She revels in the sudden arrival of brilliantly flashy orioles and their reckless zooming through canopies. She knows a place where the shikra lingers, and is delighted to tune in on its flight path by the shrill pandemonium of lesser avians, blind to the raptor's pursuit herself. Such a level of awareness is possible only through familiarity.

Amateur birdwatchers can benefit from this type of back-of-the-hand knowledge of

an area and its birdlife, following the changes that seasons usher. Each area will stage dramas replete with unique aural and visual innuendoes. What a pleasure then, to discover novelty in the form of changed behavioural patterns, explosions of populations, the arrival of an unexpected visitor, the adaptability of birds to the dynamism of weather!

A way of extending this delight is by locating the accounts of earlier birdwatchers that traversed the same areas and comparing notes. The journey and its outcome can be fascinating.

In this issue of *Indian Birds* the leading articles by Jayapal et al., and Srinivasan and Prashanth illustrate these points succinctly. Their large canvases are ably supported by reports of past birdwatchers. For the first time, this issue carries a colour photo-essay on the birds of Ladakh, made possible by the generosity of Clement Francis M., who gave his pictures without any charge.

I would like to remind you of Mr Zafar Futehally's announcement last year (*Newsletter for Ornithologists* 1: 92) of an award of Rs 5,000/- in memory of his daughter, Shama Futehally. This award will be given for a general article on Indian birds published in 2005 in *Indian Birds*.

— Aasheesh Pittie

### Announcement

1<sup>st</sup> South Indian Bird Watcher's fair: 3-5.ii.2006

Gandhigram, Dindigul district, Tamilnadu

The Palani Hills Bird Watcher's Society has announced a 3-day fair at Gandhigram Rural Institute-Deemed University. The fair includes morning and evening, two-hour free field trips, led by guides. Around 25 bird and allied conservation stalls will introduce 'Bird-watching', its value and how to set up and run bird-watcher's clubs for students and the general public. A stall demonstrating bird-ringing and its value in tracking bird migration will be an interesting addition. Other stalls will cover varied aspects of bird life, food sources, breeding, value to the environment, etc. These will be explained as a hobby to be enjoyed and helping to improve our environment. Throughout the three days, illustrated talks and lectures will also be ongoing, offering interesting, popular and scientific topics. Popular visual presentations on wildlife and conservation, of interest to students and the general public will be an important aspect of the fair.

The Gandhigram Rural Institute has a 500 acre campus close to the Sirumalai Hills and just 20kms from the Lower Palani Hills, which lead to Kodaikanal, the well known hill station at 2,000m.

For more details please contact:

Joe Homan

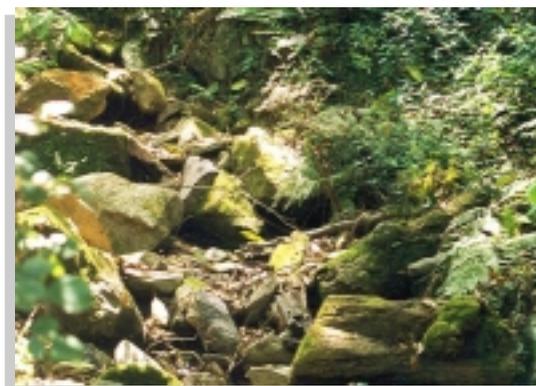
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### Errata: *Indian Birds* Vol. 1 No. 3.

- Page 63, column 2, line 8: Add 'Specimen of *L. i. phoenicuroides*: Sirur (35km west of Bir), one specimen (Field Museum 2004).' This taxon has been raised to species level by Rasmussen and Anderton in their *Birds of South Asia. The Ripley Guide* (2005).
- Page 67, column 1, line 37: Add: 'Harris, T. and Franklin, K. (2000): *Shrikes and Bush-shrikes*. Helm Identification Guides. Christopher Helm, London.'



**Birds of Kedarnath Musk Deer Sanctuary** (Clockwise from top left): Forests of mandal Kanchula Kharak; Rufous-bellied Woodpecker *Hypopicus hyperythrus*; White-tailed Nuthatch *Sitta himalayensis*; Nepal Wren-Babbler *Pnoepyga immaculata*; Nepal Wren-Babbler breeding habitat; *Rhododendron campanulatum* shrubs; Streaked Laughingthrush *Garrulax lineatus*; Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush *Monticola rufiventris*. [Photos: Arun P. Singh. Article on page 104.]



Pond Heron *Ardeola grayii* (with red legs).

Photo: K. S. Gopi Sundar



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