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A Journey along the Rhine Valley

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In 12 B. C., the Romans decided to establish a military camp called Argentoratum on the banks of the river Rhine, on what is now the site of Strasbourg. The original town was ravaged by many barbaric invasions but grew up again and was named as Strateburgum (town of roads) because of its exceptional geographic position. The Rhine has been important in European history, ever since Julius Caesar built a wooden bridge across it. During the Second World War, heavy fighting occurred along the Rhine in the final phases of the war in Europe. Today the port of Strasbourg is the second largest river port in France and on the river Rhine, which has become a great inland navigation system.

The organisers of ANATIDAE 2000 Conference, had arranged a mid-conference field trip on Wednesday the 7th December 1994, to the Rhine valley, where many waterfowl and places of natural interest are located. This region is frequented by over 1,00,000 Anatids. The field trip was organised in association with the German authorities:

The trip started with a glorious morning, as the freezing winds howled and the river gently lapped the banks. The cathedral of Strasbourg, a marvel of inspired majesty which took almost four centuries to build, gradually reappeared as the early morning mist thinned out. This cathedral was the highest building in the Christian world upto the last century.

Two flocks of Jackdaws (*Corvus monedula*) arrived to keep us company from the trees. Two *A bateau-Mouche* (excursion boats) were currently brought in and docked and we quickly walked along the jetty and hopped into the boats, in anticipation of a tremendously exhilarating day.

Soon our boats were undocked and they crisscrossed the channels to join the main stream leaving behind rows of boats and steamers that were docked in a long line along the shore.

As we left the city we saw several industries on both sides of the river. Prominent among them on our right, were the Cargil factory and another automobile crushing unit, where several cranes were seen industriously crushing used cars and neatly stacking them to form hillocks of crushed cars to be sent to a steel furnace in Switzerland for recycling. Towards our left scores of cranes were seen lifting wooden logs from trawlers and stacking for consumption by a paper industry. The global phenomenon of the insatiable general demand for wood, was evident in this part of Europe too.

We were presently nearing the open river, which was at a higher altitude and our boats were taken to compact watertight dykes and water from the elevated river was let in to raise our boats. For the first time we experienced such a technology of lifting the boats to higher elevations in stages to bring them in level with the main river.

At the open river, we were spellbound by the surrounding landscape and the teeming waterfowl. The magnificent Vosages mountain range on the right and the great Black Forest of Germany on the left encompassed the river. Surely there could never be such an impressive parade of bird species that included teals, shovellers, tufted ducks, mallards, loons, swans, cormorants and gulls swimming in the river or resting on the sides of the canal and inter-canal islands.

The treasured sighting was a small flock of Arctic Loons (*Gavia arctica*) that landed with a splash in the ice-cold waters of the river. Their sudden wailing and mournful raising calls drew the attention of one and all. They dived at once and after swimming under water for a minute or so, the entire flock surfaced some fifty meters away.

The herring gulls (*Larus argentatus*) were a sight to remember. These large dove-grey coloured birds, were seen perched at vantage points, with an image of cool and masterful gait. I was told that the herring gulls have increased in numbers in the recent past and is presently considered a pest in many parts of Europe, for its rampaging activities in the sanctuaries, terrorizing the rarer species of colonial birds.

The black-headed gull (*Larus ridibundus*) was the most widespread of all gulls, which has benefited from the activities of man. A white wagtail (*Motacilla alba*) briskly ran along a weir, uttering a short single note. While some flocks of white wagtails arrive in Bangalore by September, some seem to tolerate the colder months preferring to stay put in Europe.

The Rhine serves as the boundary between France and Germany. The formation of the European Economic Community, has enabled citizens of member countries of ECC to cross the borders without hindrance.

On the German side, a pair of hooded crows (*Corvus crone*) were seen on a pine tree. At the sight of our boats they expectantly began their morning chorus of deep guttural *kaa, kaa*, in anticipation of some titbits.

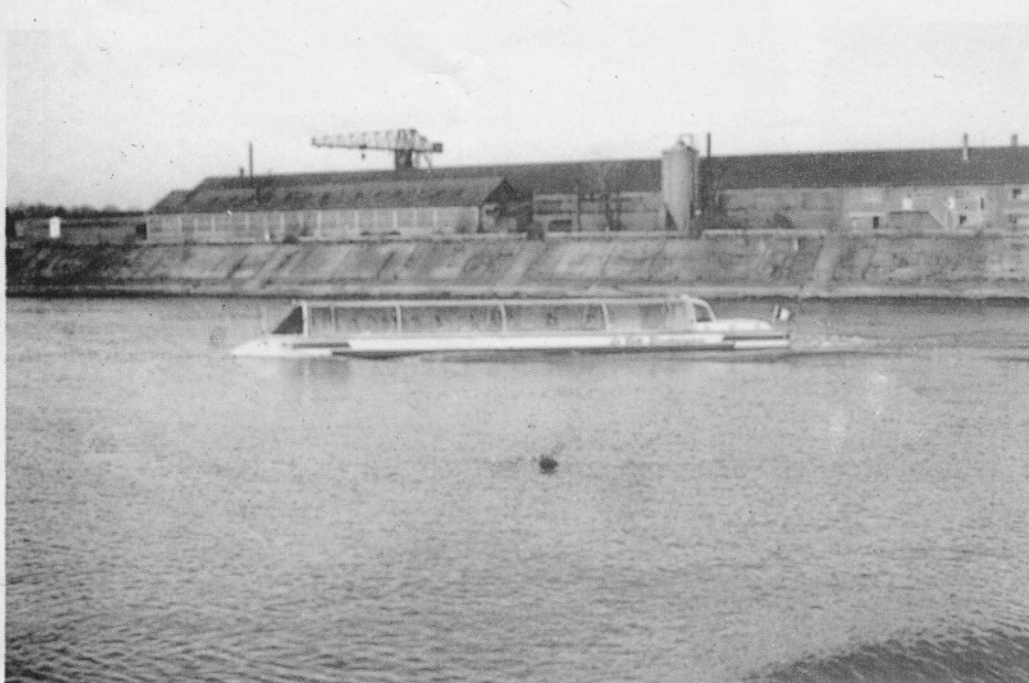
The most abundant of ducks, the mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*), were seen almost at every stretch of the river, moving in boisterous waves.

Mallards certainly are the ancestors of our domestic ducks and we could see the wild mallards readily adapting to man, often tamely resting on the banks of the canal and parks close to human settlements.

Another bird that is somewhat semi-domesticated and resides in proximity of man throughout Europe is the mute swan (*Cygnus olor*). In winter they eagerly look forward to the visitors bringing morsels and vie with each other to grab the handouts. Teals (*Anas crecca*), the shovellers, (*Anas clypeata*) the pochards (*Aythya ferina*) Tufted ducks (*Aythya fuligula*) and the great cormorants (*phalacrocorax carbo*) were also seen in good numbers all along the river. I noticed that the ducks as well as the cormorants were more restless in the open river and retreated at the sight of our boats. But the ducks in the canals or within the city limits were observed to be relatively tolerant. It could be possible they are under hunting pressure in the open river, outside the city limits.

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A bateau-Mouche (excursion boat)



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Editorial

The OSI Conference in Delhi, 14-16 November 1995

I hear from Asha Saklani that over a hundred registrations have been received already. This is welcome news and I hope many more will decide to participate and make this meeting a success. The Secretary General has made the President eat his words for I had rather overcautiously warned her to "Postpone the meeting if there was not sufficient response". Please see the second announcement of the meeting in this issue.

Surveys of various campuses

We are now receiving an increasing number of notes about birds in university campuses. Obviously this indicates that students are taking a serious interest in this subject. But that apart we have the advantage of having long term data on the bird life and successive groups of students can keep building upon it. Gadagkar and his team have keen eyes and ears and they may be able to uncover interesting facts between birds and vegetation. The IISc campus has in the past few years since the Director decided to keep cattle away become much more densely vegetated than it has been in the past. Some birds may find it too gloomy and go away, while others may prefer deep shade to sunlight. We hope that the goings on in academic establishments outside the classrooms will continue to be reported. The IIT campus on Powai lake in the old days provided much interesting birding for its students. Unfortunately it has now become too urbanised.

Rishad Naoroji and Raptors

There must be few people who have such a passionate interest in raptors as Rishad Naoroji has. Birds of prey are such melodramatic creatures but studying and enjoying them require enormous patience and great physical courage. He is in the process of writing his 'Diurnal Birds of Prey of the Indian Sub-Continent' and one hopes that in the process of his investigation into the secret lives of these birds he will not be damaged by beak or claw. Eric Hosking lost an eye while studying owls.

Articles edited by Kumar Ghorpade

In an earlier Newsletter I mentioned that some badly or hastily written articles containing promising material need to be re-written to make them more readable. In some cases only minor editing is enough. A few prepositions added or

subtracted, and some extra adjectives removed is all that is necessary. Occasionally, however, the information presented needs to be re-arranged in a more logical

manner. This is what Kumar Ghorpade has done to a few articles in this issue, and I would like to acknowledge his help.

Status and Conservation of the Great Indian Bustard in the Thar Desert



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Introduction

The great Indian bustard *Ardeotis nigriceps* is one of the rarest birds of India and one of the rarest bustards of the world. In the mid 1980s, bustard population was estimated to be between 500 to 1500, with half of the birds surviving in Rajasthan. This big variation in the estimate was mainly because Rajasthan could not be surveyed completely and the bustard survived in a vast area of nearly 2,00,000 sq km of the Thar desert (and two areas in eastern Rajasthan).

In 1986, a report on the status of the great Indian bustard was brought out, based on surveys done in 1983, 1984 and 1986 (Rahmani 1986). Ten years later, I did two surveys in 1993 and two surveys in 1994, in order to compare the populations. My studies have revealed that bustard numbers have almost halved in ten years in the whole of Rajasthan.

Historical records

Old records state that the great Indian bustard was plentiful in Rajasthan (Jerdon 1864, Barnes 1886, 1891, Blanford 1898, Baker 1929). Blanford (1898) reported the whole of Rajasthan and eastern Sind (Pakistan) as the distributional range of the bustard. The birds were regularly seen or shot in Sind (Hume 1873, Butler 1878). Hume (1890) mentioned that up to 100 bustard eggs were collected by Khan Nizam-oo-din Khan from Bikaner region.

Prakash and Ghosh (1963, 1964) saw "appreciable numbers" of bustards in the Ramdeora region of Jaisalmer district. Ali (1970) quoting the data supplied by Dharmakumarsinhji said that nearly 500 bustards must be present in Rajasthan. With the increase in environmental awareness and development of interest in natural history, more and more sightings of the bustard were reported (eg. Prakash 1980, Kapoor and Bhatia 1980, Saxena & Sen 1980, Rathore 1980, Bharat Singh 1980. See Goriup & Varadhan 1980 for more references). It is not known whether the spurt in bustard sightings was due to increase in the number of birds or due to more diligent searches. Perhaps both the factors were responsible for sightings of the bustard in widely separated areas like Sorson near Kota (Bharat Singh 1980), Shokhaliya near Ajmer (Rathore 1980), Sudasari, Khuri, Dhanana in Jaisalmer (Kapoor and Bhatia 1980), Bhinmal in Jalore and Diyatra in Bikaner (Vyasa *et al* 1980).

In the mid 1980s, our surveys as well as data collected from different sources, revealed that the bustard is found in 11 districts; Bhilwara, Tonk, Kota and Sawai Madhopur. Out of these eleven districts, we had seen bustards in five: Jodhpur, Jaisalmer, Bikaner, Ajmer and Kota (Table I). We do not know the status of bustard in Bhilwara, Tonk, Pali, Jalore and Sawai Madhopur districts. Perhaps a few birds from Sonkhaliya region could be moving temporarily to adjoining areas in Tonk, Bhilwara and Pali.

Present conservation measures

The great Indian bustard is under Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. Additionally, the Rajasthan Government has declared it as a State Bird. The State Forest Department has also given attention to the protection of this endangered bird by declaring some 'Closed Areas for Shooting', such as Sonkhaliya, Sorsan and Diyatra, but except for posting of one or two disinterested guards, without any vehicle to patrol their vast and inhospitable areas, no further step has been taken to protect the Closed Areas. Perhaps, the most praise-worthy step of the Rajasthan Forest Department was the development of the Desert National Park (DNP) and its satellite areas in 1984. After the initial enthusiasm in the early 1980s, the DNP saw a very bad phase when no higher forest official was interested to take up the challenging task of protecting this Park, as a result of which some very good core areas (eg. Miyajlar, Sam, Phulia) were disturbed. However, during the last one year, the DNP has again come in good hands and the future looks promising.

Surveys

In order to know the present status and distribution of the great Indian bustard in Rajasthan, and to compare the numbers with my earlier figures, I did four surveys in Rajasthan in different seasons. Almost all the areas where I had seen bustards in the 1980s were visited. Additionally many new areas were also surveyed. Except for the DNP, not all the areas were visited during each survey.

In 1993 the first survey of the Thar desert and Kutch was done between 2 February to 10 March, and second between 11 July to 31 August, a third survey was done from 12 January to 12 February 1994 and the fourth survey of Jaisalmer district alone was done between 18 and 21 May 1994.

Results

Population estimates of bustards in the 1980s and in 1993-94 are given in Table I.

Area	Earlier numbers	In 1993-94
Sorsan	8-10 (1984-86)	8-10 (1991-92)
Sonkhaliya	30 seen in 1986	None in 1993, 17 in February 1994
Diyatra	3 males in 1983 12 males in 1986	4 females in February 1993 None in July 1993 2 males in January 1994
Bap	11 in 1983 3 males	5 in February 1993 None in July 1993 5 in January 1994
Sam-Sudasari	25-30 in 1986	5 in February 1993 15 in July 1993 19 in January 1994 30-35 in May 1994
Khuri	14 in 1986	None in 1993
Miyajlar	5 in 1986**	None
Khinya-Mandha	13 in 1983 8 in 1986	None in 1984
Sankara	1 male in 1986	None in 1994

*Up to 90 reported by the Forest Department

**Reported by the Forest Department

Discussion

During our studies on bustards in the 1980s, we estimated that more than half of the 1500 bustards were present in Rajasthan, mainly in the Thar desert (Rahmani 1991, Rahmani & Manakadan 1990). The bustard populations appeared to be secure, and a sort of complacency had developed. In my recent surveys in 1993-94, I found that all over the Thar desert, bustard population has drastically declined (see Table I). In some areas, eg. Diyatra, Bap, Sam, the numbers have halved, while in some areas they have disappeared, eg. Khuri, Miyajlar.

The bustard is still reported from a large area in the western Thar desert (mainly Jaisalmer district) but where-ever we went a (Nachna, Diyatra, Kanasar, Nokh, Ramgarh) villagers told us about bustard poaching by outsiders. Most of these rich poachers come for houbara and sandgrouse but shoot great Indian bustard also if they find one.

There appears to be some decline in Sam-Sudasari areas of the Desert National Park in Jaisalmer, which are a show piece of the Forest department, and which still have

comparatively better protection than other core areas (eg. Miyajlar, Khuri, Sotto) of the park. While during January 1986, between Sam and Sudasari, we had seen 25 bustards, in February 1993, only five were seen. Later in July 1994 could be located. However, during May 1994, my estimate is that between 30-35 bustards were present in Sudasari area, and fortunately many displaying males were found. Due to overgrowth of vegetation in the main enclosure, most of the bustards were found outside the enclosure or in new enclosures (C and D) where the vegetation has not yet grown very tall and dense.

The Sudasari enclosures are the finest areas to see bustards and other wildlife of the Thar such as Chinkara, houbara, sandgrouse, raptors, coursers, larks, etc. Unfortunately the type of protection, and dedication present in the staff of Sudasari is not seen in other equally important enclosures of the DNP.

Reasons for decline

1. Destruction of breeding areas

Destruction or alteration of grassland habitat is perhaps the most important reason for the decline of bustards. The great Indian bustard is a long living, slow breeding bird. It is not unusual for adult birds to live in an area for 10 to 15 years. If the adult birds breed successfully, and leave a progeny the long term survival of the bustard can be assured. If these birds do not breed then what will they leave behind once they die a natural death? Conservation success should not be measured only by giving protection to adult birds, but by giving protection to their breeding areas as well.

2. Disturbances

There is no bustard area in India which is free from human disturbance. The most extensive bustard area in India was Jaisalmer district, western portions of Bikaner and Jodhpur, and northwest portions of Barmer. The development of the 645 km Indira Gandhi Nahar Project (KGNP) (earlier known as the Rajasthan Canal) has resulted in the expansion of agriculture, land colonization, development of new towns and change in natural vegetation due to extensive plantation of exotic trees. When fully operational, the IGNP and its tributaries will have a direct influence on nearly 11% of the Thar desert. However, the indirect influence will be on the whole of the Thar desert, especially in bustard areas.

Beside general disturbances due to expanding human population, each bustard area/sanctuary has its own specific problems and these have to be carefully addressed.



Birds at Asan Baraj

SATPAL SINGH GANDHI and SHAILENDRA KUMAR SINGH, 87, Park Road, Forest Survey of India, Dehra Dun (UP)

It was the month of October 1994 when we were expecting our winter visitors to migrate to Asan Baraj a water body near Dehra Dun (UP). We kept a watch on

the lake continuously. On the 1st of November 1994 we came to know from our friends Ravinder Pal Singh Bedi and Rajeev Tayal who pass by the lake every day while

Sl. No	Code	Common names	Scientific names	Residential status
Family : Alcedinidae : kingfishers				
50	719	Lesser pied kingfisher	<i>Ceryle rudis</i>	R
51	722	Common kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	R
52	735	Whitebreasted kingfisher	<i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>	R
Family : Meropidae : bee-eaters				
53	750	Green bee-eater	<i>Meropus orientalis</i>	R
Family : Corciidae : rollers				
54	755	Indian roller	<i>Coracias benghalensis</i>	R
Family : Upupidae				
55	763	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	R
Family : Bucerotidae : hornbill				
56	767	Common gery hornbill	<i>Tockus birostris</i>	R
Family : Capitonidae : barbets				
57	782	Large green barbet	<i>Megalaima zeylanica</i>	R
58	784	Lineated barbet	<i>Megalaima lineata</i>	R
59	785	Small green barbet	<i>Megalaima viridis</i>	R
60	792	Crimsonbreasted barbet	<i>Megalaima heamacephala</i>	R
Family : Hirundinidae : swallows				
61	916	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	R
62	921	Wiretailed swallow	<i>Hirundo smithii</i>	R/LM
63	930	House martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	R
Family : Laniidae				
64	946	Rufousbacked shrike	<i>Lanius schach</i>	R/LM
Family : Dicruridae : drongo				
65	963	Black drongo or king crow	<i>Dicrurus adsimilis</i>	R
Family : Sturnidae				
66	994	Black headed or brahmyn myna	<i>Sturnus pagodarum</i>	R
67	1002	Pied myna	<i>Sturnus contra</i>	R
68	1006	Common myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	R
69	1008	Bank myna	<i>Acridotheres ginginianus</i>	R
70	1009	Jungle myna	<i>Acridotheres fuscus</i>	R
Family : Corvidae : tree pies, crows				
71	1032	Indian tree pie	<i>Dendrocitta vagabunda</i>	R
72	1049	House crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>	R
73	1054	Jungle crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>	R
Family : Pycnonotidae : bulbuls				
74	1125	Whitecheeked bulbuls		R
75	1128	Redvented bulbuls	<i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>	R
Family : Muscicapidae : babblers, flycatchers, warblers, thrushes & chats				
Sub-family : Timaliinae, babblers				
76	1254	Common babbler	<i>Turdoides caudatus</i>	R

Sl. No	Code	Common names	Scientific names	Residential status
77	1265	Jungle babbler	<i>Turdoides striatus</i>	R
Sub-family : Muscicapinae : flycatchers				
78	1445	Verditer flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa thalassina</i>	R
Sub-family : Sylviinae : warblers				
79	1517	Ashy wren warbler	<i>Prinia socialis</i>	R
Sub-family : Turdinae : thrushes & chats				
80	1679	Plumbeous redstart	<i>Rhyacornis fuliginosus</i>	LM
81	1692	Brown rock chat	<i>Cercomela fusca</i>	LM
82	1700	Pied bush chat	<i>Saxicola caprata</i>	R
83	1716	Whitcapped redstart	<i>Chaimarromis leucocephalus</i>	LM
84	1720	Indian robin	<i>Saxicoloides fulicata</i>	R
Family : Tits or titmice				
85	1794	Grey tit	<i>Parus major</i>	LM
Family : Motacillidae : pipits & wagtails				
86	1874	Forest wagtail	<i>Motacilla indica</i>	R
87	1876	Yellow wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>	R
88	1883	Yellow headed wagtail	<i>Motacilla citreola</i>	R
89	1884	Grey wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	R
90	1885	Pied or white wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	R
91	1891	Large pied wagtail	<i>Motacilla maderaspatensis</i>	R
Family : Zosteropidae : white eye				
92	1933	White eye	<i>Zosterops palpebrosa</i>	R
Family : Ploceidae : weaver birds				
Sub-family : Passerinae : house & rock sparrow				
93	1938	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	R
Sub-family : Ploceinae : weaver bird, bayas				
94	1957	Baya	<i>Ploceus philippinus</i>	R

This list is not exhaustive.

Some peculiar observations :

1. During our regular visits to the lake it was observed that the arrival of Pallas' fishing eagle creates panic among the flock of ducks.
Once a fishing eagle was seen attempting to catch ducks in the lake. After a couple of attempts we saw that it managed to catch a ruddy shelduck. After catching the duck it sat on a large stone in the lake, unfeathered the duck and took it to its nearby nest holding the duck in its claws.
According to local inquiry the nest of the fishing eagle is not less than twenty years old. This was confirmed by an old gentlemen who used to do river rafting in the Yamuna in his young age who resides in Dehra Dun and is a head master in a school. This gentlemen is also a good bird watcher.
2. During our visit to the lake we saw some local people shooting ducks. After inquiry from local people we came to know that local villagers quite often shoot ducks which fetches a handsome price.

References :

Handbook of birds of India & Pakistan, by Ali & Ripley.
Birds of India, by Bikram Grewal (1 Edition).

Acknowledgment

The authors express their sincere thanks to the scientists of Forest Research Institute, Dehra Dun for extending their helping hands in identification of lake's vegetation.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors. They do not represent an official position of F.S.I. on the subject.

Abbreviations : M = migratory; R = Resident; LM = Local migration

Further information and any addition to this checklist is welcomed.



A note on the Preliminary Findings on the Distribution of the Great Black Woodpecker in the Western Ghats

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I have undertaken, as an extension of my studies on the woodpeckers of Western Ghats, a survey of the Indian great black woodpecker (*Dryocopus javensis*) supported by the NYZS/The Wildlife Conservation Society, New York. As a part of this project, I had contacted several ornithologists and naturalists working in the W.Ghats either personally or through an earlier note in the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*. I had also undertaken surveys in person in some of the areas and had two volunteers (L Shyamal and Raj Kumar) visiting some sites for me in Karnataka. Given below is the outcome of these attempts aimed to put together the present distribution of this rare bird.

I would be glad to have comments and further details from other readers, familiar with this bird in other parts of the W.Ghats. This would help in getting better idea of this bird's range and status. I plan to visit more areas and collect firsthand information on the habitat use, nesting and foraging behaviours in the course of the next few months.

A surprising finding is that there are no recent sightings of this woodpecker in the W.Ghats of Maharashtra, despite my attempts to collect information from several friends there. If this is indeed true, time has come to raise an alarm and draw more attention to this species and take up urgent conservation measures.

I thank all the people who responded to my request for information on the great black woodpecker. I am grateful to Mr L Shyamal and Mr D Raj Kumar for undertaking field trips to two localities in Karnataka.

A list of known localities in the W.Ghats where the great black woodpecker (*Dryocopus javensis*) occurs.

1 Gujarat

Surat Dangs — Snehal Patel (in litt., 1995); E.K. Barucha (Pers. Comm., 1995).

2 Maharashtra

Melghat Tiger Reserve — Asad Akhtar, *Hornbill* 1994/2, (Satpura Hills)

No recent sightings in the W.Ghats.

Ref: Humayun Abdulali, Renee Borges, E.K. Barucha, Kiran Purandare, Chittampalli (Melghat), Prakash Gole.

Probably occurs at *Sawantwadi* — R.J. Ranjit Daniels (Pers. Comm., 1994); at *Koyna and Radhanagari areas* P.Gole, Pers. Comm., 1993) and at *Tansa and Vaitarna* (R. Borges, in litt 1994).

3 Goa

Recent sightings :

Molem and Canacona (R. Grubh and S. Ali, 1976; JBHNS 73; 42-53).

Possibilities of sightings at *Molem, Cotigao and Valpoi* suggested by: R.J. Ranjit Daniels (Pers. Comm., 1994); R. Borges in litt, 1994) and Jagdish Wagh (in litt, 1994).

4 Karnataka

Recent sightings :

North Kanara — *Sirsi area* — R.J. Ranjit Daniels (Pers. Comm., 1993); *Anashi National Park* — J.C. Uttangi (in litt., 1994) and S. Subramanya (in litt., 1995); *Yellapur area* — Renee Borges (in litt., 1994).

Jog Falls — S. Subramanya (pers comm., 1993).

Agumbe/Someshwara WLS — L. Shyamal and Raj Kumar (this survey).

Bhadra WLS — L. Shyamal and Raj Kumar (this survey); J.N. Prasad (in litt., 1993); *Shimoga and Gudavi areas* — Gururaja K.V. et al., (1993).

Kudremukh — Priyadarshini Davidar (Tech. Rep 6; CTS, IISc, 1980).

Nagarhole, Bandipur — *Kabini areas* — J.N. Prasad, Raj Kumar, Ullas Karanth and TRK Yoganand (pers. comm./ in litt.,).

5 Tamil Nadu

Recent sightings :

Mudumalai WLS — TRK Yoganand; A. Manimekalan; V. Gokula; P. Kannan and B. Rajasekhar (in litt./Pers. comm.).

Siruvani RF — TRK Yoganand and C. Venkataraman (Pes. comm.).

Indira Gandhi WLS - Karian Shola — Pers. obs., R. Kannan, Krys Kazymierezak, Divya Mudappa (Pers. Comm./in litt.).

Anagundi Shola (Sanjeeva Pande — Feb. 1995; 3 birds)

Anamaiai (Urulikkal) — A Prabhakar (Pers. Comm.)

Sengaltheri-Kalakkad/Mundanturai — Pers. obs.; *Kakkachi* — T. Ganesh and Soubhadra Devi.

6 Kerala

Recent sightings :

Wynaad WLS — Pers. obs., P.K. Uthaman, A.V. Manoj, TRK Yoganand (Pers. Comm.).

Nilambur/New Amarambalam — TRK Yoganand (Pers. Comm.); NEST Survey, 1993.

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Blue-throated Flycatcher, Indian Great Reed Warbler, Common Rosefinch and Lesser Golden-backed Woodpecker — Four New Species in the Indian Institute of Science Campus, Bangalore.



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It was the morning of 14th October 1994 when we (LS, NA, VG, MR, AL and AH) saw a male blue-throated flycatcher (*Muscicapa rubeculoides*) amidst the greenery of a garden in the IISc campus. This species has been observed in Bangalore only thrice before (BWFCB, 1994).

On 27th February 1995, we (LS, VG and MR) were walking past a small piece of marshland when to our surprise there was an Indian great reed warbler (*Acrocephalus stentoreus*) sitting on a Lantana bush. The habitat and the call led us to believe that it was not a great reed warbler (*Acrocephalus arundinaceus*) or a thick billed warbler (*Acrocephalus aedon*).

The 12th of April 1995 was a really bright day for us. We (SV and VG) were indeed excited to spot two males and a female of the common rosefinch (*Carpodacus erythrinus*) resting high up on a *Casuarina* tree, and what is more, all three birds stayed put for a whole hour giving us ample opportunity to confirm our identification. The males were crimson on their heads and breasts while the female was dull brown with streaks on her breast.

A lesser golden-backed woodpecker (*Dinopium benghalense*) was heard calling on the 1st of May 1995 by one of us (LS).

We would like readers to add these four species in addition to the white browed bulbul sighted recently (Gadagkar *et al* 1994) to the check list of birds of the IISc campus.

Some corrections to the earlier checklist of birds of the IISc campus (LS): The cattle egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) Status code: x C) was missed in the earlier note (Shyamal, 1994). Species not seen by me were to be shown by an asterisk and these are lesser whistling teal, blackeared kite, longlegged buzzard, woodcock, green pigeon, rufous turtle dove, red turtle dove, little brown dove, blackcapped kingfisher, collared sandmartin, white headed myna, common iora, large grey babbler, booted tree wabbler and orphean warbler. The following five species are to be indicated by the code "rb" instead of "r" — paraiah kite, blue rock pigeon (*Columba livia*), spotted dove, house crow and jungle crow.



Do Ruddy and Common Shelduck Stay in Assam throughout the Year?

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Anatidae is the second largest wetland bird family in Assam with 28 species. Out of the 28 species, 6 species are residential. They are — *Dendrocygna javanica*, *Dendrocygna bicolor*, *Nettapus coromandelianus*, *Cairina scutulata*, *Anas poecilorhyncha haringtoni* and *Sarkidiornis melanotos*. However my recent survey on the status of anatidae in Assam reveals that in addition to the six residential species mentioned above, two more species namely *Tadorna ferruginea* and *Tadorna tadorna* have been found in some parts of Assam in small numbers throughout the year.

Earlier it was believed that both *Tadorna ferruginea* and *Tadorna tadorna* are totally migratory and leave Assam by March, as most of the migratory ducks do. But my present study reveals that a small population of *Tadorna ferruginea* stays in Assam throughout the year, as the species has been recorded in Dibru-Saikhowa Wildlife sanctuary, Majuli River

island, and some parts of the Brahmaputra River Tract even in the summer months. This phenomenon has been observed for the last three years.

However, when I visited Nameri Wildlife Sanctuary (26°95' N, 92°6' E approximately) in connection with the survey of white winged wood duck from 18 May till 25 May 1995, I spotted two *Tadorna tadorna* along with six *Tadorna ferruginea* flying over the river Bhoireli at 5.54 pm on 19th May 1995. I sighted the ducks again (same in numbers) on the subsequent days of my stay at Nameri WLS till 25th May 1995, flying along Bhoireli river in the evening. The birds were found flying from south-east to north-west in the evening. Although *Tadorna ferruginea* were recorded throughout the year in Assam earlier also, the recent sighting records of *Tadorna tadorna* in the month of late May indicates that some population of *Tadorna tadorna* stays in Assam throughout the year.



Notes on the Mating Behaviour of the Indian Roller

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I had the opportunity to observe the mating behaviour of the Indian Roller (*Coracias bengalensis*) on three different occasions at Sriharikota Island, Nellore district, Andhra Pradesh, while working in the Bird Migration Project of the BNHS.

On 27th March 1990, the birds mated on a telegraph wire around 0715 hrs. The mating lasted for about 30 seconds. The female bird was seen with her tail cocked and carried some insect grub in her beak. This she consumed soon after the mating was over. The male was constantly calling the short "ker" calls all through the period of copulation. After this, he shifted to another wire, nearby. After about ten minutes, I again saw a bird (presumably of the same pair) with some insect in its beak. The second bird responded with short calls. The first bird (male?) then launched in the air and gave an aerial display (rolling) and moved some 150 m away and repeated the display. By then the second bird flew away to a palm tree nearby.

I noticed another pair of rollers mating on the morning of 7th April 1990. The male called once just before mounting and was silent all along the 35-40 seconds when the mating took place on a Eucalyptus tree. The female was not seen feeding on any insects during or after the copulation.

A pair of rollers (the same pair seen on 7th April?) was seen mating again on the same Eucalyptus tree around 0715 hrs. The mating lasted 25 seconds. The male bird called once before he mounted and was silent thereafter. The female had some insect in her beak and she ate it after the copulation was over.

Although I never saw the male offering the insect, I feel the insect consumed by the female soon after copulation was a nuptial gift from the male. Courtship feeding is widespread among birds and is reported in all the families under the order *Coraciiformes* (Cramp, 1985). In some species, it is associated with coition and may function as a releaser for that behaviour. Courtship feeding occurs before, during or after coition (Welty, 1979). Courtship feeding is said to occur frequently during the breeding season in the Indian Roller but no details are available (Cramp, 1985).

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Birdwatching on the Manauli Island, Marine National Park

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On October 11, 1994 the sky was clear when we reached a local fishing village, about four km from Mandapam. Part of the success and enjoyment of birdwatching that day was perfection of weather.

Last year inclement weather in November had marred my visit to the Marine National Park. When we climbed into the boat at 0730 hrs the sky was clear and fine in its brilliance. The owner of the large boat had agreed to drop us at the island to watch the birds. During 25 minutes of exciting ride we did not see any dugong although gulls and terns were never out of sight. Approaching the island we could see hundreds of waders on the shore. As the tide was low when we reached the Manauli Island, we anchored 300 metres away from the coast and waded in knee-deep water to reach the island. The water was so clear — so much so that we could see the fish quite a long way ahead, say nine feet or more. There were hardly any corals although I was told by Dr Balachandran that a decade ago corals were quite common on all islands.

The first to attract our attention were large waders — crab plovers, oystercatchers and curlews. In one group of waders there was a very smart black-breasted bird, a grey plover, still in his breeding plumage. There were hundreds of Mongolian plovers running about quite unconcerned with our approach unlike crab plovers and oystercatchers. As the tide was low all birds were busy feeding. We decided to walk along the shore. Three curlews took off at our approach. Surprisingly, we encountered only one whimbrel on the island. Among another group of waders Balachandran pointed out three knots. Eleven greater flamingoes flying east to west over the sea were a pleasant sight. After walking some distance we spotted ruddy turnstones.

During our walk terns were never out of sight. Mongolian plovers, curlew sandpipers, and little stints were present uniformly along the shore. Encounter with bitterns was very brief. Two black bitterns were sighted but flew away at our approach to hide in the mangroves. Reef herons (western reef egret) and grey herons were not shy.

Exceptional number of lesser-crested terns were resting on the eastern end of the island. They eyed our approach warily. When the large flock rose in the air the cacophony of their cries was tremendous. We guessed they numbered more than 2000. Gull billed terns were in small number, say about 150. Also of great interest was concentration of Caspian terns and herring gulls on the new island adjacent to the Manauli.

After an exciting walk we stopped for lunch and settled ourselves comfortably in the shade of a mangrove tree as the sun was high and very bright. While we ate our lunch three house cows gave us company. We also spotted a common kingfisher some distance away catching fish. A warbler was noticed in the bushes and confirmed as thickbilled warbler.

We also recorded common greenshanks and Terek sandpipers at two sites on the island. By mid-day the tide began to rise and there were very few birds on the shore. It seemed we had all we are going to see when we sighted two more species of waders — two common sandpipers and 30 Kentish plovers.

Birds recorded from the Manauli Island

1	Common kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	1
2	Bartailed godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>	35
3	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	1
4	Eurasian curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	45
5	Common redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	20
6	Common greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	4
7	Terek sandpiper	<i>Tringa cinerea</i>	3
8	Common sandpiper	<i>Tringa hypoleucos</i>	2
9	Ruddy turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	20
10	Great knot	<i>Calidris tenuirostris</i>	3
11	Little stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>	36
12	Curlew sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>	1
13	Eurasian oystercatcher	<i>Haematops ostralegus</i>	6
14	Grey plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	71
15	Kentish plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	35
16	Mongolian plover	<i>Charadrius mongolus</i>	700-750
17	Crab plover	<i>Dromas ardeola</i>	8
18	Yellowlegged gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>	50
19	Gullbilled tern	<i>Sterna nilotica</i>	150-170
20	Caspian tern	<i>Sterna caspia</i>	125-150
21	Lesser crested tern	<i>Sterna bengalensis</i>	1500-2000
22	Little cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax niger</i>	4
23	Western reef egret	<i>Egretta gularis</i>	4
24	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	2
25	Black bittern	<i>Ixobrychus flavicollis</i>	2
26	Greater flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>	11
27	House crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>	3
28	Thickbilled warbler	<i>Acrocephalus stentoreus</i>	1

Manauli Island, the Gulf of Mannar Marine National Park

Manauli Island is one of the twenty small islands in the Gulf of Mannar. The relatively calm and silt free waters offer ideal conditions for the growth of sea grasses. These sea grasses support declining population of the dugong (*Dugong dugon*), the conservation of which is one of the principal aims of the Marine National Park created in 1983. Rameshwaram Island (Dhanuskodi Lagoon), Manauli and Hare islands in the Gulf of Mannar and a lagoon adjoining the Palk Bay near Mandapam are the major wintering and staging area for waterfowl. The interesting bird records from the park include noody tern and white tropic bird (*Phaethon*

laptarus). Lesser-crested tern, great stone plover, Kentish plover, and little tern are the breeding species.

Disturbance and threats

Poaching of the marine flora and fauna is rampant. We found a clap trap on Manauli Island. Local fishermen

informed us that the poachers often use their boats to reach Manauli and other islands. The alien species are flourishing on some islands at the expense of the native vegetation. Although quarrying of coral has been banned on the islands, most of the reef has already been lost.



On the afternoon of 25th April 1995 we were at Thampalakkad (76°32' E, 9°36' N), a hamlet 42 km east of Kottayam town, Kerala. Our house is nestled inside a small mixed grove amidst dense monotony of seemingly endless rubber plantations. The air was lively with the calls of a few grey tits and ioras.

Quite abruptly a pair of little spiderhunters (*Arachnothera longirostris*) entered the scene and one of them started sipping nectar from a *Heliconia rostrata*. The same individual flew on to a blunt and partly hollow branch of a nearby jack tree (*Artocarpus integrifolia*). It was seen fluffing itself, flicking its short tail violently and in the process, raising a cloud of dust. Intermittently the bird jumped out and shrugged off the dust from its body. It was later found that the dust was from an active termite mound in the tree hollow.

Soon a small green barbet (*Megalaima viridis*) made an appearance and chased the spiderhunter off. Interestingly

PRAVEEN, J, 14/779(2), K Medu, Palakkad 678013 and
SUBIN G NAIR, Srivallabha Vilas, Thampalakkad, Ponkunnam P.O., Kottayam Dt 686 526

the barbet too started the fluffing though its movements were more sluggish than the former's. After a while, the barbet left and the spiderhunter was back for its turn. This drama of chasing and alternate fluffing was repeated a couple of times till both the species departed. Now one of the grey tits (*Parus major*), a silent spectator till then, reached for the mound and imitated the process if not displaying a better standard. The grey tits too flew off by 14:22, putting an end to the entertainment.

The reason for this quaint behaviour of these birds can be that they were either dust-bathing or anting. Because of the high spirit shown by the birds in flying to the mound as if with a definite goal, the chances for the former reason is remote.

The sighting of the little spiderhunter, branded a forest species, in rubber plantations with the nearest forest at least 15 km away, is noteworthy.



Ashy Minivet Sighting in Goregaon, Bombay

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On 15th December 1990, I was on a routine walk with my dog near Bangur Nagar Creek at Goregaon at about 1645 hrs when I saw a grey black, whitish long tailed bird fly down with a harsh call and perch on a mangrove bush ten meters away from me.

I referred to 'A Pictorial Guide to the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent' by Salim Ali and Dillon Ripley, and on plate No.66 I found the bird; it was the ashy minivet (*Pericrocotus divaricatus*).

On checking the records and checklist of the Birds of Maharashtra by Humayun Abdulali, since the bird was

recorded as stray I wanted a second sighting. After a long wait, on 14th November 1993 at the Inaugural of Salim Ali Bird Count, I spotted this bird again, in the same area. This time I was fully equipped and with the pictorial guide and Binoculars confirmed it as a male ashy minivet *P.* I recorded the same in the Salim Ali Bird Count Sheet. Incidentally in 'The Birds of Burma' by B.E. Smythies, the ashy minivet *Pericrocotus divaricatus divaricatus* has been reported as breeding in Japan and migrating to the Indo-Chinese sub-region in winter.



Birds Foraging on Locusts in the Thar Desert

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Originating in Africa, the migratory locust swarms entered Jaisalmer and Barmer districts of Rajasthan around July 1, 1993. Major swarms have invaded India 13 times since 1861. The magnitude of attack this year

was unprecedented since 1988. Entering from Pakistan where the menace was not controlled immediately, they bred profusely during rains. By September 8 locust swarms reached up to Jodhpur and a week later some swarms crossed into M.P.

I was in the Desert National Park (DNP) which forms a part of the Thar Desert on September 10 and 11 and again on October 2 and 3. This note is about the foraging behaviour of different species of birds during mentioned period.

On September 10 at 0700 hrs I was near Khuri. My attention was drawn by a "cloud" of about 400 rosy pastor *Sturnus roseus* flying low and stooping suddenly on the ground. By approaching close to the birds I observed that the flock was attacking a locust swarm. The birds were catching locusts settled on grass. After 3-4 minutes the locust swarm flew 50-60 metres away to settle again on the grass. The birds followed the swarm again to feed on them. This went on for 15-20 minutes and some birds dropped out of the attacking flock and were seemingly oblivious of locusts after successful catch in the morning. They looked as if satiated and perched on bushes. Most of the birds in the flock were immatures and were noticed struggling with their "big" catch. One bird took exceptionally long time to eat a white locust. After the bird flew away I found one wing of the locust and it measured 7 cm.

On a flat grassy area near Barna one kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* was noticed on the ground picking small locusts. Another bird was seen some distance away patiently hovering above the ground before swooping down upon the locust.

One immature laggar falcon *Falco jugger* was noticed on an electric pole eating a white locust.

On 11th September at 1100 hrs blue cheeked bee-eaters *Merops superciliosus* were seen on telephone wires battering locusts in their bill against the wire before eating their catch. The bluechecked bee-eaters were flying low (about 80-90 cm) and taking advantage of rosy pastors

feeding on the ground. The locusts disturbed by the rosy pastors were being caught by the bee-eaters in the air. A successful individual would fly to the telephone wire before gulping the catch down. Near Lathi (outside the DNP, on Jaisalmer-Jodhpur road) there were at least 300 blue checked bee-eaters attacking locusts in a crop field.

Kashmir rollers *Coracias garrulus* were observed catching locusts near Damodra. They were utilizing telephone wires as scanning and feeding posts. On locating a locust the roller would swoop down to catch it and return to the perch. During the latter visit (October 2 and 3) number of locusts had fallen down and rollers were observed hawking the locusts.

During both the visits to the DNP harriers (Montagu's harrier *Circus pygargus* and pale harrier *Circus macrourus*) were also observed catching locusts. During the former visit when locust swarms were present in the area they were feeding exclusively on locusts.

Between Jaisalmer and Pokran at few places along the road house crows *Corvus splendens* were noticed flying low above the ground to catch locusts.

Conclusions

When large swarms of locusts were present during September, pale harrier, Montagu's harrier, kestrel, bluecheeked bee-eater, Kashmir roller, and rosy pastors were observed feeding exclusively on locusts. Also, during the first visit blue-cheeked bee-eaters were observed catching locusts together in groups. During both visits a good concentration of the above mentioned birds were noticed wherever locust swarms were present.

Acknowledgement

Thanks are due to Orient Bird Club, UK for partly funding my survey of the Desert National Park (DNP). The above observations were made while I was there to observe the autumn migration in the area.



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Distribution

Black-necked stork *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus* is perhaps now the most threatened bird of Nepal Terai. Although its range in Nepal extends west from Mahakali east to Meechi Zone but it is only recorded inside the protected areas.

It is often seen in singles or twos but a bigger family party can also be encountered.

Habitat

It is mainly found along the river courses, shallow ponds and other marshy places. The biggest population in Nepal inhabits river courses.

Black-necked Stork Endangered

Food

No investigation has been conducted very accurately but diet of both animal and vegetable matter were noted.

Activity patterns

During a study conducted in Nepal it was found out that the breeding period of these storks is very short. Preliminary observations have shown that their time is mostly spent on two major activities viz. resting (50% of the total available time) and feeding (30%). Other notable activities included: Preening (7%), Walking (5.67%) and territorial defence in case of male (2.45%). Special observation was carried out at Rani Tal of Sukila Phanta Wildlife Reserve, West Nepal to

get acquainted with their feeding methods. Here a resident pair was observed for the purpose.

Males were found to establish a temporary feeding territory especially when the feeding place was small eg. Rani Tal. The male would let many waterfowl to encroach but waders like great white egret *Egretta alba* and grey heron *Ardea cinerea* were not tolerated. On one occasion the male was seen to be very hostile to grey heron which wanted to land nearby it. To drive the heron away, the stork made circle after circle while chasing the equally agile heron. During this, bill-clattering of the male stork was frequently heard.

The territory size (400 sq meters) was very small compared to the large body size of the birds. The depth of the lake where they were feeding was almost two inches below their knee level.

During the study, it was found out that the darting method was most frequently used by them. The male was found to be more successful in finding food than the female. Food obtaining ratio was 1:6 for female:male. While feeding, the stork would first open the mandibles and continually probe 5 to 6 times into the water. In most occasions, food was unavailable. Out of 54 trials noted in two hours' time, the male was seen getting food only 6 times and this ratio was found to be different (lower) in female. Sometimes the feeding method would involve submerging the whole head into the water.

The feeding rate was intensified as dusk fell. There were moments when one stork would just watch (any danger?) and the other would continue feeding. On a flight, when male was disturbed by a passing by great white egret, stork charged it with its massive glossy black bill making great white not to return back. Occasional sweeping flight of grey-headed fishing-eagle *Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus* would make all ducks, small waders, other waterfowls to fly away in a small flock or dip into water eg. for cormorants. All birds would fly except the two elegants.

Many other smaller birds in between these two storks did not fly as they were guarded against the eagle by the storks. The flight of eagle might have given worries especially to the female as the head feathers could be seen erected by alarm.

Status

It is threatened to extinction in Nepal. Main causes for its decline are habitat loss, hunting, disturbance, prey shortage and may be effects of pesticides.

It is a resident bird whose population is augmented by winter and spring migrants from the south. Recently the bird was discovered to be breeding at Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve, East Nepal where three chicks were successfully raised. This is the only confirmed breeding locality inside Nepal. Attempts of nest-building were also observed at Chitwan where breeding is not proved.

Population

The population trend is not known. It is certainly not increasing. A total of 16 were counted during a recent survey. The estimated population is 20. The assumed distribution of population is as follows:

Locality	Number	Status
Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve & Koshi Barrage	Eight	Breed.
Royal Chitwan National Park	Four	Nonbr.
Royal Bardia National Park	Two	Nonbr.
Sukila Phanta Wildlife Reserve	Two	Nonbr.
Elsewhere (estimated)	Four ?	Nonbr. ?

Conservation measures

Bird conservation education should be conducted in the villages and schools where maximum priority should be given on the threatened bird species like this.

There is no provision in the law to protect the bird from hunting. It should be listed as protected under the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation-Act 1973.

Making law only does not ensure bird's survival. It should be enforced effectively. A colourful sheet of all protected animals and plants should be published and distributed to all the concerned people who enforce the laws. The disturbance inside the protected areas should be minimised so as to allow them free feeding and breeding. Their nest sites which are usually the old trees should be given protection especially from people cutting trees, fire and flood. Only then the future of black-necked stork can be bright in Nepal.



Sightings of Spotted Redshank and Black Redstart at Pallipuram, Trivandrum District, Kerala

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The Pallippuram paddyfields is a large, fine wetland situated 18 km north of Trivandrum. Waders start arriving here by the end of July, peaking around in October. This site is believed to be a staging point of early migrants. It is during this time that the rarer residents like painted snipe (*Rostratula bengalensis*) and

blue breasted banded rail (*Rallus straitus*) and local migrant (?) like red munia (*Estrilda amandava*) make their appearance here.

On 7th August 1994, by 1700 hrs while watching waders at Pallipuram, I came across a large sandpiper which, at first thought to a common redshank *Tringa totanus*. Later on

closer observation, the absence of wingbar, orange red legs, distinctly spotted wings and back with white wedge at rump and spots on outer tail feathers set this bird apart. Call of the bird, often repeated on the wing, was much similar to that of common redshank. The reddish base of black bill was also noted. The bird was exceedingly wary and flew vigorously for even the slight disturbance by villagers. By the dusk, the bird was seen bathing and preening with a large group of wood sandpipers and a few ringed plovers.

On the next day morning, I could observe the bird once again. The details of plumage observed the day before were carefully checked. The bird was later identified as spotted or dusky redshank (*Tringa erythropus*). In the evening Mr Susanth Kumar and Mr Ramesh, M visited the area with me, but could not find the bird.

This bird seems to be a 'new' bird to Kerala. The recently published 'A book of Kerala birds' by K K Neelakantan *et al* did not include this bird. In 'Annotated checklist of birds of Bangalore', the bird is considered as a rare winter visitor to Bangalore. So this sighting implies that it can be considered as a rare vagrant to Kerala.

On 20th January 1995, I was riding my cycle along the embankments of irrigation canal of the paddy fields. The area was drying up very fast after the harvest with some wet patches where small waders were very active. A few paddyfield pipits (*Anthus novaeseelandiae*) were enjoying their routine dust bathing. I was surprised to find a

sparrow-sized brown-black bird sitting on the other side of the canal. Within minutes, I could return to the spot with my binoculars. It had brownish black head and body with grayish streaks on breast with reddish/orangeish lower belly, rump and moulting tail. The plumage and size perfectly matching with that of a male black redstart (*Phoenicurus ochruros*), described in references. I could observe it as close as 3 meters. When I came closer, it stood staring at me for a few seconds before darting to a place 10 to 15 metres away. Soon I realised that it is highly location specific. It preferred to perch on elevated places like mounds of earth and on reeds. Flicking of wings and tail and catching insects were also noted. On the next day evening the bird was there near the same patch of reeds. As a black drongo made a swooping flight towards the redstart, it sheltered for sometime in a clump of dry reeds. On the 22nd evening, Ramesh M and I surveyed the area but the bird was not there.

The bird was reported from Palghat and Trichur districts (from Mathur and Palackal Kole respectively). So this sighting of Black Redstart is the first report from southern part of Kerala.

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The Sight of a Shortnosed Fruit Bat and the Response of Birds

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On 10th September 1994, at about 1100 am, I captured a shortnosed fruit bat (*Cynopterus sphinx*) from a small orchard near Jhadol village. After taking its measurements, I released it. As soon as I tossed it up in air, it flew away and disappeared among the trees. While it was flying, many roseringed parakeets and redvented

bulbuls made a noise similar to that made when a hawk is approaching. Perhaps a shortnosed fruit bat gives the false impression of being a raptor while in flight. Being nocturnal, its sight is not familiar to diurnal birds. That is why they gave the ware hawk signal.



Bird Conservation Nepal (previously known as Nepal Bird Watching Club) is the only society dedicated to the interests of ornithologists and bird-watchers in Nepal. It was established in 1982 to promote an interest in birds among the general public, to encourage research on diverse aspects of bird biology, to identify threats to birds' continued survival, and to help conserve birds and their habitats. After a long incubation period, the society is being rejuvenated through the renewed enthusiasm of its members.

Bird Conservation Nepal aims to become an authoritative bird conservation body in Nepal. At the

Bird Conservation Nepal

moment, the highest priority of the society is to educate people on the importance of bird conservation in Nepal.

The society is entirely run by a group of dedicated volunteers and supporters from varied background and regions. To make its work more effective and far reaching, the society requires support — both in terms of personnel and finances. Bird Conservation Nepal would appreciate and welcome any kind of help that you can offer.

For further information please write to :

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Strange Nesting Behaviour of Grey Hornbill

SANT, N R, 27, Adarsh Nagar, Wadgaon, Belgaum 590 005

For the past four years, I have been observing a pair of Grey Hornbills (*Tockus birostris*) from mid-December to mid-April. Each year the pair visits a natural hollow on a *Ficus* tree on the Belgaum-Goa Highway, beginning as early as the 14th December. The hollow is about 20-22 ft above ground and is usually occupied by nesting roseringed parakeets (*Psittacula krameri*) in this season.

For a couple of days the hornbills merely sit on branches around the tree-hollow, watching motor vehicles and others go by in their peculiar manner. In 1992 and again in 1994 I saw the female devouring the parakeet's eggs and removing its nest material. The parakeets are driven away and perhaps the nest lining that is thrown out is used later by pairs of jungle mynas (*Acridotheres fuscus*) who occupy the hollow after the hornbills depart. While the female hornbill is busy cleaning the hollow, the male brings her gifts like wild figs which are abundant at this time of the year. Mating takes place after each gift and at the end of January the female enters the hollow, coming out of it very rarely. The male is then seen to bring some tree bark (of *Eucalyptus*?) used to line the hollow and feeds the female after she accepts the bark. After mid-February, the female remains inside the nest hollow with the male feeding her frequently.

Until this stage, everything appears to be normal, but then I begin to observe strange behaviour as follows. In all four years I did not see the male packing the female into the hollow as is usual for hornbills. The female leaves the hollow earliest 24 days later and latest after 32 days. The strangest thing of all is that I do not know if any eggs are laid at all, because in all four years I haven't observed the young hornbills leave the nest. After the female comes out of the hollow I observed the male arriving with food and going

through the motions of feeding the chicks inside when perhaps there are none there.

Questions that come to mind are whether this kind of behaviour is known in hornbills and does it resemble a kind of pseudo-pregnancy that occurs in mammals?

[Failure to lay eggs or to incubate them and raise young usually results in the adult pair deserting the nest; the above behaviour is intriguing, if it has been reported correctly with all the facts. Continuation of this supposed 'pseudo-pregnancy' syndrome for four consecutive years is baffling. The observation that the female is not 'packed in' the hollow — the female actually walls herself in with help of plastering material delivered by the male — and leaves the enclosure 3-4 weeks after she enters it and, then, only the male comes back with food for the non-existent (?) young, suggest what I venture to put forward as an explanation. If the female is not sealed in properly and the nest hollow opening is left wide open after she leaves (and does not return?), the possibility of the young being eaten up by a predator entering the hollow during the parents' absence may be considered. To solve this curious phenomenon, perhaps it would have been best for the writer to have examined the tree hollow after the exit of the female hornbill, and after later visits by the male, to look for signs of young or of food articles that were put in by the male? The nesting season for the Grey Hornbill is given as "overall March to June" (Handbook 4: 131) and as "January to early April" on the next page for the Malabar Hornbill (also grey, without a trace of any casque). Were these hornbills mentioned above abnormal with the nesting season for their species too, or were they misidentified? A very elaborate discussion about nesting of hornbills is available in E.H.N. Lowther (1949) — *A Bird Photographer in India*, pp 95-110 but nothing like the above is even suggested. See also two more references to detailed accounts of nesting habits of the Grey Hornbill in the Handbook 4: 131. ----- Kumar Ghorpade]



Further Records of the Bay Owl from Kerala

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A single female specimen of the Bay Owl (*Phodilus badius*), known only from north-east India and Sri Lanka, was collected on April 30, 1976 at the Pariasolai Coffee Estate on the Nelliampathy Hills in the Palghat district of Kerala. This area is covered with wet evergreen forest wherever it has not been cleared and converted into plantations. The specimen was procured from a group of tribal children who were playing with the owl brought from the nearby jungle. Drs M A Reza Khan and V S Vijayan happened to be on a survey of the environs of Parambikulam Sanctuary nearby and chanced on the bird specimen. It died soon after and proper treatment to preserve its skin was not possible as the survey team did not have necessary equipment with them. However, it was sent to the Bombay Natural History Society where Dr Salim Ali examined it and pronounced it as something new. The skin was later shipped to Dr S Dillon Ripley in the US who confirmed the novelty after comparing it to specimens of *P.b. saturatus* from N.E. India and *P.b. assimilis* from Sri Lanka available in New York and

London. S A Hussain and M A Reza Khan (1978, JBNHS, 74: 334-336, 1 pl) then formally described it as a third subspecies in our subcontinent, naming it *R.b. ripleyi* after Dr Ripley.

This owl species is considered very rare and "very little known as the bird is strictly nocturnal and seldom seen" (Handbook 3: 254). Available literature on the species was given by Hussain and Reza Khan (1978: 334) along with the measurements of body parts of the Periasolai specimen.

Besides this single record of the bay owl from Kerala, no further published information is as yet available. During 1992, Mr R Kannan reported seeing and photographing this owl on the Sangam Range of the Parambikulam Sanctuary, but identification in the hand was not possible. On April 10, 1995 another specimen of this owl was brought live to the Ecological Research Centre of the Thattakad Bird Sanctuary. It was obtained on the boundary of the Sanctuary in a bad condition, having been attacked by crows during daytime. Some photographs have been taken and the bird

identified as *P.b. ripleyi*, with the following weight and measurements: Weight — 257 gm; Length — 28 cm; Wing — 197 mm; Bill (from skull) — 35 mm; Tarsus — 53 mm; Tail — 80 mm. In description of its plumage it agreed with Hussain and Reza Khan's paper. When approached the bird produced a hissing noise with open mouth and wide eyes, wings drooping. The claws are sharp and the upper bill sharply downcurved and pointed. The bird is still alive (12 April) and we hope to save it for further observations.

[The known facts regarding *Phodilus badius* (Horsfield) are an excellent example of a) the still poorly known distribution of many of our birds, especially those that are solitary or live in

pairs, frequent habitats not traversed by humanity generally and which also are mainly nocturnal, and b) the unsatisfactory recognition of so many 'subspecies', first by Stuart Baker in his *New Fana* (1922-30) and then by Ripley in his *Synopsis* (1961, 1982). Six subspecies are now recognised of *P. badius* known from Sri Lanka and Kerala (1 subsp. each) which are disjunct from the four other subspecies recorded from Nepal (not recorded since Hodgson in the last century) and N.E. India through Burma and the Indochinese Peninsula to the Greater Sunda Islands east to Borneo, and also the Philippines. For such a widely distributed species, the gaps in its range perhaps indicate loss of suitable habitat. One other species *P. prigoginei* occurs in the dense forests of the Congo basin in Central Africa. . . . Kumar Ghorpade]

Correspondence

BIRD OBSERVATIONS AT A RESERVOIR NEAR AURANGABAD. VIVEK GHARPURE, Gharpure Hospital, 13 Pushpanagari, Aurangabad 431 001

On February 5th this year we visited an Irrigation Department water reservoir at Sukhna, some 26 km away from Aurangabad. From 0715 to 1000 hrs we birdwatched and the following observations seem worth writing about.

A couple of little egrets *Egretta garzetta* were seen flying above the water surface and apparently feeding on the wing, like terns and gulls do. They would sometimes land on the water surface momentarily and take off again. Normally egrets stand in shallow water and feed but feeding on wing has perhaps not been observed before?

A pair of marsh harriers *Circus aeruginosus* flew over making the Coots *Fulica atra* and little grebes *Podiceps ruficollis* dive into the water and groups of ducks take off and land elsewhere on the reservoir. Coots and ducks are large birds and we were surprised to see their reaction to the harriers.

A group of around 3 common swallows *Hirundo rustica* was noticed perched on the ground in a nearby field and feeding. This was curious as we believed that swallows and related species of birds do not sit on the ground because they have very short feet.

On our way back home, we saw two purple sunbirds *Nectarinia asiatica* feeding on Rangoon Creeper *Quisqualis indica* flowers by piercing the stem of the flower to get at the nectar.

[If the birds seen were egrets, this behaviour is interesting but what were they devouring? Harriers have been known to take coots and ducks and larger birds too if weak or frail. Swallows are known to alight on ground and I quote the Handbook 5: 69 on the Redrumped Striated Swallow *Hirundo durica*: "Frequently the swarms settle sprawled out on damp, sandy river beds and shoals, or in newly ploughed fields". Could the "Common Swallows" have really been this somewhat similar species? With regard to the sunbirds' feeding behaviour, what was observed is nothing new as the Handbook 10: 22-37 documents it for this species and also the Purplerumped and Loten's sunbirds. . . . Kumar Ghorpade]

BLUE ROCK PIGEON AND BARN OWL NESTING UNDER THE SAME ROOF. N.R. SANT, 27, Adarsh Nagar, Wadgaon, Belgaum 590 005

On the second floor of a bungalow in front of our house a roof corner has been occupied by a pair of blue rock pigeons *Columba livia* for many years. Last winter a pair of barn owls *Tyto alba* took over that corner and nested there. I used to watch one bird, probably female (?), incubating and the other bird sitting on an electric pole nearby, watching the area for rodents. On the 1st December 1994 I heard noises made by young which must have hatched and I went up and investigated the nest to find five owl chicks about 2-week old in the corner. I was surprised also to find a pigeon nest only about 2 1/2 to 3 feet away containing two week-old squabs. This was something I never expected.

I kept a close watch on both nesting pairs. There was never any confrontation between the owls and pigeons. The pigeons were active during the mornings and the afternoons and the owls began moving around at night, their loud screams heard all night. During the day I could see the female barn owl dozing in the corner and the pigeons did not seem to bother about her presence. Some six weeks later the young pigeons left the nest and another four weeks later (on 13th February 1995) I saw all the barn owl young on a neighbouring coconut tree following the adult birds. For a further two weeks the family party remained in the vicinity of the roof corner and then disappeared. I see only one young owl on the front building sometimes in the evenings.

[This observation of a diurnal, granivorous species of bird "sharing the same roof" with a nocturnal, carnivorous one to rear young is very interesting. It would have been informative to know which species commenced egg-laying first, even though the pigeons left the nest sooner because of a shorter incubation and fledgeling period. The Handbook 3: 251 and New Fauna 4: 386 summarize nidification data about the Barn Owl and Stuart Baker's (1913) book on Indian Pigeons and Doves should do the same for the Blue Rock Pigeon. Who displaces who next breeding season there remains to be seen and information on the 'nest' of both species could be useful, since neither use much nest material anyway. A study of the animal remnants in the nest and pellets of disgorged remains there and scattered down below would be very helpful next season. . . . Kumar Ghorpade]



Continued from front inside cover

By forenoon we arrived at a frontier post, where our boat ride was terminated and we were taken on a short trek around the ERSTEIN Natural reserve - a lowland alluvial forest of France, bounded by the Rhine and a high water dyke built in the 19th century. This Rhine river forest is a result of the dynamics of the post glacial river. But over the last 20 years, this forest is subject to floods due to construction of a dam to generate electricity. The construction of a compensating reservoir in Plobsheim, submerged a large part of the alluvial forest in Erstein, called sommerley.

This river-based forest grows on the recent alluvial deposits of Rhine. Long ago the wild river Rhine had several branches called Giessen. During the floods, these branches permitted diversion of the high waters. During lean periods, the Giesen were fed by underground water table. But the network of canals on the Rhine in Alsace built during this century have led to frequent floods in the Erstein forest. Typically two types of vegetation make up the forest; the Oak forest with elms and ash-trees occupies the major part while Willow forest with poplars occupies the lower regions of the forest. This reserve is crossed by a vast network of lateral arms and branches of the Rhine, now disconnected from the Rhine and fed by the underground water. The water is crystal clear and limpid. Visitors are not allowed with their vehicles but allowed on foot only.

A good stroke of fortune enabled me to have my first glimpse of a lesser spotted wood pecker (*Dendrocopus minor*), as it hastily fluttered from one branch to another.

Nature-lovers find many reasons to rejoice in the European countryside. The placid river skirted the forested tracks, with spectacular grace, while pairs of cormorants perched on rocks, dried their wings, gazing at us on a timeless midwinter afternoon. It was cold and we warmed ourselves around the camp fire, specially made for the occasion. Here, I could review the progress and growth of the Asian mid-winter waterfowl census, with Dr. Taej Mundkur, the International Co-ordinator.

After lunch, we drove along the road with a long and well-kept tarmac that passed through green and lush pastures, dotted with an occasional village or an automobile factory.

The evening was equally eventful, when we were taken to a place called Ried, which is essentially a prairie land that supports a multitude of bird species. A group of dedicated nature lovers have formed a voluntary body

called 'Centre Permanent D'Initiation A L'Environment' (CPIE), at Maison De La Nature Du. Ried.

Ried, in Mutter Shaltz, is an exquisite hamlet surrounded by meadows and marshes between Colmar and Strasbourg. This small charming village with wide boulevards lined with hedges and avenue trees, in the heart of the Alsace province has a vast natural depression through which river Ill and numerous water courses flow. An underground water table that breaks out in clear springs, regular floods and irrigation network make the landscape a veritable mosaic of meadows, hedges and forests. The delightful rural villas sporting red and black tiled roofs amid vast grass fields were a sight to cherish. Here we learnt how the members of CPIE are making efforts to protect the breeding grounds of the curlews (*Numerius arquata*).

In summer, the tractors were all but smothering the nests of curlews. The farmers were persuaded by the CPIE team, not to grow crops in select areas, during the breeding season of the curlews. Instead arrangements were made to compensate an equivalent amount they would have otherwise earned by growing the crops!

We were also struck by other admirable efforts of the CPIE to protect the nesting grounds of the curlews. In summer, overflowing waters from the canals often inundated the surrounding fields. In order to protect the breeding grounds of the curlews, the volunteers of CPIE have successfully convinced the authorities of the need to regulate the flow of water in the canals. Presently in summer, the fields have just enough water, for the curlews and white storks (*Ciconia ciconia*) to forage. In a poignant sense, this has enabled the curlews to successfully nest in these fields, which were otherwise getting flooded or mowed down by tractors. Other ground nesting birds, that are concurrently benefited by the efforts of CPIE are the lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*) or the peewit, the woodlarks (*Lullula arborea*) and the skylarks (*Alauda arvensis*). They are returning in good numbers due to the relentless habitat restoration efforts of the CPIE. Presently they have a decent chance of successful nesting.

Here was an example of how the naturalists as well as the farmers debated and readily accepted the facts, which otherwise would have necessitated futile and acrimonious arguments for years.

At Mutter Shaltz, we had the rare privilege of learning more about the local culture. We also enjoyed the cuisine of the region, which chiefly consisted of home made bread, cake, cheese, fruit juice and black tea.



Warming around the camp fire.



A CPIE member explained the efforts to save the curlews.

Later, our attention was drawn to an abandoned white stork's nest on the tower of the village church. But the white stork population has gradually declined in this part of Europe. Two reasons attributed by the CPE were; degradation and loss of habitats and extensive hunting in wintering grounds in Asia and Africa; getting electrocuted by high tension wires, especially when visibility is poor during early winter months. We glossed over this disturbing fact. Then a member of the CPE with an adventurous spirit, explained about the efforts that were on to pinion the adult storks, so that the young-ones are enticed to remain with their parents, thus giving their trans Oriental/African winter flight a miss. I wonder if such exotic experiments will be of much help in reviving their population. Nevertheless, it was a salutary reminder that man and his attendant developmental activities are forcing more and more animals and birds to live on the edge.

The exhaustive and the exhausting but educative and entertaining journey through the Rhineland, ended around midnight with a ceremonial banquet, which was held under the aura of candle lights, typifying the rustic festivity and ambience of Central Europe. We thanked the organisers with a "merci beaucoup et au revoir," and returned to our hotels.

Announcement

ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF INDIA

OSI

Bi-annual Conference
ENVIRONMENT & BIRDS
14-16 November, 1995, New Delhi

Theme of the Conference

We are all aware of the importance of birds in our lives. Forests would disappear without the contribution of birds to the humus on which trees grow. Birds are nature's best crop-pesticides and aid in seed dispersal. But very few people know that apart from their aesthetic and economic value birds have played and continue to play a dominant role in the development of fundamental scientific principles and theories e.g. in the field of evolution, ecology, signalling and other behaviours, endocrinology and physiology. This Conference, as the OSI Conferences in the past, will provide a unique platform for hobbyists and professional ornithologists alike. They will review the environmental influences on various aspects of birdlife and vice versa with special reference to the role of birds in science and society. Measures to promote interest in and protect birdlife and to maximise avian contribution to our lives shall also be highlighted.

Venue

Indian Agricultural Research Institute, Pusa, New Delhi. The capital is well connected with the rest of the country through land and air transport.

Dates :

14 to 16 November, 1995. Mid-November in Delhi with its sparkling winter sunshine is a pleasant time (day temp 22-26°C).

Cover : **White backed vulture** (*Gyps bengalensis*). This heavy looking bird is often seen perched hunched-up on tree or roof of walls near slaughter houses. This vulture soars and glides majestically in the sky with outspread wings and watch with acute eye sight, the movements of crows, jackals and village dogs for any tell-tale presence of a caracass. They arrive in good numbers at the quarry, and after much jostling and squabbling, devour on the dead animal with alacrity.

Photo S. Sridhar, ARPS

Presentations

During the three days of the Conference open and invited papers shall be presented in various sessions. Apart from these a series of Special Symposia and Round Tables are being organised in which formal and/or informal presentations will be made.

For further details Contact :

OSI Secretariat : Box 45, Srinagar Garhwai, UP 246 174
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BOMBAY NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY

Salim Ali Centenary Seminar on Conservation of
Avifauna of Wetlands and Grasslands
February 12 - 15, 1996, Bombay, India

First Announcement

Objective

This International Seminar aims to bring together experts and planners from the world over to identify and recommend options for the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands and grasslands to ensure the future of this valuable natural resource. The seminar will provide an opportunity to discuss and examine the work done by both international and local agencies in this context.

One of the major outputs of this Seminar is expected to be the development of an international network for the conservation of such habitats by exploiting the possibilities of initiating projects and programmes and to provide a sound basis for future international co-operation.

It is intended to publish a special volume of the BNHS Journal on this theme, which would include the presentations at the seminar and additional contributions.

Provisional Programme

Sessions

- (1) Cranes
- (2) Ducks and Geese
- (3) Bustards and Floricans
- (4) Raptors
- (5) Waders, Storks and Herons
- (6) Conservation of Grassland and Wetland Habitats

Venue

Indira Gandhi Institute for Development Research
Gen. Vaidya Marg, Goregaon (East)
Bombay - 400 065., INDIA

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