

# Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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Birdwatching at Jaipur by Y.M. Rai

The surroundings of Jaipur beyond the university is a vast wilderness. A sandy tract of sand dunes and ravines extends for about 4 kms, and stunted trees, mostly khejri (*Prosopis cineraria*) give the impression of a woodland, but there is no under growth of any kind except some scattered tufts of *Erianthus munja* and *Argemone mexicana*. But in this some what desolate area I was able to do some exciting bird-watching in the last week of May and the first week of January 1978.

Even in summer the mornings are pleasant but very soon it becomes unpleasantly hot when the sun rises. The birds I saw included purple sunbirds, white-cheeked bulbuls, Jungle babblers, chats, redvented bulbuls, ashywren warblers, tailor birds, roseringed parakeets, blue rock pigeons, hoopoes, common and brahminy mynas, treepies, house crows, and house sparrows.

Beyond, where the vegetation existing in the neighbourhood of the university disappears, and inhospitable ravines begin, I saw rufousfronted wren warblers very busy foraging for insects in the dry grass as this was the breeding season. One bird was quite unmindful of my presence and I observed it from just 2 yards away. Franklins wren warblers and whitethroated munias were also present. Near a garbage dump white scavenger vultures, and whitebacked vultures were seen. Rollers sat on telephone wires, and one redwinged bushlark repeatedly parachuted down in typical fashion with dangling feet. Descending into the ravines I saw a pair of redwattled lapwings with two juveniles. The young ones had already learnt to take advantage of their protective colouration and were almost impossible to see as they remained notionless under the shade of munja and khejri trees. The parents rent the sky with their screams and indulged in the broken wing technique to draw my attention away from the young birds. On subsequent days whenever I approached the young birds the parents set up an alarm as soon as they saw me approaching the scene.

The other birds seen in this area were grey shrikes, green bee-eaters, whitebreasted kingfishers, and a colony of weaver birds on a *Accacia nilotica*.

Some distance away, in the forested ravines I saw a pied bushchat, grey tits, Marshals Iora (*Aegithinia nigrolutea*) and the soft spoken wood shrikes (*Tephrodornis pondicerianus*). I was also fortunate in seeing a pair of crested buntings (*Melophus lothami*). It seemed to me that each evening these buntings returned to their night roost in a patch of grass and weeds along side a drain flowing out of the Bhabha Hostel.



The grey leafless trees of the forested ravines and hillocks acted as a fine backdrop to a colourful flock of small minivets. Occasionally along with them I saw whitebellied minivets, remarkably beautiful birds on account of their contrasting colours of black and white and orange red. One bird which seemed to beat the rigours of summer was the whitebrowed fantail flycatcher, whose animated movements indicated that it was unaffected by the heat.

One sultry day I saw a pair of rufoustailed finchlarks and I remember that a few years ago when the ravines had more bushes and shrubs many grey partridges were also seen here. On this occasion I saw only one bird with three chicks. Two of the young birds and the hen disappeared, but one chick tried to escape my attention by flattening itself against the ground. After a while the parent bird suddenly appeared and escorted the chick to safety.

At the farther end of the ravines a rocky hill rose solid and firm, with tall green trees here and there on its slopes. The valley and the hill slopes were alive with bird calls. There were crested buntings, large grey babblers, blossomheaded parakeets and Indian robins. One early morning I was surprised to hear from the thickets on the slope the chuk chukchuk of a nightjar. The nightjar was probably duped into the belief that the dawn was the extension of the late hours of a waning moon.

The valley between the two hill ranges is green on account of a wide shallow stream of clear water and the banks are thick with Typha elephantina. Here I saw a small blue kingfisher, a goldenbacked woodpecker, golden orioles, pond herons, cattle egrets, baybacked shrikes, spotted owlets, a shikra, a black drongo and many other birds.

I am sure readers will agree that Jaipur has much to offer to the birdwatcher.

#### House Sparrows by V.J. Rajan

Two years ago, a pair of House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) arrived and set about building a nest on an electric wire bracket in our bed room. I assisted by fixing a thick cardboard to the bracket. During the last 2 years they raised several broods though many of the chicks fell down and died prematurely. The birds were always

flying in and out and used to feed the chicks even at 10 p.m. or as long as the lights were on. Most days I used to wake up early in the morning to the mousy squeaks uttered by them while mating. We used to hear the squeaks several times during the day.

A few days ago the female bird blundered into the fan and died. The male sat nudging the dead bird with its beak and occasionally uttering a single 'cheep', for over two hours, until I buried it. The male then was feeding the solitary chick in the nest the whole day, but the chick was found dead next day on the ground. For the next four or five days there were no sparrows in the house and we missed their joyous chirpings. One morning I was awakened by a commotion at the nest and found the male sparrow having a vociferous argument with a fat female (sparrow, of course) and chased it out of the nest. The female flew to a near by wire and sat preening itself. The male sat about 6 feet away with its face averted, away from the female. The male was raising Cain only when the female tried to go near the nest, otherwise, it just sat with its face averted. As I was very much interested in their domestic developments, I took leave and settled down to watch them. Nothing happened except that the male pecked furiously, every time the female flew near the nest. It was obvious that the male felt very possessive about the nest. For three days the stalemate continued. On the fourth day while both birds were sitting on the wire the male suddenly hopped near the female and pecked it on its rump and immediately mounted. The mating was done in silence, which struck me as odd as the male earlier always chirped when it jumped on the female. A few seconds later they sat on the wire, far apart, as if nothing had happened, and, as a matter of fact, nothing more happened for the rest of the day. They sat with averted faces for long periods. The female however did not make any attempt to go near the nest at all now and for the next two days the birds did not mate. On the third day, I was awakened by the familiar mousy squeaks and found them mating. They mated again at 6/35 and 7/40 a.m. Obviously they were now, a well established pair and what is more, they were flying in and out of the nest as of yore. I joined duty.

While we are cautioned against attributing human emotions and feelings to bird behaviour, what was intriguing was why did the male bird not accept the female for such a long period. Surely it was not because she was fat!

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Notes from my bird-diary by V. Santharam.

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Dabchicks in Adayar River

In the month of June this year, when the Adayar Estuary was full of water, I noticed the presence of the little grebes or dabchicks (*Podiceps ruficollis*). Scattered parties of these birds were seen swimming and diving. There were more than a hundred birds. I also saw them in the backwaters of the river. It was interesting to watch them chase each other, half flying, half walking over the water. The birds are still here, but are confined more to the backwaters, where the depth of water is adequate. But when the tide comes in, the birds too come to the river. Dr. Salim Ali in his 'Handbook' says "Frequents all types of inland water with or without floating vegetation or reeds and irrigation reservoirs, village tanks, ponds, moats of ancient forts, etc., even flooded roadside ditches and borrow-pits. Hardly ever rivers or the sea". I reckon the main reason for their presence in the river is that the ponds and lakes in the vicinity have gone dry.

#### Sunbird's bath

I used to notice a pair of purplerumped sunbirds come every morning to the plantain tree in the winter months for a bath. They would arrive at about 7 a.m. with 'Swiie' and start their ablution. They bathed in the dew collected on the broad leaves by rubbing their underparts and wings on the leaves. They would always slip in the process but would manage to balance themselves. They would cling to the tips of the leaves upside down at times. After a few seconds, they would retreat to a nearby tree and preen and 'oil' their feathers and again return. Twice or thrice they would 'oil' and bathe, alternatively, after which they would fly off. Guided by this habit of theirs, I started to pour water regularly on the leaves when there was no natural accumulation of dew on the leaves both in the morning and evening. They kept arriving for their bath. I found that the female is more keen on her bath than the male and have seen her many times coming to bathe alone. I have also noticed tailor birds taking a bath on this plantain tree.

#### Koels on the ground

On 12th February 1977, at the deer park, Guindy, I noticed a bird described by Salim Ali as "a strictly arboreal bird" feeding on some fruit on the ground. It was a female Koel (*Eudynamis scolopacea*). The male, suddenly, appeared from a tree and joined its mate and both were on the ground for a few seconds.

### Pariah Kites

On 29th July I had been to Adyar Estuary to watch birds. At about 5.30 p.m. I noticed a number of birds flying in circles. A closer look revealed that there were about 110-120 pariah kites (*Milvus migrans*) soaring. There were apparently two circles of the birds, getting closer and closer. Finally in about five minutes they merged into a group and continued soaring and circling. After a few minutes, they broke their formation and began to fly in a line towards the north. I guess this was a migratory group of kites, on their way to some other place. I have so far never encountered a group of ~~this strength~~ I have read of these birds as being highly gregarious. But I don't think a group of about 120 birds are commonly met with.

### Swallows migrating early

Common Swallows (*Hirundo rustica*) are abundant winter visitors to the city arriving usually in the middle of September. This time, however, I have been seeing them from the second week of August, flying from north to south in scattered parties. On 15th August I saw about 40 birds on a wire and on 25th some 60-70 at the same spot. Besides many birds were flying about over the backwaters of Adyar River.

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### Birds as Locust Consumers by Indra Kumar Sharma

There was an invasion of the Desert Locust (*Schistocerca gregaria*), and swarms several kilometers wide descended around Jodhpur city after about 16 years in the second week of October 1978. I availed of the opportunity to watch the role of birds in consuming this pest, in the suburbs of Jodhpur city, as well as in the farms around villages.

It is noteworthy that when thick swarms of the locust were hovering in the sky the birds came to land presumably to prevent their wings from being injured while flying through the thick swarm. When the swarms settled on the ground or on the trees, several species of birds began to pick the locusts. In suburban areas the house crow, the pariah kite the common myna and the brahminy myna ate large numbers.



In village areas and near countrysides farms, in addition to the above mentioned birds, the black drongo, the grey shrike, the shikra, the jungle crow, the spotted owlet, the scavenger vulture, the common vulture and the little egret picked considerable numbers of these locusts.

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Habitat Cited For Hawaiian Stilt, Coot, and Gallinule (Courtesy The Endangered Species Technical Bulletin)

The Service has approved a recovery plan calling for the acquisition and **maintenance** of scarce wetlands habitat in the Hawaiian Islands to restore the populations of three Endangered waterbirds. The plan covers the Hawaiian stilt or zeo (*Himantopus mexicanus knudseni*), the Hawaiian coot or alae keokeo (*Fulica americana alai*), and the Hawaiian gallinule or alae ula (*Gallinula chloropus sandvicensis*).

The recovery team, headed by Ronald L. Walker of the Hawaii Division of Fish and Game, has established the following primary objective to be carried out by the plan: "To provide and maintain populations of at least 2,000 Hawaiian stilts, 2,000 Hawaiian coots, and 2,000 Hawaiian gallinules in, at a minimum, the habitats and island distribution existing in 1976 and to remove these Endangered species from the Endangered and Threatened status lists".

If the recommendations detailed in the plan are carried out, the recovery team said, attainment of the objective appears biologically feasible. The team estimates the current statewide population of the stilt at 1,500 birds, the coot at 2,500 birds, and the gallinule at a total of 750 birds. But owing to the secretive nature of the gallinule, which lives in heavily vegetated areas of Kauai and Oahu, the team said the population estimate for the bird was made on a "best judgment" basis rather than an actual count.

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Childrens Page

List of Birds Sighted by Shikha Gupta (Welham School, Dehra Dun)

After reading Romulus Whitaker's article I decided to keep a list of birds. I was not able to keep it for a long time because our exams were coming close, but I am sending it to you.

Date	Bird	Occasional Visitor	Nesting Resident	Remarks	Appearance
1.11.78	Crow	-	X	Many	Black and with a grey neck
2.11.78	Sparrow	-	X	Many	Brown and black back and pale brown chest.
3-11-78	Swallows	X	-	Millions on electric wires	Black and white with two long spikes sticking out of the tail.
4-11-78	Myna	-	X	Very friendly	This one had brown streaks.
5-11-78	Myna	X	-	I have not seen this one before	This one had black streaks.
5 5-11-78	?	X	-	It keeps moving its tail up and down	Black and white but not like the swallows, it was bigger.

I also heard many birds singing but I could not see them as they were hidden inside the trees.

#### Editors Note:

I do not know whether Shikha Gupta is a boy or girl but this is irrelevant. I would suggest that an attempt be made to identify the species of the mynas. Were they common myna, brahminy myna, pied myna, jungle myna, bank myna, or whatever? Also may I suggest to my young friends not to use expressions like millions of swallows. It is better to be accurate and say scores or hundreds, or thousands if numbers justify such expressions.

### The K.K. Surendran Prize continues

Mr. K.K. Surendran has generously offered to continue with the 100 rupee prize for the best article in 1979. Special consideration will be shown to Junior Members who contribute to the Junior Page and this is an opportunity for them to make some pocket money while writing about their enjoyable birdwatching experience in the field.

Editor

### The Madhav Gadgil Prize

I am greatly honoured at being the first recipient of the K.K. Surendran Prize, and would like to express my appreciation for the recognition accorded me. I would like to plough back the money I have thus received with a small contribution of another Rs.50-00 on my part to generate a project for all the readers of the Newsletter. I propose that we launch in 1979 a study of the breeding season of the Koel all over India. The song of the male Koel is one of the most noticeable of bird songs in our country, and must serve as a good indicator of its breeding season. I suggest that we mobilize all the readers of the Newsletter to keep as accurate a record of the song of male Koel **this** year as possible. The readers could decide to record the total number of breeding calls of male Koel (the well-known kuhu-kuhu) one hour after sunrise throughout its breeding season. The number of calls would be small at the beginning, reach a peak at the peak of the breeding season, and then decline. If we have such records from all over India, we could get a nice picture. In addition the readers could keep any other records of koels breeding that is possible. All readers should then be invited to send in their accounts. I propose three prizes for these reports 1st - Rs.75, 2nd Rs.50, 3rd Rs.25... Let us hope to get a good response.

### Correspondence

Replies to R.E. Hawkins about Papiha

a) by Pradyumna K. Desai

Chaturvedi and Tiwari's practical dictionary is correct in saying that "papiha" is a true species of cuckoo, and in Indian literature

the bird is considered an ideal of love lorn beings because the bird is supposed to drink water straight from the rain drops and will never drink from the collected water.

The bird calls in ~~ascending~~ ascending crescendo and English name is the hawk cuckoo or the brainfever bird (*Hierococcyx Varius* Bahl). The cuckoo you have mentioned as "*cuculus melanolecos*". I am unable to find this name even in "The Handbook of birds of India and Pakistan". I suppose the bird could be the pied crested cuckoo "*Clamator jacobinus*". This cuckoo gives out a call "piyu piyu" which means "where is my beloved". The pied crested cuckoo is a migratory bird on this side of the country. As far as my knowledge goes both the cuckoos are silent during the winter and summer months.

Both the cuckoos have not the same name of papiha. The pied crested cuckoo's name is "Chatak" or "Kala paphia" and the name of the brainfever bird is "papiha" or "bapaiyo". This bird is a local migrant and the pied crested cuckoo comes here in the beginning of the rainy season and is supposed to announce the coming of rain.

b) By Y.M. Rai

The love lorn feeling attributed to the bird is due to its high pitched plaintive call that is heard for most of the year. The melancholy note is more pronounced in the hawk cuckoo (*Cuculus varius*), and less so in the pied crested cuckoo (*Clamator jacobinus*). The common man in the Hindi speaking region does not differentiate between the calls of the pied crested cuckoo, which he can see easily, and the hawk cuckoo which he does not. Further the hawk cuckoo whose call gains in frequency with the departure of winter, goes on crying through the summer till the advent of the monsoon. At this time the pied crested cuckoo takes up the cry, though in a different note.

No birds in Dalma Hill by A. Kumar

How unfortunate that I did not know Dr. Dutta and his interest in birdwatching or else he could have himself asked Dr. Salim Ali about the Brown Shrike. (Newsletter Vol. XVIII 11.11.78). It so happened that Dr. Salim Ali was at Jamshedpur on the 31st October and Dr. Dutt could have easily obtained first hand information as I did on the 30th October at the Dalma Hill. Spying a bird just outside the hill top bungalow, I tried in vain to identify it. Nor could I get a clear view as the birds - a pair - kept well inside a thick foliage. A glance through the binoculars showed the tail to be much longer. Dr. Salim Ali was having breakfast on the lawns. As soon as the problem was presented to him, he brought up his binoculars and



declared, "Greenbilled Malkoha. Not in the Handbook. Should be there in the next edition." I must admit it is an advantage to have Dr. Salim Ali close by when birdwatching!!!

But what a disappointment to find bird life so poor on this hill during this trip. On previous trips, I had always found the birdlife to be exceptionally rich, though previous forays were usually January onwards. But why was there no trace of resident birds? Undoubtedly, the foliage was very thick owing to the late rains and numerous small birds flitted out of sight, but the song of the oriole was heard only once and the crested serpent-eagle was not seen soaring. By December end, I will make another trip to solve this mystery. Are the birds being trapped heavily even though this is a sanctuary? Has there been high mortality due to the heavy rains and storms, or do they just do not arrive (from where) till December? As Dr. Dutta lives in Jamshedpur would he please investigate.

#### Maggots in dead chick of Spotted Dove by John Singh

You might remember that sometime ago I had taken some maggots from the dead nestling of a spotted dove found in the **next** close to your portico.

Mr. C. Ramakrishna of Entomology Department, University of Agricultural Sciences, had taken the trouble of identifying it and he found it to be a maggot belonging to the family Sarcophagidae, which belongs to the Order Diptera to which our mosquitoes and House flies belong.

Generally these larvae or maggots are saprophagous, breeding in dead animals, meat or meat products, and parasites of invertebrates namely snails, spiders and insects especially Orthoptera (Grass hoppers) and Coleoptera (beetles) while others live in or produce wounds in domestic animals, man and wild animals.

#### Whitebreasted Munias by R. Mukherjee

Shri. R. Mukherjee of the Zoological Survey of India, Solan, M.P. writes to say that he has seen a whitebreasted waterhen in Khatra in Riasi district surrounded by Mirpur in Pakistan, Poonch, Srinagar, Udhampur and Jammu Dts of J and K. He believes that the whitebreasted waterhen has not yet been recorded beyond 33° latitude and 75° longitude.

#### Blackcapped Kingfisher by Lavkumar Khacher

Going through the Newsletters I was pleased to read my good friend



Dr. G.P. Vyas's account of the Blackcapped Kingfisher *Halcyon pileata* at Lalpari Reservoir at Rajkot. This particular bird was seen by many of us since it spent its winter here, being very parochial. I use the word winter because Dr. Vyas confirmed that though he visited the place several times after May, the bird was not located. We again saw it in November and it is again settled at the same place where many species of Kingfishers can be seen including *Halcyon pileata*, *H. smyrnensis*, *Ceryle rudis* and the tiny *Alcedo atthis*. Incidentally, the last time we watched *pileata* it was quite vocal. Its cackle kek...kek...kek....kek....kek was very similar to, though uttered slowly, and quite deliberately, the call of the whitebreasted kingfisher *H. smyrnensis*. In 1969 winter I had been perplexed by this variation of the whitebreasted kingfisher's call which I heard in the mangroves off Jamnagar. Pradeepbhai Pandya, one of our knowledgeable birdwatchers saw the bird this November and Veraval. I would not be surprised if this lovely kingfisher is found breeding along our Saurashtra and Kutch Coasts.

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