

# *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*

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## Editorial

### 40 years on

In December this year our Newsletter will celebrate its 40th birthday, for the first cyclostyled monthly issue was brought out in December 1959. It is a shame that I do not have the first issue in my file (in fact there are vast gaps in my collection). S. Subramanya, Aasheesh Pittie & Kumar Ghorpade have helped by listing and asking for the missing issues, but not with much success as far as I know.

Looking back, mentally, on these first issues indicates the distance the Newsletter has covered. In those early years there was considerable excitement in the Editorial Office when a schoolboy reported that there were two kinds of crows in his garden, one with a grey neck and one with a black one. Now it would be difficult for the Editor to print such a piece inspite of the complaint from one reader that the Newsletter caters to the lowest common denominator, and more erudition is called for.

But let me assure the novices that our Newsletter will always have some space for them. I was delighted to hear from Ramachandra Guha, now a celebrity and the author of several books, including co-authorship with Madhav Gadgil in *This Fissured Land*, that as a school boy of eleven, his very first article to be published was in the Newsletter for *Birdwatchers*. I wish I could lay my hands on that one.

I might mention here that the NLBW faced rough weather when it was conceived. Members of the Executive Committee of the BNHS protested that if the Birdwatchers Field Club of India was formed, and if the Newsletter was published it would reduce the already low membership of the BNHS. I held the contrary view (and was proved right) that birdwatchers would join the BWFCI, subscribe to the NL and then as their interest developed they would join the BNHS as well. Salim Ali encouraged me to go ahead with the Newsletter, but the attacks from Executive Committee Members of the BNHS continued. In fact Salim Ali was castigated by the BNHS Committee for having contributed an article to the Newsletter on the WHO/BNHS Bird Migration Project, before it was published in the BNHS Journal. The Journal then was not too punctual, and there were long delays between issues. The Bird Migration Project was a significant development, so where was the harm in publicising it in a monthly created specially to arouse an interest in our birds.

I was surprised at the number of eminent naturalists who so willingly agreed to write for the NL when it was launched. I will name a few who have died, or those with whom we are now not in close touch : Loke Wan Tho, Shivarkumar of Jaldan, R.S. Dharmakumarsinhji, R.M. Naik, T.J. Roberts, Stewart Melliush, R.S. Fitter, Christopher Savage, Peter Jackson and many more.

I must pay a special tribute to JS Serrao of the BNHS who came to my house in far away Andheri after a hard days work in Bombay to cyclostyle the NL. His phenomenal memory for natural history facts, and ability to lay his hand on appropriate references was admirable. Salim Ali told me that without Serrao's assistance the ten volume Handbook would not have appeared when it did.

To all of them our grateful thanks for having laid the foundations of a publication which I am sure will survive the Founder Editor. I would not like to think of a successor as yet - but will do so in good time, I hope.

## Pelicans

Anish Andheria's article in this issue refers to a solitary pelican in Dodda-Gubbi. It was a wonderful sight. What made it come to this tank this year? We stayed in Dodda-Gubbi from July 75 till March 89 but never saw a pelican. On 4th January I went to Kokrebellur for the first time. I was disappointed with the scene. There was only one ficus tree on which there were about 30 birds, and a couple of active nests. Others who went there a day earlier saw many more pelicans including painted storks. So obviously I am not a good watcher. But it is a thrill to see the big birds lowering their landing gear and land without a jolt (unlike our aircraft) on the selected branch. The

same day we went to Ranganthittu. The boat ride in the Cauvery, meandering around the islands, watching stone plovers, spoonbills, purple herons, night herons and many others was a great pleasure.

But what made our trip exceptionally worthwhile for me and my companions was an hour's walk through the rustic lands just a furlong away from the Sanctuary. I do not recall visiting such a beautiful matrix of large local trees, cultivated fields, water courses, shrubbery and birds in recent years. In the distance we could see the beautiful structures of Srirangapatnam. All told a sight to remember, and a reassurance again about the matchless beauty of our country.



## Pondicherry University Campus and a Taste of Summer

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I read with interest the article on the Birds of Pondicherry University campus and the checklist of birds seen during the years 1995-97 by my good friend Gopi Sundar in the March / April 1998 issue of the Newsletter.

I had opportunities to observe the birds of this campus soon after it was acquired by the University and before the buildings were constructed in 1988. Ever since, I have been a casual visitor to the campus and my last visit was sometime in February 1997. In 1988, I had the opportunity to make regular weekly visits to the campus between September and November to monitor the birdlife. I had hoped this activity would be carried on by the subsequent batches of the students of the ecology and biology departments and it would be possible to document and assess the changes that take place in the campus birdlife following habitat changes - both beneficial (such as tree plantation) and harmful (construction of roads, buildings, clearing of natural scrub vegetation etc.). I am glad that Gopi has been able to spare time to watch birds and compile a list.

My old list contains 94 species of birds, which includes a few water birds noticed in overhead flight — grey heron, large egret, openbill stork, pintail, lesser golden plover, little ringed plover, green sandpiper, whiskered tern and gull billed tern. Some of the resident birds that I had recorded but absent in Gopi's list are — brahmyn kite, white-eyed buzzard, brown hawk-owl, stone curlew, blue rock pigeon, baybacked shrike, yellow throated sparrow, white throated and spotted munias. Among the migrants I had spotted, the following are not mentioned in the recent list — pale harrier, Eurasian hobby, European cuckoo, rosy pastor. Blyth's reed warbler, lesser white throat, black red start and forest wagtail.

The plaintive cuckoo, alpine swift and bluetailed bee-eater are some of the other birds I had seen here which don't feature in Gopi's list.

I found in the list a few birds that have never been reported in the Pondicherry-Madras coastal habitats (where I have been observing birds for over two decades now) - small green barbet, jungle myna, gold fronted chloropsis, grey tit and white eye. Two other birds that need confirmation and more details are the black-eared kite and hen harrier. It was surprising that the more common pale and Montagu's harriers are not mentioned in his list. I would also like Gopi to verify his sightings of the chestnut headed bee-eater (was it the bluetailed bee eater ?) and the booted warbler (Blyth's reed warbler, a very common migrant is absent in the list). I wish to know if the doves — ring, red turtle and little brown doves are regularly seen or occur as casual visitors. It is my experience that these are confined more to the vicinity of scrub jungles in this region while the red turtle dove is a rare bird.

While it is still too early to see what changes have taken place in the campus birdlife in the last decade, we can get some indications - the house sparrow has started showing up. This was never seen in the campus 10 years ago. What I expect to happen is the replacement of the few scrub — specialized birds by the more generalised birds especially those adapted to human habitations. I hope someone would continue to monitor the birds and report the changes.

### A Taste of Summer (April 15-29, 1998)

The summer of 1998 was a hot one and it was hot in Rishi Valley too. Although at an altitude of some 700 m, the afternoon temperatures touched 40° C but the dry, humidity-free conditions made it bearable. Despite the heat,

the 350 acre campus had retained a green and refreshing look as compared to the drab and dry look of the surrounding hills. My brief two-week stay proved fruitful and I could tally a list of 96 bird species (out of the nearly 200 species so far recorded here) and some are "new" records for the campus. Here are extracts from a note written on the last day of my stay on the campus.

I am put up at the comfortable Guest House of the Rishi Valley School and from my window I get a good view of the *Ficus religiosa* tree just outside the Guest House and the low hills bordering the southern end of the campus. This *Ficus* tree is just getting into fruit and this morning I had woken to the musical 'pee-lu-lu' calls of the golden oriole. Among other visitors to the tree, I could also spot a male blackheaded cuckoo-shrike, several bulbuls (redvented, redwhiskered and white-browed), a pair of goldmantled chloropsis, some Tickell's flowerpeckers and common mynas. There was a lone grey drongo on a nearby *Casuarina* tree as late as 28th April. When I had first arrived I had seen several more which are no longer seen and presumably have moved to their breeding grounds in the north.

Last morning there was a party of over half a dozen rufousbellied babblers (white throated subspecies) foraging in the bushes close to the Guest House. These delightful birds are fairly common in the campus and I have noticed them in scrub, bamboos and even in the guinea grass patches which are wetter with dense, lush growth. Their cousin — the yellow-eyed babbler — is not as common but can be seen in the scrub covered hill sides in smaller numbers, usually in pairs. Other babblers that can be seen here are the common and whiteheaded, the former being the least common and the latter most ubiquitous! The large grey babbler is found outside the campus in drier areas.

I hear the 'Whee-tiu' of a pitta as I am writing this, calling not very far away from my room. I had seen a few birds in the last few days as they flew or foraged in some shady and overgrown parts, especially on the bamboo-lined bund of the percolation tank, a small waterbody surrounded by fields. Fortunately there is still some water here and it is a pleasure watching the dabchicks and whitebreasted waterhens swimming about or foraging in the drying margins. A couple of Indian moorhens skulk amongst the dense mat of *Ipomoea* plants growing along the water's edge and they rarely venture out in the open waters to forage. There are still several Blyth's reed warblers 'chuck' ing about in bushes and dense undergrowth. Blue rock pigeons and ring doves descend down to drink water while a pair of large pied wagtails along with a juvenile forage, running around wagging their tails vigorously. Occasionally the magpie-robin regales us with a burst of song but it is more often the male pied bush chat that one hears here.

Three species of kingfishers - small blue, pied and whitebreasted - show up sometimes all together but often in turns - two species at a time. Redrumped swallows, house

and palm swifts drink water in flight, flying low over the water surface. There were some uncommon visitors too - chestnut bittern, a pintail snipe and crested serpent eagle seen sitting on a small earthen mound. The eagle has been quite vocal and seen circling over the campus in the morning hours, over the last two weeks. One afternoon it was seen carrying a greenish snake in its talons with a dozen or so crows in hot pursuit. The eagle dived into a mango tree and disappeared from view.

In the paddy fields close to the percolation tank are streaked fantail warblers, plain and ashy prinias. I have noticed the fantail warblers carrying food in their beak and diving into the field and once a bird had a white faecal sac which it carried away. I am certain the prinias are also nesting and have noticed them singing. The campus has two other species of prinias - the jungle and Franklin's - and these are usually confined to the drier areas and found in scrub covered hill sides.

Climbing onto one of the hillocks near the school, one gets a bird's eye view of the whole valley and one cannot but admire the various hues and shades of the lush green campus with its native and exotic trees, many of which are now in bloom - *Cassia fistula*, *Peltophorum*, *Jacaranda*, gulmohur and some varieties of *Acacias*. The valley beyond is undulating and is partly covered with vegetation. The Horsly Hills loom in the background. Scanning these hills with binoculars, one can see people cultivating even the rocky, dry barren slopes.

I have not only enjoyed the grand views of the valley in excellent evening or morning lighting which remind one of some vintage landscape paintings of the likes of Constable but also used this perch as a convenient platform to locate the several raptors that could be seen in the campus. Out of the blue would materialise a magnificent short-toed eagle or a scavenger vulture. The pariah kite is usually noticed in flight. The tawny eagle is also regularly seen and on two occasions I saw the Bonelli's hawk eagle. One afternoon a shaheen falcon zipped past and a female harrier also presented itself one morning. I flushed a white-eyed buzzard from a tree one afternoon as I headed towards the "last lake", a small waterbody half-way up the hills. The lake was dry but on its dry overgrown bed, a pair of yellow legged button quails were foraging.

Among the migratory birds that are still persisting in the campus are the greenish leaf warblers. Last week (on 19th). I saw a bird which I believe was the Tickell's leaf warbler - olive above and yellow beneath with a yellowish eye-brow and no wing bars, silently foraging on an *Acacia* tree. I am familiar with the bird, having seen it earlier in the Western Ghats, usually above 1000 m altitude. I could not locate the bird on subsequent visits to the same spot - possibly it was a bird on passage. I have also been seeing a couple of brown shrikes and 2-3 paradise flycatchers (female birds).

Several birds are courting or nesting. I was able to locate an active nest of coppersmith on a dead tree and that of a small green bee-eater on an earthen bank. Both birds carried food to the nests. Indian robin and hoopoe are other birds seen flying with food in their beak. There was a purplerumped sunbird nest on a small tree. Koels have commenced singing though not too vigorously. Little brown doves are busy courting, bowing and cooing to their mates. Common wood shrikes are also quite vocal. House swifts nest in the cave under a rock on the hill east of the campus and several birds flutter around the entrance noisily. Two days ago I noticed a pair of dusky crag martins flying about along with the swifts.

The open areas to the western end of the campus are the haunts of the rufous winged bushlarks and rufoustailed finchlarks. The brahminy myna and baya weavers were noticed in small numbers. On a mango tree in the orchard there were three blossomheaded parakeets, one morning. Their cousins the roseringed are seen in good numbers.

At dusk one often hears the common Indian nightjars and only on rare occasions I have heard the longtailed nightjar on this visit. The collared scops owl and spotted owlet are commonly heard. The mottled woodowl was heard at dusk, calling from a mango tree near the Percolation tank. The calls of the collared scops owl is an interrogative 'wut?' or 'what?' repeated every few seconds at regular intervals. On rare occasions, I have heard it being repeated in quick succession. The mottled wood owl has a loud and distinct call described aptly by Salim Ali as "a loud quavering eerie *chuhua-aa*". Often two or more birds call together soon after sunset.

One evening as I was returning after dinner, a large owl, uniformly brown in colour, flew from a roadside tree and landed on another across the road. It could have been a brown fish owl or the great horned owl, both of which are resident birds of the campus. I had a better view of the brown fish owl - a pair last evening. They were roosting on a *Ficus* tree growing amongst the boulders and scrub in the hills and were oblivious to the mobbing of whiteheaded babblers and an assortment of smaller birds from close range.



## Discovery of New Heronries

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During the course of our exploration of the waterbirds around Rishi Valley in April 1997 and in February 1998, we came across three heronries along the Madanapalle-Kadiri Road. The countryside is mostly dry and undulating with rocky outcrops and sparse scrub jungle, dotted with small to medium sized irrigation tanks. These tanks enabled the cultivation of paddy and other crops immediately in their vicinity.

We drove along the road on April 30th 1997 and stopped by some of the tanks. We were surprised that many of them had a lot of water and a number of waterbirds - coot, grey heron, median egret, little cormorant, blackwinged stilt etc.

The Nayan Cheruvu on the outskirts of the Ghattu Village has a large banyan tree on its bank and right next to the road. There was a fairly large roost of some 200 flying foxes or fruit bats on this tree. On the top branch of the same tree, there were atleast three nests of grey herons. Birds were seen bringing twigs to the nests where their mates were sitting. On our later visit on 6th February 1998, we counted eight active nests on the same tree.

Further down, a kilometre ahead of the town, B. Kotha Kota, was a small tank (Bayi Cheruvu) with several *Acacia nilotica* trees growing on its bed. On our second visit on 6th February, we noticed nearly 50 night herons including juveniles perched on the *Acacia* trees. These trees had some

nests and it is possible the night herons had nested on these trees.

Beyond Kotha Kota, some 7 kms away was a large tank - Pedda Tippa Samudram or PTM. Stopping the car near the road, we cut across the fields and some barren land to reach its shore. At the far end of the tank was a grove of *Acacia* trees, approximately about 1500 in number. A few of these were partly submerged in the water and on these trees we spotted several waterbird nests. There were a number of young birds in the vicinity of the tank and this indicated they were in the late stages of breeding.

A brief survey showed that there were atleast eight species of nesting waterbirds - little cormorant - 200+, large cormorant (juveniles) - 40+, (possibly there were Indian shags also), Indian darter - 2, grey heron - 20+, median egret - 25+, little egret - 100+, white ibis - 4, spoonbill - 2. A couple of spotbilled pelicans were noticed swimming in the tank besides 200+ dabchicks, 40 spot-billed duck and over 700 coots. On the water's edge there were red and yellow-wattled lapwings, little ringed plovers and blackwinged stilts.

On our visit here again on 6th February, we did not find any breeding activity. We could count over 2000 water birds and waders of over 25 species including three barheaded geese, six grey herons, three painted storks, four white ibises,

a solitary whitenecked stork, two large cormorants, seven Indian shag and several ducks (garganey, common teal, shoveller, pintail, common and tufted pochards) and egrets.

One of the reasons for the absence of nesting activity could have been the lower water level in the tank. A second

reason might be the disturbance caused by the villagers who were engaged in cutting the *Acacia* trees though well away from the nest trees. We will be monitoring these tanks and write more on these heronries at a later date.



## Birds of a Feather Flock Together

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Since, it was decided to assemble at Futehally's old house (adjacent to Maj. Appachu's estate), I reached Col. Chacko's residence just before 8.00, to find him geared up for the drive. The journey takes about 45 minutes but with an encyclopedia beside you, who cares! We were the first to reach our destination and were greeted at the gate by a pair of Asian koels (*Eudynamys scolopacea*). Acknowledging their warm welcome, we entered the farm. Soon, we were joined by more bird watchers and didn't take long before we were all engrossed in exploring the lush green surroundings of an excellently maintained farm land.

Not far away, I noticed a spotted munia (*Lonchura punctulata*) on an *Ixora* plant, carry grass blades into the dense foliage. It was joined by its mate and together they began giving final touches to the cradle which would eventually protect their naked and vulnerable progenies. Just when we were enjoying their engineering feat, Mr. Amithabh, an ardent birder, heard a rustle high up in a tamarind tree. Inspection revealed a well concealed Indian tree pie (*Dendrocitta vagabunda*) along with an ashy drongo (*Dicrurus leucophaeus*) with its characteristic fiery red eye. While we observed the twosome, the silence was shattered by a vociferous flock of white headed babblers (*Turdoides affinis*) who always seem to be in search of an excuse to quarrel. Above, a pair of purple-rumped sunbirds (*Nectarinia zeylonica*), meticulously inspected every flower for nectar. On the adjacent mango grove were a few thick-billed flowerpeckers (*Dicaeum agile*), also seeking nectar from the flowers.

While we were watching these feathery jewels there were some telescopic eyes keeping a vigil over us. A family of brahminy kites (*Haliastur indus*), comprising two magnificent rust coloured adults and a not so colourful juvenile were riding the thermals to gain height so as to survey the territory below. They were closely accompanied by their cousins, the pariah kites (*Milvus migrans*) who also possess the art of effortless flight. In the nearby bauhinia the agile and handsome red throated flycatcher (*Ficedula parva*) which has a special liking for flying insects kept us busy for the next few minutes. Meanwhile, a shikra (*Accipiter badius*) disappeared into a far off tamarind, wanting to sweep on an unsuspecting rodent or bird. Although, we were enjoying every bit of our stay at the farm, we decided to move on to the Dodda Gubbi tank

(meaning bigger sparrow) less than a kilometre away. En route, we were kept involved by two of the most flamboyant of birds - the Indian roller (*Coracias benghalensis*) and the white breasted kingfisher (*Halcyon smyrnensis*) both of which have brilliant turquoise blue plumage.

The tank was visible at the horizon and I was astonished to learn that last year the water was conspicuous by its absence and one could walk across its bed to get to the other end. However, the generous monsoon this year obviated any such possibility. We expected to see a lot of waders and water fowl. As soon as we touched the bank, we were gifted with a sighting of a solitary spotted billed pelican (*Pelecanus philippensis*) sailing smoothly across the shimmering water with consummate ease. It is believed to be the first sighting of this monster of a fisherman at this spot since almost a decade. The pelican led us to two grey herons (*Ardea cinerea*) in the background. They were getting ready for the long day ahead by preening their flight feathers. To the right of the pelican was a small flock of Asian white ibises (*Threskiornis melanocephalus*) thrusting their sickle shaped beaks into the shallow waters to disturb the tiny invertebrates and fish-fry that top their menu. Not far behind were the great egrets (*Casmerodius albus*). Unlike the fidgety ibis, they too relish fish-food but prefer to lay motionless in wait for their hapless prey. Once the fish is within striking distance, they seldom miss.

On the bank, we saw a flock of black winged stilts (*Himantopus himantopus*) probing into the mud. Their long feet allow them to travel deep into the water thereby opening up a more varied food base as well as reducing competition with other waders. On moving close to them they took off in a customary flight with their long legs trailing behind the body. However, the more tolerant green sandpiper (*Tringa ochropus*) and the stealthy pond herons (*Ardeola grayii*) held their ground and presented us with a pleasant view. Suddenly, we caught sight of another master fisherman of the bird world — the lesser pied kingfisher (*Ceryle rudis*) hovering over the water while keeping a watch on any surfacing fish. On the faintest opportunity, it would plunge into the water to emerge with prey in its long black beak.

The Dodda Gubbi reservoir is lined with a few tamarind and eucalyptus trees on one side and therefore an interesting

number of land-birds also frequent this place. Some of the birds that adorned the canopy included, the black headed munia (*Lonchura malacca*), jungle myna (*Acridotheres fuscus*) and common myna (*Acridotheres tristis*), brown shrike (*Lanius cristatus*), rufous backed shrike (*Lanius schach*), rose ringed parakeet (*Psittacula krameri*), small green barbet (*Megalaima viridis*), Blyth's reed warbler (*Acrocephalus dumetorum*) and a few small green bee-eaters (*Merops orientalis*). In the adjoining fields, we saw the hoopoe (*Upupa epops*), hammering deep into the ploughed earth for insect larvae with its thin, long bill. A pair of Indian robins (*Saxicoloides fulicata*) also made to the field to pick up insects from the ground; whereas, both the common swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) and the red-rumped swallow (*Hirundo daurica*) swallowed insects in the air.

So occupied were we that we completely disregarded the torrid sun, but it was indeed time for us to head back to Maj. Appachu's estate. The red wattled lapwings (*Vanellus indicus*) applauded our decision with their penetrating 'Did you do it' calls as they regained possession of their feeding territory, whereas, a spotted dove (*Streptopelia chinensis*), perched lazily on a nearby palm, just looked on. The sun had shown its effect even on the otherwise hyperactive large pied wagtails (*Motacilla maderaspatensis*) which had found an appropriate perch to spend the afternoon.

At Maj. Appachu's farm, all of us were treated to extremely refreshing tender coconuts which helped us refresh ourselves. By then, the group had swelled to a strong 40+ and Mr. Sridhar announced the schedule for the afternoon.

The first talk was by Flight Lieutenant Rangaswami, the man behind founding the private Bird Reserve at the Rishi Valley School. The Rishi Valley experiment is a rare testimony to the hard work of a few dedicated naturalists who have positively altered the course of an entire ecosystem.

The second talk by Mr. Sridhar made our blood boil. He discussed the hideous custom of hunting of countless innocuous wild animals and birds in some villages in parts of Karnataka. The only consolation was to learn that many NGO's from Bangalore, Tumkur, etc. have joined hands with the Police and Forest Department to stop the villagers from going on with this rampage. After listening to him and seeing pictures of the mercilessly butchered animals, our hearts were full of grief.

He then handed over the podium to Col. Chacko who shared his experiences regarding the magnificent black necked cranes (*Grus nigricollis*) of Laddakh. Here too the bottom-line was loud and clear — we humans in our lust for space and fodder, have totally disregarded the rights of other life-forms and continue to march ruthlessly on their few remaining strongholds. He said that although, the cranes were first discovered in India during the turn of the last century, they were largely ignored for many decades. In the fifties reports started to come in about these graceful denizens of the snow capped Himalayas. As per his current studies, about 15 breeding pairs visit their nesting grounds in Laddakh all the way from China. However, it's an irony that we are unable to provide safe breeding space for even a handful of birds. If something is not done soon, these 'cranes-of-the-blue-mountains' would only remain in the record books and no further.

After Col. Chacko's talk Maj. Appachu, our host for the day, marshalled us towards the dining hall for a most scrumptious meal.

The clock struck three and it was time for us to disperse. I was sure that everyone returned home feeling much more responsible for ameliorating the state of birds and other life-forms around us.



### Introduction

The sarus crane *Grus antigone antigone* (Linnaeus) resident in the Indian subcontinent is the largest flying bird. For Indians it has tremendous aesthetic and cultural importance being an object of reverence and worship. Owing to its size and high energy requirements sarus requires large feeding and breeding areas. The march of civilization into the earlier uninhabited areas is pushing the sarus to the wall and it is losing its habitat rapidly. This long term success of a species depends on its capability to reproduce and raise its young. Breeding can be termed successful only when the progeny reaches sexual maturity and becomes a part of the social structure.

## Breeding Success and Chick Mortality in Sarus Crane

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In an exhaustive survey of various sarus crane areas Gole (1989) identified Kota as one of its key breeding areas in India. Studies presented on ecology and breeding biology of sarus crane at the Asian Crane Congress, Rajkot (Vyas & Kulshreshtha, 1989) confirmed the importance of the environs of Kota for its breeding. Sarus cranes need inundated fields, marshes and reedbeds for nesting. The present study tries to look into the breeding success in sarus cranes based on the close study and follow up of some nests and sightings of the young ones with their parents. The survival of eggs and fledglings of various stages of growth has been judged by the number of young with the parents. Out of random observations taken over a five year period, a picture has emerged which

can be used as a yardstick breeding success of sarus cranes in Kota area in South East Rajasthan (25°10'N, 75°52'E).

### Method

Live nests, chicks, juveniles and subadults with their parents seen during the course of field visits were recorded throughout the area around Kota. Six nests were closely followed-up upto chick stage and two upto juvenile stage. Once the young ones were able to fly, they were taken to suitable feeding grounds by their parents. So, the follow up beyond this stage was normally not possible. The tarsal length of 32-35 cm of an adult sarus (Ali & Ripley, 1983) was taken as a yardstick to estimate the size of the young ones. Age and plumage descriptions were based on the study of six nests, which were watched upto advanced stage of fledging. Depending on the age, size and body colour, the young ones were divided into 3 developmental stages. Upto 4 week old 15 to 45 cm cinnamon-buff downy young ones with pale pink bill and legs were termed as chicks. Eight to nine weeks old, 46 to 100 cm, yellow buff to dull grey young ones with pale grey bill, pink grey legs and grey-brown head were termed as juveniles. The older fledglings had grey body, grey-brown head with a tinge of bare red patch, horny bill and pink legs. These were termed as subadults.

### Major breeding areas and seasons

The reed beds formed by the seepage of the Right Main Canal (R.M.C.) of Kota Barrage are major sarus crane breeding areas around Kota. Maximum concentration of nests and chicks was seen between km 5-12 and km 48-76 on R.M.C. In recent years, nesting success has declined drastically particularly in 1992. Some other areas of importance are water-logged fields at Abheda, Nanta, Lakhawa and Ummedganj.

Some authors as far back as 1910 (Mosse A.H. 1910) had reported two breeding seasons of sarus cranes namely post monsoon and spring. Kulshreshtha and Vyas (1989) reported the same for the Kota area during the 1988-89 season. I found the same trend over the past five years. Nests and chicks were mostly seen during September-October and March-April. As no adult pair was seen accompanied by juveniles in spring, it is likely that the spring breeders are those pairs which failed to breed in the post- monsoon season.

Safety and availability of food are two important considerations for selection of a site by a breeding pair. Usually, the pair remains in the vicinity of a nesting site for approximately 12-16 weeks, while gradually increasing their feeding area. In one instance a pair tried to whisk away its chicks of 5 and 3 days to a safer area. The nest was located in a water-logged field and on the 5th day after hatching, buffaloes were let loose in the field for foraging. The younger 3 days old downy chick perished in the process, but the older one was successfully taken to a field about 1 km from the nesting site. It was a surprisingly long distance for a 5 days old to cover.

### Discussion

In most of the crane species of the world the usual clutch size is two, but only one chick is raised to adulthood (Ali & Ripley, 1983; Maclean, 1985; Sawhney, 1989). This could be due to the time lapse of 24-48 hours between the hatching of the two chicks and the inability of the parents to protect and provide suitable food to both chicks. In some instances an accident of the sort narrated earlier may lead to the death of one chick. The number of fledglings of different ages accompanied by their parents were recorded. The percentage of parents seen with fledglings of different ages gave an idea of the survival of the young in the area of study. Out of 33 nests studied 10 had only one egg, while the remaining had two eggs. The average clutch size was 1.7 in the study areas with 69.7% pairs incubating two eggs, and 30.3% incubating only one. The average number of chicks per pair was 1.35. The possibility of predation on the second egg increases with the parents attention diverted towards the first hatched chick. This explains the sighting of 65.2% pairs with one chick, and only 34.8% with two chicks. By the time the juvenile stage is reached, the percentage of pairs with two young drops further to 25.8%, while 74.2% pairs were seen with one juvenile. The average number of juveniles per pair also falls to 1.26. Again at subadult stage almost equal number of pairs are recorded with one and two subadults. 51.7% pairs were accompanied by one subadult and 48.7% by two subadults. The average of subadults per pair also improved to a healthy figure of 1.51. These findings can be summed up and the following inferences can be drawn.

- 1 The average clutch size in the study area is 1.7.
- 2 Average number of chicks, juveniles and subadults per pair was 1.35, 1.26 and 1.51 respectively.
- 3 Although 69.7% pairs laid two eggs, only 34.8% pairs were seen with two chicks.
- 4 The mortality of younger chick and abandoning of second egg are two possible reasons.
- 5 The mortality of chicks between the age of 4-9 weeks is fairly high as against the average number of juveniles per pair and percentage fell to 1.26 and 25.8%.
- 6 From juvenile stage onward the chances of survival go up and in fact, we see almost equal number of pairs with one and two subadults.
- 7 51.7% pairs were seen with one subadult and 48.3% with two subadults.
- 8 The chances of two juveniles surviving to subadulthood are higher due to sibling support and ability to defend oneself.
- 9 It is also possible that one juvenile raised to adulthood becomes independent quicker and two of them tend to stick longer with their parents.



The sighting records and analysis of the data do not augur well for the sarus crane breeding in and around Kota in S.E. Rajasthan. The nesting in the major suitable habitats has been infrequent and declining over the years (1988-92). During post monsoon season in 1992, live nests were seen at R.M.C. kms 48-76 but no breeding activity was noticed on subsequent visits. The nests were abandoned and no incubation was seen. It confirms the complete breeding failure in that area in 1992. No breeding activity was seen at Nanta, Lakhawa or Ummadganj in the 1992 post monsoon season. Only one nest with one egg was seen at Abheda but this too was abandoned in an advanced stage of incubation. Increased human movement, population pressure and loss of suitable breeding grounds are the main causes of breeding failure. The draining of marshes and advancement of agricultural fields was also noticed lately. No persecution of sarus cranes was seen in the study area.

### Acknowledgement

I am thankful to Dr. Asad R. Rahmani for commenting on the original manuscript.

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## Webs, Vultures, Escapees, Expansions and Identities

DR. KUMAR GHORPADE, 1861 Bethel Street, St. Thomas Town, Bangalore 560 084

I will deal with the contents of the previous *Newsletter* issue and comment on some of them. Anish Andheria (NLBW 38 : 73-74) has, hopefully, ignited a new, holistic outlook (to investigate Nature's *Webs*) that I have been hoping our bird watchers will adopt in future.

The flycatcher was unlucky that Anish decided against freeing it from the spider's web, because I doubt if Madame Nephila would have partaken of the hapless, dead *Hypothymis azurea* after all.

Asad Rahmani's 'Alarm Call' on the decline of *vultures* (38 : 80-81) and Vulture Alert (in *Pitta* No. 92, p.1) is intriguing. What are the population dynamics data that have been consulted to arrive at these 'near-threatened' tags? What if vulture numbers undergo a 'rise and fall' rhythm [see my note in NLBW 35 (5) : 95-96] naturally, over a period of time, and what if the larger numbers in past decades, of these four vulture species cited above, were a 'peak' due to environmental factors? On-the-spot investigations in vulture country, largely our 'cow-belt' (the Indo-Gangetic Plains),

need to be carried out, and the several possible causes, suggested by Rahmani, verified for truth. These vultures lay only a single egg and, so, infant mortality may be an important factor, perhaps due to predators or, mainly, to shortage of available food in these more efficient "farm management" times. The following quotation, from O.L. Austin and A. Slinger's (1961, *Birds of the World*, p.75) book, may also suggest a possible cause — "Though exceedingly valuable as a scavenger, the Egyptian vulture has suffered considerably from indiscriminate poisoning campaigns in many parts of its range, and is no longer as common as it once was". Food and reproduction (and enemies) are the major factors in population fluctuations, so carcass availability and nesting success may perhaps be primarily responsible, though whether Man or Nature is really responsible needs to be worked out. Speaking of vultures, our publisher S. Sridhar's photograph of a splendid white-backed vulture on the cover of NLBW 35(4) of July/August 1995 is, I believe, one of his best 'takes', and Lavkumar Khacher's (38 : 74) praise for Sridhar's camera-work is seconded by me.

Lt. Gen. Baljit Singh's pleasure (38 : 85) at the apparent success of *escapées*, like the red-breasted parakeet (*Psittacula alexandri*) near Bombay, and of the Alexandrine parakeet (*P. eupatria*) in London, confuses me. Accidental or intentional 'introductions' of birds and other animals, through human agency, have caused some of the most disastrous, unnatural 'fallouts' that have sullied Nature's handiwork. That we humans live on cultivated crops and husbanded animals which are not native to our present homes is another matter, and the row over patenting rights on genes, by commercial humans, disgusts me.

The suggestion, excitedly made by L. Shyamal (38 : 87), that the European bee-eater (*Merops apiaster*) is now perhaps into "an Easterly expansion" drive into southern India, needs to be commented upon. There is a breeding population of this species in Kashmir and in Baluchistan and stragglers in peninsular India in winter may belong to this source. They have even been seen once in the Maldivé Islands, by F.N. Betts. Is there a link between this European bee-eater and the European honey bee (*Apis mellifera*) recently introduced (I think wrongly) into southern India, to make up for the virus infected colonies of the Asian honey bee (*A. cerana*)? Many migratory birds that did not wander so far south are now being reported doing so, and this may be due to habitat alteration and/or human disturbance in the Indo-Gangetic Plains. Detailed avifaunal surveys of this recent biogeographical area, as well as of the ancient Central Highlands, need to be carried out, by expert ornithologists, to investigate population trends and species diversity in these areas.

I need to comment on the *identities* of three birds that raised doubts in the last NLBW number. I believe the

purported sighting of a scarlet-backed flowerpecker (*Dicaeum cruentatum*) on the Nilgiri Hills, is a gross misidentification. Zafar Futehally's remark on the credibility of M.A. Badshah's reports, according to Salim Ali, is quite in order. What S. Thirumurthi and C.P. Bhanumathi saw (38 : 88-89) was most probably Sykes' (or small) sunbird (*Nectarinia minima*), the male in 'metallic plumage' which it moults into during the early monsoon, from the eclipse plumage it is normally seen in during the dry months. Pawleen Singha's query (38 : 89) about the lack of a lilac shoulder-patch, on what was correctly identified as the yellow-legged green pigeon (*Treron phoenicoptera*), is easier to answer. Immature birds lack this lilac colour which is assumed only by mature birds. H.S.A. Yahya is very correct in his statement that the small green barbet (*Megalaima virdis*) is a peninsular endemic, hardly expected to occur in the Himalayan foothills. Our Editor's list (38 : 40-42), placed in very confusing order, cited this bird at the very end, with a query, and is a mistake for what was, most probably, the lineated barbet (*M. lineata*).

Himmatsinhji's appreciative words and his corroboration of my plea to bird watchers, to try and do some 'research' also on their field observations, is gratefully acknowledged. It is time senior, experienced, bird watchers like him and Lavkumar Khacher, and others, take the time and make the effort to comment on the contents of this *Newsletter* and other sources carrying new data on our avifauna. This must be the 'Mission' of our *Newsletter*— to publish data on our birds (also in an enjoyably readable manner) and to get these 'overseen', and then researched, by senior ornithologists.



## Raptors of Nilgiris — A Preliminary Survey

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Raptors are birds of prey belonging to the Order Falconiformes, and they are highly useful as bioindicators of a healthy environment. Now they are affected by loss of habitat, pollution and general environmental degradation, and their numbers are rapidly declining (Naoroji, 1995). The population dynamics, diversity and ecology of raptors in the hill district of Nilgiris has not been documented, except for the sighting reports by Baker and Inglis (1930), Badsha (1970) and Sivaparasad and Srivastava (1997). To understand the raptors of Nilgiris and their present status, attempts are on the anvil at the Forest College and Research Institute, Mettupalayam to document the habitatwise distribution and ecology of these birds.

### Materials and Methods

A survey has been conducted during 1995-97 covering different habitats of Nilgiris including various forest types, grasslands, sholas, orchards, water bodies and wetlands. These observations were effected between 06.30 to 09.00 hours and again 17.30 to 18.30 hours during alternate weekends from October to December in the respective years. This was done to include the winter visitors in our study. Binoculars with 8 x 40 specification were used along with a telescope of 20 x 50. A straight line transect method covering a distance of 200 metres with a viewing of 25 metres on either side (Abraham Verghese, 1995) was employed in the present survey and the number of sightings were recorded. To identify the birds, the field guides by Ali and Ripley (1980) were consulted. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 List of Raptors found in Nilgiris

No.	Syn. No	Species	Common Name	Nos. spotted	Localities	St.
1.	124	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>	Blackwinged kite	26	Kotagiri, Mukurti and Mamaram	R
2.	127	<i>Aviceda leuphotes</i>	Blackcrested baza	1	Khallati	?
3.	130	<i>Pernis ptilorhyncus</i>	Honey buzzard	5	Mukurthi and Gudalur	R
4.	133	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	Pariah kite	168	Most locations	R
5.	135	<i>Haliastur indus</i>	Brahmity kite	107	Most locations	R
6.	139	<i>Accipiter badius</i>	Ceylon shikra	12	Sigur, Mudumalai and Khallati	R
7.	147	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	Sparrowhawk	16	Kotagiri and Kilkotagiri	V
8.	151	<i>Accipiter virgatus</i>	Besra sparrowhawk	2	Solur	V
9.	144	<i>Accipiter trivirgatus</i>	Crested goshawk	7	Avalanche, Mukurthi Mamaram and Pykara	R
10.	153	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>	Longlegged buzzard	13	Khallati, Sigur, Masinagudi and Coonor	V
11.	157	<i>Butastur teesa</i>	Whiteeyed buzzard	5	Kallar valley Mamaram and Kunjapanai	R
12.	158	<i>Spizaetus nipalensis</i>	Hodgson's hawk eagle	2	Moyar	?
13.	161	<i>Spizaetus cirratus</i>	Crested hawk eagle	4	Moyar and Mamaram	V
14.	163	<i>Hieraaetus fasciatus</i>	Bonelli's eagle	3	Kilkotagiri	V
15.	164	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	Booted hawk eagle	2	Gudalur	V
16.	165	<i>Hieraaetus kienerii</i>	Rufousbellied hawk eagle	4	Mukurthi	V
17.	168	<i>Aquila vindhiana</i>	Tawny eagle	5	Mamaram, Kotagiri and Sholur	V
18.	172	<i>Ictinaetus malayensis</i>	Black eagle	6	Thengumarhada and Moyar	V
19.	174	<i>Haliaeetus leucorhynchus</i>	Pallas's fishing eagle	6	Thengumarhada	V
20.	175	<i>Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus</i>	Greyheaded fishing eagle	4	Thengumarhada and Moyar	R
21.	178	<i>Sarcogyps calvus</i>	Black (King) vulture	21	Masinagudi, Wellington Udhagamandalam Gudalur and Kotagiri	R
22.	182	<i>Gyps indicus</i>	Longbilled vulture	11	Masinagudi, Gudalur Coonor and Naduvattam	R
23.	185	<i>Gyps bengalensis</i>	Whitebacked vulture	6	Gudalur, Kargudi and Kotagiri	R
24.	187	<i>Neophron perenopterus</i>	Egyptian (Scavenger) vulture	3	Coonor	R
25.	190	<i>Circus macrourus</i>	Pale harrier	6	Doddabetta	V
26.	191	<i>Circus pygargus</i>	Montagu's harrier	2	Masinagudi	V
27.	196	<i>Spilornis cheela</i>	Crested serpent eagle	4	Moyar	V
28.	203	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	Osprey	12	Thengumarhada and Moyar	V
29.	211	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	Shaheen falcon	1	Mukurthi	V
30.	219	<i>Falco chicquera</i>	Redheaded merlin	2	Mudumalai and Masinagudi	V
31.	222	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	Kestrel	7	Thengumarhada, Moyar, Sighur and Mamaram	R

## Results and Discussion

A total of 31 species of raptors were found in the Nilgiris during the present survey. While thirteen species are known to breed here, sixteen species are winter visitors. The status of two species viz., *Avicida leuphotes* (black baza) and *Spizaetus nipalensis* (Hodgon's hawk eagle) could not be elucidated. Most of the visitors were sighted from October to March. The most common species include *Milvus migrans* and *Haliastur indus* which were sighted at most places. *Elanus caeruleus*, *Accipiter nisus*, *Sarcogyps calvus*, *Buteo rufinus*, *Gyps indicus* and *Accipiter badius* are other species which could be spotted in fair number. The predominant genera were: *Accipiter* (4 species), *Hieraaetus* (3 species) and *Falco* (3 species). The genera *Spizaetus*, *Ichthyophaga*, *Gyps* and *Circus* were represented by two species each.

## Conclusions

Raptors could be seen practically throughout the Nilgiris. They inhabit sholas, moist and dry deciduous forests, water bodies and cultivated ecosystems. Thengumarhads, Moyar, Kotagiri, Mudumalai, Mukurthi, Mamaram, Kallar valley, Masinagudi, Singur, Gudalur are good locations for observing these magnificent birds.

It is highly disturbing to note the poor number of sightings of most of the species observed. Habitat transformation, highlevel pollution of water bodies, industrial and urban wastes, pesticide usage, automobile gases and decline of forest cover are the major factors contributing to the fall of raptor populations in the hill district.

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## CORRESPONDENCE

**COMMENTS ON THE PAST ISSUE.** AASHEESH PITTIE, 8-2-545, "Prem Parvat", Road No. 7, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500 034, India

The latest issue of the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* (Vol. 38 No. 6) arrived in this morning's post. As usual, it is a pleasure to read. The photographs on the covers are excellent and perhaps rare!

In the editorial you mention about the white patches on the wings of a dark morph reef heron. I looked up a few field guides – none mention this characteristic. Hancock & Kushlan (1984), in their *The Herons Handbook*, state that this is an "occasional" trait of the bird. Perhaps that's why it is not used as a pointer in field guides

S.A. Pande's note on purple rumped sunbirds (Pp. 102-103) differentiates a female purplerumped sunbird from one of a purple sunbird by the colour of their irises. The Handbook does not mention this feature exclusively for females of the species. This characteristic is not dimorphic for either species. A more practical method of identifying the species of a female is the more conventional pointer of a greyish-white chin of throat and flanks of a ♀ yellow rumped sunbird vis-a-vis all lemon yellow underparts of a ♀ purple sunbird!

J.K. Tiwari's note on clutch size of grey partridge (p. 105), refers to Eates' record of "the biggest clutch". This was of 9 eggs (Roberts 1991).

Gurunath Desai (p. 105) speaks of "literally hundreds of darters nesting". He is aware that this is an endangered species, *vide* his next sentence. But he does not give exact figures of the nests or the birds! And this exercise is done for the other species observed!

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**18th AKHIL BHARATHIYA PAKSHI MITRA SAMMELAN - KARAD, MAHARASHTRA.** M.S. KULKARNI, C/o. Birdwatchers Society of A.P., Post Box No. 45, Bangara Hills Post Office, Hyderabad 500 034

I had a rare type of experience at Akhil Bharathiya Paksi Mitra Sammelan, in Dec. 1998.

I represented the Birdwatcher's Society of A.P. for this Sammelan. Prior to the Inauguration day, there was Vruksha, Paksi (Bird) dindi (Procession) consisting of one thousand school children, carrying environmental slogans and models of birds. This procession went through the main roads of the town, and drew considerable public attention. The volunteers were mostly students from various junior colleges in the town.

It was a three day programme. The first two days were devoted to inauguration by VIP's, discussions on sighting of specific birds, slide shows by Milind Gupte, and Sharad Apte. A Photo exhibition was arranged by Milind Gupte, Dr. Satish Pande, and Kiran Purandare.

There were four hundred and fifty delegates participating representing all the districts of Maharashtra. On the last day of the conference, the delegates were taken to the famous

earth quake prone Koyana dam, its back waters and to the picturesque water fall near the dam.

Altogether there were about 1000 people who participated in this Sammelan, and I have never experienced an occasion where all the delegates listened to the deliberations with such seriousness.

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**DOCUMENTARY ON VULTURES.** MAHENDRA SINGH LALAS, C-7 Akashwani Colony, Hiran Magari Sector V, Udaipur 313 002

In November '98, I decided to produce a radio documentary on vultures and started working on it. I work at the All India Radio station Udaipur as a Transmission Executive. First I made a call to Dr. Vibhu Prakash of BNHS who has been working on vultures for over one decade! It was nice to get some details from him on the telephone.

Recording the voices of the vultures was a major task and it took several days to get the required sounds as the vultures are usually silent. Almost a whole day was spent near a dead cow to do the recording. Half the day was spoilt by the dogs as they didn't allow the vultures to come near the carcass. Usually the vultures make loud sounds while eating their prey, but my presence made them silent.

I went to a breeding site of the whitebacked vultures located at the Jakham dam in the Sita Mata Wildlife sanctuary with the enthusiastic D.F.O. of the Pratapgarh range Raghuvir Singh Shekhawat, and found at least 200 whitebacked vultures in their colony. This hill is known as Gidh Magra (Vultures' hill)

Another important fact was brought to my notice by noted birdwatcher Digvijay Singh. He had seen long billed vultures not only feeding their own chicks but in case of the death of any one (or both) of the parenting vultures they start feeding the orphaned chicks as well!

A tribal Kesu Ram pointed out another lesser known fact. He said the Egyptian vultures have a close relationship with Rebaris (wandering tribe of Rajasthan who keep herds of camels, sheep etc) as the Rebaris keep throwing waste food etc, for the birds, and as the number of the visiting Rebaris has been reduced, so has the number of these vultures! Noted ornithologist Dr. Satish Kumar Sharma found some important information from his wife! She found that a number of villagers in the North-eastern region of Rajasthan destroy the nests of Egyptian vultures as they believe that these birds keep gold and silver ornaments in their nests. The birds have the habit of picking glittering objects like wires for their nests, which are mistaken for valuable items.

Another wonderful incident was related by Wing Commander Alok Verma during the process of making the documentary. We know that vultures fly upto 10-15,000 ft. but he encountered one King vulture at the height of 25,000 ft. while flying over Sikkim.

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**SEEKING INFORMATION ON THE AUSTRALIAN WHITE HEADED STILTS.** Prof. H. DANIEL WESLEY, 126, Ramalinganagar South, Tiruchirapalli 620 017

The birds were pure white from forehead down. They were white on the entire head and neck with the wings black and legs red. It was not only in my latest observation on the Tuticorin shores but also in my earlier ones there that the stilts were of this species/sub species.

Reference to the bird is to be found on page 10 of the Asian Waterfowl Census 1994-1996. I recall the sighting of these birds at Tuticorin in June 1996 and reported about them in NLBW Vol. 37, No. 1. 1997. Although I had not named them as whiteheaded Australian stilts, I wondered, in the introduction, at their presence 'nonseasonally' there.

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**COMMENTS ON "THE AVIAN FAUNA OF SAJJANGARH WILDLIFE SANCTUARY".** Dr. SATISH KUMAR SHARMA, Range Forest Officer, Jhadol (F), Dist. Udaipur 313 702, Rajasthan

I read the comments of Sh. H.S. Sangha about my article "The Avian Fauna of Sajjangarh Wildlife Sanctuary, Rajasthan" which appeared in Newsletter's issue No. 38 (3). I agree with Sh. Sangha's comments that correct identification of certain smaller birds in the field is sometimes a difficult task. Sh. Sangha has pointed out that *Sylvia communis* and *Oenanthe finschii*, which are mentioned by me should be *Sylvia curruca* and *Oenanthe picata* respectively. I feel he may be right. However, *Sylvia communis* is not new for Rajasthan. This species has been recorded in KNP, Bharatpur (Evans, M., 1989, Bharatpur Bird Paradise). Record of Barne's chat *Oenanthe finschii* seems erroneous. Therefore, necessary corrections may be made and where the name *S. communis* and *O. finschi* figures, they are to be taken as *S. curruca* and *O. picata* respectively.

I regret the error.

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**MISSING SPECIES REDISCOVERED AT KALIMPONG, NORTH BENGAL.** S.J. GHOSH, 25/1, R.M.C. Lahiri Street, P.O. Serampore, Dist. Hooghly, West Bengal 712 201

There was an exciting rediscovery of the Siberian blue chat at Kalimpong, North Bengal, after sixty five years on 10 October, 1997. The members were fortunate to capture a foraging male in their binoculars, uttering a harsh "Chek, chek" and constantly flicking open the tail up and down as it was in search of prey.

The species was first traced in 1932 by a British Ornithologist at Haldibari of district Kochbihar in North Bengal and next by the great birdman Dr. Salim Ali in South Andaman in the year 1980 who collected a single female specimen from there and that is at present in BNHS bird museum.

A recent ornithological survey at Paunabu Valley of Kalimpong conducted by the Himalayan Nature & Foundation Wing during October last year successfully hunted up more forty five Siberian blue chats with another very rare species called Sultan tit last sighted at Chapramari Sanctuary of Dist. Jalpaiguri and that was in 1947.

So the occurrence of resighting of the two hardly seen species after decades long absence in the sanctuary of North Bengal is extremely noteworthy.

But till date no further study has been done by the Forest Department of West Bengal or Z.S.I of Calcutta to know the ecology and present status of the two rare avians.

As largest and India's most prestigious natural history organisation. BNHS should undertake immediate protection measures with proper long term studies to ascertain the present and future survival of the species in North Bengal. Persons may put individual skill providing useful information on distribution and present status of these "once probably disappeared" birds elsewhere in India.



**THE MYSTERIOUS RAPTORS.** K. RAMESH, *Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun 248 001, U.P.*

I wish to support Dr. Asad Rahmani's observation in the last issue of NLBW that the vulture population in North India is fast declining. I have been carrying out my research work on pheasants in the Great Himalayan National Park (GHNP) for over three years. Raptors in this Park are represented by 11 species which include bearded vulture or lammergeier, *Gypaetus barbatus*, Himalayan griffon *Gyps himalayensis*, griffon vulture *Gyps fulvus* and golden eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*. All of them were abundant when I landed in GHNP in 1995. Sighting of these species used to be very frequent which indicated a large population. Even in 1996, I used to have an average sighting of 8-10 individuals of lammergeier and golden eagle, besides a large number of griffons in each of my visits to Tirthan valley of GHNP. Suddenly in 1997, they started disappearing and sighting of these birds became rare, which puzzled me. I could not think of any explanation. Drs. Peter Garson and Tony Gaston, who were conducting surveys in this park over 10 years from 1980 to 1991, were also surprised at the absence of raptors when they visited in May 1998. Dr. Gaston even suggested that we have a separate monitoring protocol to keep a watch on these birds. Here our observation in GHNP reveals a decline in population, not only of the vultures, but also of other raptors. When I discussed this with my colleagues at Wildlife Institute of India, I came to know that the case was same even in the Kedarnath Wildlife Sanctuary and other places in the himalayan region. I also had a chat on this issue with Dr. Rahmani during the National Seminar at WII. What surprised me more is the reappearance of the raptors in GHNP. I saw four (including

one subadult) golden eagles and two lammergeiers in Shift *thach* and Khoillpoi (within GHNP) respectively in October 1998. I also witnessed a larger flock of 22 griffons hovering just outside GHNP thrice recently in different occasions. During my last field working days in November, I also recorded two lammergeiers and a few himalayan griffons. The reappearance of these raptors forced me the queries, "Is there any migration taking place in the raptors? If so, where do they go?"



**INDIAN SKIMMER IN RAJASTHAN.** JATINDER KAUR, *Researcher, Wildlife Institute of India, P.B. No. 18, Chandrabani, Dehradun 248 001*

I want to add an additional piece of information to the article, published in the Newsletter (Vol. 38 No. 5) entitled "Sightings of Indian skimmer (*Rynchops albicollis*) in Rajasthan far from its fluvial (riverine) habitat". This article documents past and recent records of the Indian skimmer in Rajasthan from non-fluvial habitats.

It was interesting to note that the authors never saw more than 5 birds and most of the sightings were restricted to the Chambal river area. During a survey in Bhilwara district on July 6, 1998 for the sarus crane, I counted 7 Indian skimmers over the waters of the Kothari dam in south Rajasthan. The birds were gliding, diving and skimming in classical skimmer style and stayed close to the banks of the reservoir. I was in the area for over 30 minutes and the birds showed no signs of leaving. This bit of information strengthens the case of the authors in classifying Rajasthan as an important state for the species. Most of the records in the article are from east Rajasthan, and my observation suggests that the southern part of the state may be housing a substantial population of this charismatic species.



**BIRDING IN MANNANUR FOREST RANGE, ANDHRA PRADESH.** S. ASHOK KUMAR, *IAS (Retd.), Plot No. 491, Road No. 10, Jubilee Hills, Hyderabad 500 033*

Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh had a birding trip to Mannanur Forest Range on 22nd November, 1998. In the vegetation hedging the Deccan trap rock cliff near Umamaheswari temple. Yellowthroated bulbuls (*Pycnonotus xantholaemus*) were sighted along with whitebrowed bulbuls (*Pycnonotus luteolus*). The other interesting birds recorded were the whitebellied drongo (*Dicrurus caerulescens*), grey or ashy drongo (*Dicrurus leucophaeus*), Jerdon's chloropsis (*Chloropsis jerdoni*) verditer flycatcher (*Muscicapa thalassina*), large green barbet (*Megalaima zeylanica*), emerald or bronzewinged dove (*Chalcophaps indica*).



**MISCELLANEOUS NOTES.** by H.S.A. YAHYA, Centre of Wildlife and Ornithology, A.M.U. Aligarh

In response to the matter Newsletter (Vol. 38 No. 5) I submit the following:

**Common Names of Birds**

I was one of the 7 delegates from India at the 22<sup>nd</sup> IOC at Durban held between 16 and 22 August 1998. Rishad Naorji did not attend. As far as I remember no special session was held for discussing nomenclature. I think it was rightly so. In my opinion too much emphasis is being given in India on this issue. The common names given in the Handbook of Birds of Indian & Pakistan by Ali & Ripley are good enough and we could stick to them.

**The Suggestion of Mr. J. L. Singh Regarding Formal Mission Statement**

I think it would be appropriate to formalise the mission of the Newsletter by adopting the resolution he has suggested.

But another area which we need to explore is about job opportunities in this field. If appropriate jobs are not available on long term basis, we might not keep attracting talented students in this field. I have pressed this issue with the authorities of UGC, NET and Union Public Service Commission to include Wildlife Science as one of the subjects in their entrance exams. I request you to emphasise the same endorsing our effort.

**The Return of House Crows**

We often used to be harassed during our childhood in late 50s and 60s by house crows (*Corvus splendens*) which were abundant in our village (near Darbhanga 26°.10' N 85°.57' E). However, they started disappearing noticeably from our locality around 1975 and around 1985 they were hardly seen in my village. At the same time the number of jungle crows (*Corvus macrorhynchos*) grew remarkably in this area. It was a great surprise to me and on each visit to my home, roughly once in a year, I used to hear the same comment from villagers that due to cutting of forests in the Terai areas the jungle crows have come to our village and have usurped the place of house crows. The argument sounded quite logical. However, I was quite surprised to find some house crows back in the village during my recent visit in Oct. 1998. On enquiring I came to know that they have just started appearing again in ones or twos for the past six months and the villagers are happy on their return.

I wonder whether this type of disappearance and reappearance of some common species of birds is a natural phenomenon? No drastic ecological changes have taken place in the surroundings during the period in question.

I do not remember any such reference in ornithological literature and would be grateful if any one enlightens me on such a phenomenon. May be the vultures will also return to

Bharatpur (see article by Dr. Rahmani NLBW 38 (5) : 80-81) if the temporary absence of a species from any area is a natural phenomenon!

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**OCCURRENCE OF THE GREYHEADED LAPWING VANELLUS CINEREUS BLYTH IN ARUNACHAL PRADESH.** MAAN BARUA, Barua Bhavan, 107, M.C. Road, Uzan Bazaar, Guwahati 781 001, Assam, India.

Between 9 and 12 March 1997, I spent a few days in Namdapha Tiger Reserve (26° 28' N - 29° 30' E) in the Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh. On 13 March, while driving from Deban to Miao, at about 1000 hrs I came across two medium-sized plovers. The birds were foraging in paddy stubbles by the roadside at a distance of 15-20 metres. On closer observation, I noticed the following characteristics: size and appearance similar to that of redwattled lapwing *Vanellus indicus*; rounded brownish grey head, nape and breast with a black pectoral band; yellow beak tipped black; iris red; rest of underparts off-white and legs yellow. I immediately recognized them as greyheaded lapwings *Vanellus cinereus*, being familiar with them in Kaziranga National Park where they winter in large numbers.

This is the first record of the greyheaded lapwing from Arunachal Pradesh. According to Ali and Ripley (1983) is a regular winter visitor (Sept.-Oct. to the end of Mar-Apr) to West Bengal, Bihar, Manipur and Assam (quite common), Bangladesh and straggling to Kashmir, Dehra Dun and the Andaman Islands. They winter in marshy areas - the edge of jheels, banks of rivers and wet grazing grounds, ploughs and stubbles. This species has not been listed for Arunachal Pradesh by more recent workers (Ripley *et. al.*, 1991, Singh 1994). However it is a common migrant to the Brahmaputra valley and its occurrence in the foothills of Arunachal Pradesh is not unexpected.

**Reference :**

- Ali, S and Ripley, S.D. (1983) Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan. New Delhi : Oxford University Press.
- Ripley, S.M.D., Saha, S.S and Beehler, B.M. (1991) Notes on the Birds from Upper Noa Dihing, Arunachal Pradesh, North eastern India. Bull. Brit. Orn. Club 111 : 19-28
- Singh, P (1994) Recent bird records from Arunachal Pradesh. Forktail 10 : 65-104.

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**GUIDED ENTHUSIASM.** IRMELA FUTEHALLY, 403, Nippon Apts., Juhu Tara Road, Mumbai 400 049

Being a casual birdwatchers at first — enjoying the beauty and variety of our local avians — I had begun to feel the need to learn more about them. Therefore, I was glad to hear of the Home Study Course in Ornithology offered by the Rishi Valley Education Centre in A.P.

It is a most convenient and pleasurable way to be able to study at ones own leisure. This course not only describes birds in detail but gives also a clear overall view of its total environment. Added to this are chapters of how to be an active participant in ornithology.

The study has given me a new meaning to birdwatching and I have become a more careful and enthusiastic observer, with a note-book at hand always.

May many more people take advantage of this valuable and easy opportunity.



**SIGHTING RECORD OF WHITE STORKS *CICONIA CICONIA* IN LOWER ASSAM, KOKRAJHAR.** BABLU DEY, Green Heart, A Nature Conservation Society of NE-India, P.O. & Dist. Kokrajhar, B.A.C., Ward No. 6, Assam 783 370

In a bright and clear morning of December 14th 1997, a flock of large storks 6 (six) in number was sighted in the sky at the southern side of my house, Kokrajhar Town (Lat. 26° 27' N Long. 90° 15' E).

The storks were slowly flying straight from the western side with movement at a very low level. The flock circled eight times in the sky looking down to the ground and then flew away towards the eastern side making a beautiful queue. While observing carefully it was found that, they had bright red coloured beak and legs, white tails, wings black in scapulars and flight feathers. These characteristics helped me to confirm that, they were white storks.

Earlier I had never seen white storks in Assam during my birdwatching trips to different places. Every year during early and late winter I used to keep watching in the sky in early mornings and evenings for migratory birds. The town of Kokrajhar is adjacent to lower Bengal and Bhutan and is bounded by lower Himalayas on the northern side and is highly rich in bird diversity. Moreover, we the members of Green Heart have recorded several species of migratory birds in our district. The flock of white storks could have taken rest during the previous night in that place where I saw them.

I read the article written by Maan Barua in the newsletter (Vol. 37, No. 6, Page 99-100) occurrence of white storks *Ciconia ciconia* in Assam with some notes on its identification. Where Mr. Barua reported three confirmed sighting records and all from eastern Assam my sighting at western Assam would be the first record and is an addition to the earlier records in other parts of the state. From his article I also came to know that nobody in Assam had seen more than one individual of white stork any where till date and this is the first record of sighting of six birds in a group, which is noteworthy.

According to Ali & Ripley (1980) the status of white storks in Assam is very rare, uncommon and is a winter visitor as listed by Choudhury, A. (1990). So I request birdwatchers

working in Assam and north-east India to pay special attention to the occurrence of white storks in Assam and north-east region and report their sightings to the Newsletter for Birdwatchers so that, in future a clear status of white stork in Assam could be assessed properly.

#### Reference :

Ali, S. & Ripley, S.D. (1981) Handbook of the Bird of India & Pakistan. Vol. I, New Delhi. Oxford University Press.

Sonbe, K. & Usul, S. (Editors) 1993, A Field Guide to the Waterbirds of Asia. Tokyo, Wild Bird Society of Japan. Tokai Foundation, Japan & Asian Wetland Bureau, Malaysia.

Choudhury, A. (1990) Checklist of the Birds of Assam. Guwahati Sofia Publishers.



**SIGHTING OF BLACK-HEADED BUNTING *EMBERIZA MELANOCEPHALA* IN SHIMOGA CITY.** K.V. GURURAJA, "Vishwam", LIG 414, 'F' Block, III Main, II Stage, Kallahalli, Shimoga 577 204

Chennamumbapura, commonly known as Abbalagere tank is situated about 6 1/2 km North of Shimoga city (13° 56' N 75° 38' E, + 568.450 msl, with average annual rainfall of 865 mm). This site has been included in the Asian Waterfowl census (1994-96).

#### Observation :

The first sight of the bird was made on 13th Nov'94. A flock of 13 birds were seen sitting on the bushes of *Lantana* and *Eupatorium odoratum*. I took out my field guide and rummaging through it I found it as black-headed bunting *Emberiza melanocephala*.

Size : sparrow + (7"). Male : (During winter) head and back with brown, and underparts yellowish. Tail dark brown with white in outer feathers. Rump yellowish rufous. Wings dark brown with white wing bars. Female : Pale sandy brown upper-parts with narrow dark brown streaks, buffy throat and pale yellow breast, belly and under tail coverts distinctive. Wing bars buff coloured, has yellowish tinge on the rump and upper tail coverts.

Consecutive observations were made on the following dates at the same place, i.e., 1st & 8th Jan'95. Similar observations were also made on the following years, i.e., 96, 97 during November, December and January. But since Jan'98, till now I have not sighted this bird.

It is also confirmed that the bird is a winter visitor for this place. Now it has been included in the Checklist of Birds of Shimoga. And it is the first ever-recorded sight of the bird, in this region.



**Reference :**

Ali, S. and Ripley, S.D. 1968-1969. Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan.

Ben F. King and Edward C. Dickinson. 1986. A field guide to the Birds of South East Asia.

**Acknowledgement :**

I am grateful to the members of Shimoga Bird Watcher's Club for their kind cooperation given during this work.

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**BOOK REVIEW**

**A BIRDWATCHERS' GUIDE TO INDIA**, by Krys Kazmierczak & Raj Singh, reviewed by Aasheesh Pittie

The book under review is the ninth in a series of Birdwatchers' Guides (dedicated to BirdLife International) conceived and edited by David Fisher and Chris Harbard, covering various countries of the world. The fantastic variety of habitats found in India and the resulting plethora of bird species, coupled with all the rich historical sites in this country, makes it one of the most desirable destinations for tourists. Tourist guides, heavily weighted towards historical and pleasure-oriented tours, have been around for some time, e.g. the Lonely Planet series, etc. Insight Guides published a book specializing of Indian wildlife in 1987. But this Birdwatchers' Guide is a class apart. It focuses on the gems of birding sites in India and manages to cover most of them. Though the accessibility of a good birding site is important for such a Guide (considering its primary market is the foreign tourist), this has not been over-emphasized and relatively less-accessible areas with good birding have also been covered. The authors state in its 'Introduction' that this "book is primarily written with the visiting Western birder in mind," and they "hope it may prove to be of use to the Indian birdwatcher venturing away from his usual haunts". There is no doubt in my mind that an Indian bird-watcher will gain much from this book. The maps of birding trails at specific sites are reason enough to invest in it. Indian birdwatchers may be familiar with names of good birding areas, but once we have reached them, which is the best trail to follow? *This* Guide has the answers! Indian bird-watchers should however realize that many species marked as 'musts', may be common for them, and have been thus emphasized with the foreign visitor in mind!

The Guide can be divided roughly into three major sections. The first, an introductory section, comprises of chapters dealing with the generalities of travelling. These are; Pre-tour Information, Travel Information, Staying in India, Climate and Clothing, Health, Books and Maps, When to Go, and, Protected Areas and the Forest Department. This section contains information primarily for a foreign visitor and the chapter headings are self-explanatory. The facts are generally well researched and clearly presented. A traveller using the Guide would be wise to remember that "inevitably in a book

of this kind some information becomes out-of-date quickly". Rules, addresses, phone numbers, all are subject to change. It might save a lot of time and effort (not to say money) if proper information is gathered before venturing on a tour. I will restrict my comments on this section to a few minor quibbles.

The 'Introduction' and 'Introduction to Site Information' mention an "appendix". This refers to the cluster of 7 chapters at the end of the Guide. The user should treat these as the appendices to the book. A line in the penultimate paragraph of the 'Introduction', about the frequency of changing telephone numbers would warn users about the ephemeral nature of such information in India!

The chapter entitled 'Books and Maps' has a few wrinkles that need ironing. "The Flemings' *Birds of Nepal*" has a third co-author, Lain Singh Bangdel, who should be acknowledged. "Bharat Bhushan, *et al.*" have perhaps been credited with authoring *Field Guide to Asian Waterbirds*, as their names appear on its cover. Its correct by-line, however, is 'Sonobe, K. & Usui, S. (editors)'. The author of *Butterflies of Sikkim Himalaya and their Natural History*, Meena Haribal, is not mentioned here, though her name is listed properly in the 'Selected Bibliography'.

The second major section of the book comprises the main content of the Guide. Through its pages, the inquisitive, persistent, or birder-on-a-tight-schedule, will derive maximum benefit and pleasure while planning bird-watching itineraries. The authors have divided the country into 11 regions that contain 64 bird-watching areas and 23 sub-areas within them. These are; Delhi area [Lodi Gardens, Buddha Jayanti park, Delhi Ridge, Old Fort & Delhi Zoo, Okhla, Tughlaqabad and, Sultanpur Jheel]. Northwest India [Bharatpur (Bund Baretha), Ranthambhor, Jaipur area, (Sambhar Salt Lake), Thar Desert (Jaisalmer, Desert National Park), Harike, Jaisamand, Kumbhalgarh, Nal Sarovar, Little Rann of Kutch and, Velavadar]. North India [Corbett & Ramnagar, Nainital (Mongoli Valley, Sat Tal), Great Himalayan National Park & the Kullu Valley]. Kashmir & Ladakh [Kashmir (Srinagar, Dachigam and, Lidder Valley Trek), Ladakh (Leh, Indus Valley near Leh and, Suru Valley)]. North Bengal and Sikkim [Darjeeling & Tiger Hill, Sandakphu Trek, Lava and, Sikkim (Gangtok, Pemayangtse)]. Northeast India [Guwahati, Manas, Kaziranga & Panbari, Dibru-Saikhowa, Namdapha, Shillong & Cherrapunjee and, Jatinga]. Central India [Mumbai (Borivli/Sanjay Gandhi National Park, Elephanta Island), Bandhavgarh, Melghat, Pachmarhi, Simlipal and, Chilka Lake]. Goa [Baga, Carambolim Lake, Bondla, Molem, and, Fort Aguada]. South India [Ranganathittu & Mysore, Nagarhole/Rajiv Gandhi National Park, Mudumalai & Masinagudi, Udhagamandalam (Cairnhill Forest, Potato Research Station, Naduvattam & Nadugani, and, Sighur Ghat), Top Slip/Anaimalai, Munnar (Rajamalai/Eravikulam National Park, Bodi Ghat), Periyar, Chennai (Guindy, Theosophical Society Gardens & Adyar Estuary), Vedanthangal, Point Calimere, Gulf of Mannar, Pulicat Lake, Shamirpet Lake and, Rollapadu]. Andaman & Nicobar Islands [Port Blair, Corbyn's Cove Marsh, Mount Harriet, Chiriyá Tapu

and, Mahatma Gandhi Marine National Park/Wandoor]. Lakshadweep (Laccadive Islands).

Each of the 11 regions has a main map of the area covered by that region. Maps are also given for each of the sections and sub-sections. The text under each of these regions, areas and sub-areas has information relating to Location, Accommodation, Strategy, Other Sites, Other Wildlife and, Birds, besides an introduction. The text is well written and meaty, with lots of pro-active information. In fact the Guide can be read for pure pleasure! It is a smashing boon for armchair naturalists! It is full of tips and suggestions relevant and pertinent to the area being discussed. Areas that have been visited by me seem to be pretty well covered.

The third section of the Guide contains material that would find a place under an Appendix. Chapters under this section are; Glossary, Selective Bird List; Birds of India; Mammals of India; Useful Addresses, Societies, Clubs and Magazines, Selected Bibliography and Site Index.

The 'Glossary' consists of a list of mainly Hindustani words of common usage including those of some plants, animals and habitats. A few points that come to mind are :

1. The polite form of *Chalo* is *Chaliye* and for *Rukho* it is *Rukhiye*.
2. Dhobi actually refers only to the person who washes clothes. Not the laundry.
3. 'Yoghurt' is spelt in two different ways under *curd* and *lassi*.
4. *Taluka* is not a district. It is a revenue sub-division of a district.
5. *Tank* or *talar* should be *tank* or *talab*.

The chapter entitled 'Selective Bird List' comprises of a "selection of uncommon, endemic and endangered species which are particularly sought-after by birders". The list is annotated to the extent of a species' status and range (with emphasis on areas described in the book). This is a very useful section for Indian bird-watchers too as it has distilled the 'glamorous' species (based on their status) from the Indian list. This List comprises of a total of 413 species (33.85% of 1,220 species recognized by the authors, vis-a-vis the following chapter). 158 (83.16% of 190 vis-a-vis the following chapter) of these are either globally threatened or near-threatened. 54 are endemic to India (all are listed) and 50 (70.42% of 71 vis-a-vis the following chapter) endemic to the Indian subcontinent. The occurrence of 4 [25% of 16 (wrongly mentioned as 17 in the introductory paragraph of the next chapter)] species listed here is either open to doubt, or has not been sufficiently well documented.

'Birds of India' is a chapter that contains a checklist of the birds of *political* India, which is briefly annotated, with the status of the species, using abbreviation. To quote from the text, it includes "all 1220 species known by the authors to have been reliably recorded within Indian limits up to May 1998. Eight of these... are new to the country having apparently been reliably observed in recent years but the records not yet fully documented. A further 17 (*actually* 16) species whose

occurrence is open to doubt, or which have not been sufficiently well documented, are listed in square brackets".... "In the interests of global standardisation in taxonomy, scientific and English names largely follow Inskipp, Lindsey and Duckworth *An Annotated Checklist of the Birds of the Oriental Region*. Exceptions relate to recent taxonomic revisions. We have, however, retained the older sequence used in Ripley's 1982 *Synopsis*." The last is perhaps the best way out at this moment in time when ornithological nomenclature seems to be at a crossroad in its history. I say this, as the sequence followed by Ripley's is the most popular and well-known today. Of the three new imminent field guides on Indian birds, one follows Inskipp *et al.* in its sequence (Grimmet, *et al.*) and is already on sale. The second, by Krys Kazmierczak and Ber van Perlo, due to be published in the next few months, will follow Ripley's sequence and the third, (also under preparation) and to be published by the Smithsonian Institution, may also be weighted towards Ripley's sequence, as S.D. Ripley is its senior author.

The usage of this List and the 'Selective Bird List' is terribly hampered by the lack of a species index. According to me this is the greatest drawback of the Guide. A species index for these two Lists should have been provided and the authors should give it serious thought for future editions. I am sure that lots of amateur bird-watchers, who are not familiar with a sequential order of birds, will use the Guide. They will be seriously obstructed by the lack of a species index, when searching for interesting species.

Subsequent chapters include a checklist of the 'Mammals of India' (391 species), a chapter on 'Useful Addresses, Societies, Clubs and Magazines' and a 'Selected Bibliography' which is fairly comprehensive for an amateur ornithologist or naturalist. One book that could find a place under the sub-section 'General Wildlife', is M. Krishnan's (1984): *The Handbook of India's Wildlife*. Maps and Agencies, Madras.

The authors have done a marvellous job of covering India's vast landmass and distilling interesting and thrilling bird-watching areas for birders. When such a book is regularly updated and added to, it can only become better. The price may be a bit steep for Indian bird-watchers, but one should view its purchase as an investment. A little bird tells me that a more affordable Indian edition may be in the offing! This could however take over a year. As far as I know, copies are not yet available in India and orders will have to be placed with NHBS, 2 Wills Road, Totnes, Devon, TQ9 5XN, U.K. [Fax : ++44-(0) 1803-865280. Email: nhbs@nhbs.co.uk]. Postage from U.K. will cost upwards of £ 6 per copy. With the advent of this book and the 3 new field-guides, bird-watching literature for India enters a new and exciting phase. All that is missing, but has been spoken of for long, is a Directory of Indian Bird-watchers. This could very well form an unofficial companion volume of the Guide under review. Dr. Kumar Ghorpade, the bird is now in your garden!

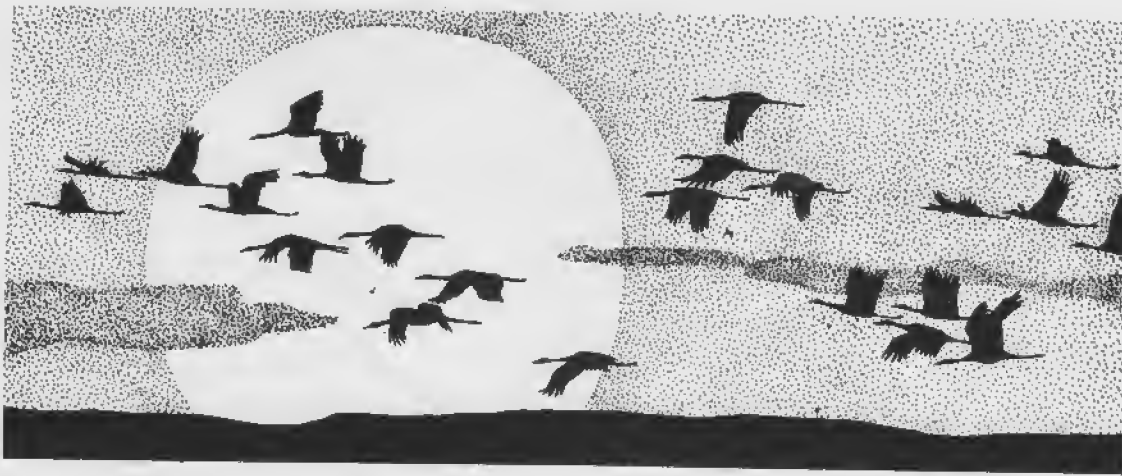


ILLUSTRATION: ANN HOBDAY

## Hooked by the cranes

As I write, five feathers lie before me across the desk. All are about 20 cm long and 5 cm wide, and to anyone else they probably look rather uninspiring, uniformly grey quills, except that two have small areas of black towards the tips.

They are the feathers of common cranes. I found them several days ago, where the birds dropped them, at a spot called Angyalahaza, which forms part of the Hortobagy National Park in eastern Hungary, one of the most intact and atmospheric areas of central European steppe left on the continent. The place has recently acquired additional importance as a staging post for huge numbers of migratory cranes. Up to 65,000 of these massive birds, and perhaps as much as a quarter of the world's entire population, converge on the Hungarian wetland before passing down to the tip of Italy, then across the Mediterranean for their winter quarters in Algeria, Tunisia and even as far south as Ethiopia.

My five feathers are a symbolic link with this ancient journey, which probably has its origins at the end of the last Ice Age. But they also connect me to the other part of the crane's annual life cycle - their months on the breeding grounds in northern Europe. These feathers carry in their numerous tiny imperfections a coded history of a crane's summer. The irregularly tattered fringes and faintly soiled bloom were acquired by daily wear and tear among the boggy meadows of eastern Poland, the boreal forests and lakes of subarctic Scandinavia or the Russian taiga.

My five plumes also speak obliquely of another crucial ritual in a crane's life - the moult of flight feathers. Every two to four years all cranes lose those feather-tracts known to the layperson as pinions (and to ornithologists as primaries and secondaries) - the great black quills that permit the bird to undertake its heroic odyssey back and forth from Africa. When

these are shed they fall in summer during a 48-hour period. However, my five feathers, known as coverts, never moult at that moment since they overlay and protect the bird's primaries during the critical period of re-growth.

Only when the main wing feathers are renewed can the crane afford to lose these coverts, which they do halfway through their migration on the plains of Hungary. By gathering five of them up at the Angyalahaza puszta I intervened in their natural destiny to return to the alkaline soils of the steppe, or perhaps even survive the winter to be recycled as a soft lining of the spring eggs of other breeding birds. But mine now serve a more personal, complicated function - re-awakening memories of their owners as they came to roost in the innermost section of the park.

Towards dusk the initially small and intermittent formations of cranes began to link up into larger silhouetted clusters. Often these appeared as a gigantic, slow-moving amoeba expanding and contracting above the horizon, depending on how the birds changed direction in relation to where we stood. Some-times there were so many in the sky they formed an almost continuous front through 180 degrees.

As they came closer the flocks gradually swung round, and one by one each individual would peel away from the undifferentiated mass of heaving wings, and bodies, until they created a graceful, evenly spaced skein right across the skyline. All the while these thousands of birds maintained a loud, sonorous bugling that seemed a distilled essence of that northern European wilderness from which they had arrived. And as I witnessed this sublime spectacle I gathered up my five feathers to help chronicle its meaning.

Mark Cocker

Courtesy : Guardian

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Cover : Paddyfield Pipit (*Anthus novaeseelandiae*). About the size of a sparrow, this bird frequents scrubby hillsides, stubble fields and cultivated tracks, with a wheezy trill or feeble 'tseep - tseep' uttered on the wing. Occasionally utters a high pitched call - pipit - pipit - pipit. Builds a cup shaped nest of grass roots and lines the nest with fine grass and hair, in a shallow depression in the ground under grass tussock.

Photo : S. SRIDHAR, ARPS

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### DEPARTMENT OF BIRD STUDIES, ECOLOGY AND NATURAL HISTORY

# HOME STUDY COURSE IN ORNITHOLOGY

(INTERMEDIATE LEVEL)

#### Course Details

This is a self-study course of six months duration ; students will put in personal effort at their own convenience. Lessons will be despatched in one lot at the commencement of the course. There will be two tests, one during the middle of the course and the other at the end. Answers are to be sent by post and certificates will be awarded on satisfactory completion.

Courses commence on the first of the month following the date of registration. Intakes are restricted to 15 to 20 a month.

The course aims at imparting Environmental Education with birds as basis. Topics include avian biology, bird behaviour, ecology, conservation principles, biodiversity protection, saving endangered birds, field ornithology, caring for birds in distress, deep ecology etc.

#### Fees

To make the course affordable to larger numbers and to promote bird consciousness and ecological awareness among the public, the youth in particular, the fee has been lowered to Rs. 600/=. Further, **50% fee concession** is offered to **students of the age group 15-25 years** (Std X and above). This concession is also extended to **housewives, Senior Citizens, unemployed persons and other deserving cases.**

#### Roster

**Dr. Radhika Herzberger**

**Stephan Harding**, B.Sc., D.Phil (Oxon)

Resident Ecologist, Schumacher College, U.K.

*Director*

*Hony. Advisor*

#### Faculty

**S. Rangaswami**, M.A. B.Sc. M.Ed.

Hony. Chief Warden, Rishi Valley Bird Preserve

*Head of Dept.,*

**V. Santharam**, M.Sc. Ph.D.,

Ecologist and Ornithologist

*Jt. Head of Dept.*

**S. Sridhar**, ARPS

Bird Photographer and Field Studies Expert

*Faculty*

(Rangaswami and Sridhar are authors of *Birds of Rishi Valley and Renewal of their Habitats*)

Apply to **Rishi Valley Education Centre (B.S.), Rishi Valley - 517 352**, Chittoor District, Andhra Pradesh with a Bank Draft for Rs.20/- (Rs. Twenty Only) in favour of Rishi Valley Education Centre on any bank with branch in Madanapalle or by Money Order. (with address on the reverse of the M.O. coupon).