

Indian Birds

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- To promote awareness of bird watching amongst the general public.
- To establish and maintain links/liaison with other associations or organized bodies in India or abroad whose objectives are in keeping with the objectives of the Trust (i.e. to support amateur birdwatchers with cash / kind for projects in ornithology).



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Front cover: Ultramarine Flycatcher *Ficedula superciliosa*. Nandi Hills, Karnataka, December 2004. (Photo: Suresh V.)

Notes on the breeding of the Indian Spotted Eagle *Aquila hastata*

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(With two photographs online at: www.indianbirds.in)

Introduction

The Indian Spotted Eagle *Aquila hastata* is a rare, endemic (Ali & Ripley 1987), and 'Vulnerable' (BirdLife International 2004) species restricted to the Indian sub-continent. It is distributed sparingly in north India over the Gangetic plains, in eastern India up to Manipur and in central India in Madhya Pradesh and southern Orissa (Ali & Ripley 1987, Prakash 1996). In south India, its distribution is limited to Kotagiri and Mudumalai, Nilgiri district, Tamilnadu (Ali & Ripley 1987, BirdLife International 2004), and Tumkur, Karnataka (Davidson 1908).

These sedentary eagles are difficult to identify in the field and confusion with congeners persists even today (Ali & Ripley 1987), leading to frequent wrong identification. The Indian Spotted Eagle, which until recently, was considered a subspecies of *Aquila pomarina*, has now been elevated to a full species (Parry et al. 2002, Rasmussen & Anderton 2005). This study records the breeding of this species in south India after nearly a century (Davidson 1908).

Published nesting records are few (Prakash 1996, Davidson 1908, Parry et al. 2002, Islam & Rahmani 2005). Parry et al. (2002: p. 672) list the following un-published records from the archives of The Natural History Museum: Sylhet, Mysore¹ (J. Davidson, 4.iii.1848); Delhi (C.T. Bingham, 14.v.1876); Sylhet (*sic*, = Sylhet), E. Pakistan (= Bangladesh) (H.N. Coltart, 31.iii.1900); Agrore Valley (Hazara district, Pakistan) (W.H. Unwin, 6.v.1870); Madhubaur (*sic*, = Madhuban), Tirhut (Bihar) (Unknown, 20.vi.1899); Botanical Gardens, Calcutta (= Kolkata) (J.C. Parker, 9.v.1877); Fureedpore (= Faridpur), E. Bengal (= Bangladesh) (J.R. Cripps, 16.v.1878); Saharunpore (= Saharunpur, U.P.; W.E. Brooks, 30.iv.1872); Champaran, Behar (= Bihar) (F. Field, 2.v.1892). They also give two published records: Darbhanga, Bihar (C.M. Inglis, 16.v.?), Saharunpore (A. Anderson, ?.vi.1873; 7 separate records) and, one contemporary un-published record from Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur (V.

Prakash, on eight occasions from 2.v.1985 to 7.v.1999). Presently, only two regular breeding sites, Bharatpur and Mysore, have been identified, where observations are in progress. Difficulty in identifying the eagle took much time to realize that the bird is in our backyard. The middle-aged farm owners, on whose farm we conducted our study, recall the breeding history of the eagles from way back to their childhood.

The presence of the resident Tawny Eagle *Aquila rapax* (Ali & Ripley 1987) and the migratory Greater Spotted Eagle *A. clanga* (Shivanand & Shivprakash 2004) is well recorded in Kaveri River basin, in the Mysore, Mandya and Chamarajanagar districts of Karnataka, where this breeding study is conducted.

Physical characteristics

The female's yellowish gape and 'lips' gradually turn greyish-white during breeding, and she acquires, and retains, a thin white supercilium all through that time.

Pair formation, courtship display and mating

Pair formation, nest building and mating activity takes place during the third and fourth weeks of February till second week of March. Pair formation takes place just before nest building. It is quite probable that monogamous bondage is strong and the same pair breeds every year. However, to ascertain this would require a much more detailed study. During courtship displays, the male takes off from the nest tree, gradually attaining height after a few circles in the air. Sometimes he flies in a horizontal 'loop of eight'. The female follows him, but at lower elevation. This might continue for up to forty minutes at a time. Towards the end of this display flight, both birds end up as close as a foot or two, to each other, and end the display by landing side-by-side on a branch. This ritual was observed thrice, within seven days, during one breeding season.

The process of mating is simple and quick.

The male lands directly on the female, which gives forth a muted coughing call. Mating took place in the early morning hours, but not after 09:00 hrs. We observed the pair mating once a day, in the morning hours, for three consecutive days, a week before incubation began. A total of seven copulations were observed in one season. Mating always occurred on a branch of the nest tree or on that of a neighbouring tree. The male dismounts onto the branch, takes a few steps, and either flies off to collect nesting material or goes to the nest and begins re-arranging twigs on the nest.

The nest

Both birds share nest-building activity. The nest is always constructed on the western side, but as close to the centre as possible, of a Coconut tree *Cocos nucifera*. The highest tree in the grove is chosen for nesting. Thorny twigs of *Prosopis juliflora* and *Acacia nilotica* are used as nesting material. A nest placed at a height of 9-12 m ensures safety and provides a clear all round view for approaching danger. At times, up to seven sorties are made by the male in one and half hours, to collect nesting material. Nest construction takes up to two weeks. Thorny nests are lined with an inner cushion of green sprays from *Cocos nucifera*, *Azadirachta indica*, *Ficus religiosa* and *cassia auriculata*. For some reason, *Azadirachta indica* is the most popular lining material before and after the hatching, till the chick is seven weeks old. Oval nest size is 40-60 cm x 30-40 cm with a depression of 15 cm (these dimensions approximations, based on measurements of two nests that had fallen), which is almost similar in size to the blown-down nest measured by Davidson on 13.iii.1877 (Barnes 1888).

Incubation

A single egg is laid every year. Incubation occurs through peak of dry season and finishes just before the monsoon. Normally, incubation begins in the third week of March and ends in the second week of May. Young

¹ This is an error in Parry et al (2002). Sylhet is in Bangladesh, not Mysore (Karnataka, India). Davidson's record is from Tumkur district in Karnataka.

fly generally by the end of July. Pre-monsoon showers start by the end of March and continue till the beginning of the monsoon, in the second week of June. The emergent vegetation at this time corresponds roughly with an abundance of prey. Other *Aquila* sp., that breeds nearby is Tawny Eagle *A. rapax*. The Indian Spotted Eagle's nest is located in the middle of three Tawny Eagle nests; spread over an area of almost 22 km². The Tawny Eagles breed between November and February. So competition for food, with the Indian Spotted Eagles doesn't arise. The Indian Spotted Eagle incubates for 45-48 days. Though its congener, *A. pomarina*, incubates for 42-44 days (Ali & Ripley 1987), Prakash (1996), contrary to his findings, feels the incubation period for *A. hastata* should be more than 30 days, which seems to be the case in our study.

The female incubates almost without any break for the first three weeks. Then onwards, she takes short, 10-35 minute breaks daily, either in the morning or in the evening. The male takes charge of incubation whenever the female leaves, either to consume prey he has brought her, or to defecate, or drink water. Sometimes, when she leaves the nest for less than ten minutes, the eggs are simply not incubated. The eagles incubated on hot days while hyperventilating with partially open beaks.

The nest is kept clean and tidy by the adults, especially by their infusion of fresh plant matter. The female generally carries morsels brought by her partner to a nearby tree and consumes it there. Young defecate over the rim of the nest. However, chicks are fed within the nest. Beak cleaning is an elaborate exercise for the adults. A hard thin stalk supports the leaflet of a coconut frond. Gripping this thin stalk with their beak, they gently slide it along the stalk, thereby cleaning the beak. They also brush the sides of their beaks on the rib of frond, to get rid of sticky food material.

Brooding is less intensive after the chick is 3-6 weeks old. Thereafter the female stays away from the nest, but within a protective distance from the chick.

Feeding

The male supplies the incubating female with toads *Bufo* spp., garden lizard *Calotes versicolor*, Indian field mouse *Mus booduga*, common Indian bronzeback *Dendrelaphis tristis*, Baya Weaver *Ploceus philippinus*, Streaked Weaver *P. manyar*, Baillon's Crake *Porzana pusilla*, Jungle

Myna *Acridotheres fuscus* and Indian Myna *A. tristis*. Toads from roads, crushed on rainy nights by vehicular traffic, are normally brought for her in the morning.

He brings the food, alights on the frond, walks up to the nest and drops it inside. On sensing a threat, he alights on a nearby tree, waits and then cautiously approaches the nest. The female carries this food to a nearby tree and consumes it over a period not exceeding two hours. Sometimes, after a 3-4 hour stint of incubation, the hungry female takes the morsel directly from the male's beak and leaves immediately for feeding. On some occasions, smaller items are consumed immediately on the nest itself.

The eaglet is fed with the same food that the adults consume; garden lizards and Indian field mouse forming its main diet. However, it is given tiny selected morsels, a piece at a time. The female, holding the prey in her claws, tears off morsels with her beak and feeds the young one. Gradually the eaglet adopts a begging posture by lowering its body and raising its beak. Some unidentified parts of the prey remain after it is fed. These are carried away from nest by the adults and disposed off in the middle of thick bushes.

Activity of eaglet

The eaglet watches its surroundings with curiosity, like all young raptors. From eight weeks onwards, it walks about on the nest and exercises its wings by waving them up and down. It stands for longer periods, as it gets stronger. Gradually, after gaining more confidence, it moves onto palm fronds, balancing with open wings. There it flaps its wings and hops up and down. Initially, while hopping, it hardly rises from the frond, but as it becomes stronger, it flaps continuously and leaps higher and higher. It faces gusty winds and flaps. It walks into the wind, getting accustomed to the strength of the breeze. It begins glides from higher frond to a lower one within the canopy. Sometimes it glides to a neighbouring tree and then flies back to its nest. These preparatory glides become longer as the eaglet grows. Flying practice continues till the end of July.

During flying practice, it often lands on the ground at least twice a day. There it tries to pull at shrubs' roots by holding an exposed stem. This was observed generally after rainy days. Could this strange exercise be practice for tearing carcasses in the future?

The eaglet imitates adults' hunting habit of flying straight to an imaginary prey, lying on the ground, from a high perch. After a successful hunt, an adult utters a call, while holding its prey in its clutches, and the eaglet arrives to share the food under what

seems like careful parental guidance and instruction. By 22nd - 24th week, after hatching, the eaglet makes attempt to catch prey on its own, calling in flight, as it goes hunting so that adults follow, landing only after the juvenile's attempt is complete. On one occasion, we observed an adult give supportive cover when a gecko was fleeing from the inexperienced juvenile. The juvenile roosts on any tree other than its nesting tree.

Precautionary measures

The male always remained close to the nest when the female was incubating, either flying about or perched on a nearby tree. Every avian intruder in the vicinity of the nest was chased away. Activities like the beating of drums or bursting of crackers to scare birds from depredating nearby paddy fields; the trimming of a tree just below the nesting tree; urchins throwing stones at coconuts on a nearby tree (c. 15 m); nuisance created by bonnet macaque *Macaca radiata* in the orchard; tilling the field with a tractor right below the nesting tree - didn't deter incubation. The adults wouldn't allow anyone to pluck coconuts from the nesting tree. One adventurer, who tried to do so, was badly bruised.

Once the egg had hatched, the female usually positioned herself away from the nest, but within 50 m of it, forming the first round of a protective shield, while the male, further away, either flying or perched, forming the second. Whenever Crows (*Corvus* spp.), Black Kite *Milvus migrans*, Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus*, or Shikra *Accipiter badius* passed close to the nest, the eaglet made a low-pitched, 'kitch...kitch' call, of 4-5 notes, standing in an alert position. Either one of the adults would support the eaglet by threatening the intruder with high-pitched calls and aggressive posture. If the threat persisted, the female took off and chased the intruder away. The eaglet however moved into the nest's depression whenever the female gave a particular alarm-call on sensing danger.

Mobbing

Nesting eagles are mobbed vigorously by crows; once a congregation of over sixty crows was noticed. 4-6 crows mob the flying eaglet most of the time. Sometimes crows approached close to the eaglet, which took a few steps towards them and drove them away with aggressive postures. At such times, the repeated calls of the eaglet don't attract adults even though they

are in the vicinity. Adults drop food into the nest only after the murder of crows has moved away and in some cases they waited more than half an hour, holding prey in their beak, till the crows had moved away.

Once, at 17:35 hrs, the eaglet, which had learnt flying just three days ago, arrived at the nest from a near by perch, to find three bonnet macaques actively moving in the canopy of the nest tree. The young one fumbled on seeing them, but regained its balance quickly, turned and went back to its earlier perch. None of the adults assisted the eaglet in regaining the nesting tree from the macaques. That was a cloudy day and by 18:30 hrs it was dark. The eaglet couldn't occupy the nest and spent entire night on another tree.

Discussion

In the five years' breeding observations, nests have fallen off, causing chicks' mortality, in the second and third years. The dead chick from the third year, a day or two old was collected and sent to Bombay Natural History Society for preservation. The fourth-year nest also fell down. However, the adults raised a second brood. The fourth-year breeding continued almost up to the end of September, coinciding with an extended monsoon.

In all the breeding years, we feel that the nests were not strong or suitable for breeding activity. Yet, the pair raised three broods out of five. The nest should ensure the safety and protection of eggs and the newborn young (Brown 1976). But it doesn't seem so in this case, perhaps due to faulty tree selection. Despite misgivings, we consciously did not interfere in the natural breeding process of the birds either to save the chicks or strengthen the nest. Although a good number of *Ficus* sp., tamarind,

Syzigium sp., trees, with wide-spread canopy are present in the vicinity, the eagles did not utilize them. The coconut tree might have provided a safer place for the nest, as it was taller and afforded a better view of the surroundings and therefore any impending danger. Large scale coconut plantations in this region were started five decades ago (Kamath 1988). Davidson's observation (Barnes 1888) of a blown-down nest that was in a fork but not on branches of a tree, indicates that the bird's breeding habit has changed considerably over the last century. Davidson found the eagle common in central Mysore during 1877 (Barnes 1888). Further study is required to ascertain the cause of decline.

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Birding in the Saryu-Ramganga river valleys (1,500-4,133 m), Kumaon Himalayas

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(With three colour photographs on back cover)

Birds were surveyed on a trek from 27.ix.2004-7.x.2004, in Bageshwar and Almora districts of Kumaon, Uttarakhand, India. The trek started from Song / Supi village (1,500 m; 30°02'N 79°00'E) located along the Saryu River (see map), passing through Bhadratunga village (1,600 m), Madhari Pass (3,040 m), lower Raj Kharak (2,520 m), Gogina village, Ramaganaga River bridge (1,870 m),

Namik village (2,200 m), Sur-Sungri Pass (3,240 m), lower Thaltok (2,950 m), upper Thaltok (3,200 m), Sudam Khan Pass (4,133 m), back to upper and lower Thaltok and Sur Sungri Pass and then a descent to Jakala valley [2,200 m below Rur Khan Pass (3,500 m) which lies above Munsiyari on the other side], and finally ending at Birthi village (1,750 m) – about 100 km in seven days. I

passed through some spectacular scenery: forests, wild flowers and mountain peaks (Nanda Devi, Nanda Ghunti, Trishul, Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri, Shivaling, Bandarpunch, Kamat, Panch Chuli, etc). There was unprecedented rain and snow-fall on the higher reaches.

Birds recorded on the trek

105 species of birds were recorded. Sightings of interest were Black-faced Warbler *Abroscopus schisticeps*, Spot-bellied Eagle Owl *Bubo nipalensis*, Himalayan Snowcock *Tetraogallus himalayensis*, Koklass Pheasant *Pucrasia macrolopha*, Impeyan Monal *Lophophorus impejanus*, Yellow-billed Chough *Pyrrhocorax graculus*, Green Shrike-Babbler *Pteruthius xanthochlorus*, Little Pied Flycatcher *Ficedula westermanni* and Collard Grosbeak *Mycerobas affinis*.

Song village to Bhadratunga camp along the Saryu River: Cultivation and open scrub. A large assemblage (c. 600+) of Nepal House-Martins *Delichon nipalensis*, flying and perching high on electric wires along the steep rocky cliffs near a village Patiadhar. Many Himalayan Griffons *Gyps himalayensis* circled overhead. Rufous Sibia *Heterophasia capistrata* and Blue-throated Barbet *Megalaima asiatica* were heard frequently. Brown Dipper *Cinclus pallasii*, Plumbeous *Rhyacornis fuliginosus* and White-capped Redstarts *Chaimarrornis leucocephalus* were noted on the Saryu River. The Blue Whistling-Thrush *Myophonus caeruleus* actively sang at dusk near our tents at Bhadratunga temple.

Bhadratunga to Madhari Pass: Mixed moist-temperate patch of Indian Cedar *Cedrus deodara*, Oaks *Quercus leucotrichophora*, *Q. semicarpifolia* and *Q. dilatata* and *Rhododendron arboreum*: Saw Rufous-bellied Niltava *Niltava sundara* and heard Striated Laughingthrush *Garrulax striatus* (= *Grammatoptila striata*) calling from a 'nullah', Crested Serpent-Eagle *Spilornis cheela* basking on a tree and a party of Black-faced Flycatcher-Warblers *Abroscopus schisticeps* (6+) moving through foliage. Also seen on this route were White-tailed Nuthatch *Sitta himalayensis*, Grey-faced Leaf-Warbler *Phylloscopus maculipennis*, and Greenish Leaf-Warblers *Phylloscopus trochiloides*.

Madhari Pass to lower Raj Kharak: Mixed oak with meadows ('Bugiyars'). Variegated Laughingthrush *Garrulax variegatus* and three Common Hill Partridges *Arborophila torqueola* were recorded in *Rhododendron companulatum* shrubberies and a Mountain Hawk-Eagle *Spizaetus nipalensis* settling on a tree top.

Lower Raj Kharak: Many Chestnut-bellied Rock-Thrush *Monticola rufiventris* pairs and a few juveniles were also present, chasing each other and calling in the evening. Other sightings included

Himalayan Pied *Dendrocopos himalayensis* and Large Scaly-bellied Green Woodpeckers *Picus squamatus*, Himalayan Swiftlets *Collocalia brevirostris* (= *Aerodramus brevirostris*), Blue-fronted Redstart *Phoenicurus frontalis*, Yellow-breasted Greenfinches *Carduelis spinoides*, Orange-gorgeted *Ficedula strophiatea*, Ultramarine *F. superciliaris*, Verditer *Eumyias thalassina* and Sooty *Muscicapa sibirica* Flycatchers, Brown-crested Tit *Parus dichrous*, White-throated Laughingthrush *Garrulax albogularis*, Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius*, and Oriental Turtle Dove *Streptopelia orientalis*.

Lower Raj Kharak–Ramganga River–Namik Village: Open scrub, cultivation and mixed oak. A flock of Slaty-headed Parakeet *Psittacula himalayana* was seen flying over Ramanga River, where Brown Dipper was present. A mixed hunting party consisted of Yellow-naped Yuhina *Yuhina flavicollis*, Black Bulbul *Hypsipetes leucocephalus*, Rufous Sibia and a Black Eagle *Ictinaetus malayensis* flying across. Ashy Drongo *Dicrurus leucophaeus*, Black-headed *Garrulus lanceolatus* and Eurasian *G. glandarius* Jays in the forest, and a Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*, flying across, were also seen.

Namik village to Sur-Sungri Pass: Dwarf rhododendrons *R. companulatum* in a forest with Ban Oak (Himalayan Silver Oak) *Q. leucotrichophora*; yew and silver fir trees. Blue-fronted Redstart, Spot-winged Crested Tit *Parus melanolophus* observed feeding in shrubberies. A Lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus*, flew over us from time to time. On large trees were Large Scaly-bellied Green and Himalayan Pied Woodpeckers; a female Collard Grosbeak *Mycerobas affinis*; Mrs Gould's Sunbird *Aethopyga gouldiae* and two Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus* feeding on the ground.

Lower Thaltok: These bare rocky mountain slopes, rising above our tents, had 100+ Upland Pipits *Anthus sylvanus* spread all over and three Yellow-billed Choughs feeding near our tents in the morning. Calls of Hill Partridge and Impeyan Monal were heard at dusk, from the mountain tops.

Upper Thaltok: The sub-alpine meadows with *Polygonum* sp. were ideal 'Monal country'. Groups of up to 12 individuals were recorded several times at close range, calling 'whee-(uw)', and on being disturbed, gliding away downhill, to another vale, in an long arcing trajectory, with males showing their brilliant plumage. Flocks of Upland Pipit were recorded in high numbers. At

dusk, calls of Koklass Pheasant, a repeated 'kok-kok-korrok', from nearby slopes, drew a response from other individuals in the vicinity. Lower down, a dense forest with rhododendrons, a few birch trees, and conifers, had a feeding party of Bar-throated Minla *Minla strigula* and Stripe-throated Yuhina in the morning. A flock of Hill Pigeon *Columba rupestris* was also noted circling overhead.

Upper Thaltok to Sudam Khan Pass: This was the toughest part of the trek with a sub-alpine treeless area on the ridge. Impeyan Monal and Upland Pipit were present all along this route. Alpine Accentors *Prunella collaris* (probably) were also noted. Just below Sudam Khan Pass, on our return journey, two Himalayan Snowcock *Tetraogallus himalayensis* were feeding on bare rocky ground. Seeing us, both flew away together, displaying the white patches in their primaries.

Sur-Sungri Pass to Jakala Valley: There is a steep descent from the pass downhill to the valley, through an excellent oak forest. The highlight of this trip was a lone Speckled Wood-Pigeon *Columba hodgsonii*, which flew in and perched on a tree top.

Jakala Valley–Birthing village: Dense oak forest. A Forest Eagle-Owl *Bubo nipalensis* was perched on the branch of a large tree where it was being mobbed by birds until it flew away. A large party of 30+ White-throated Laughingthrush was making various types of calls in the tree tops and a Greater Pied Kingfisher *Ceryle lugubris* was seen on the river.

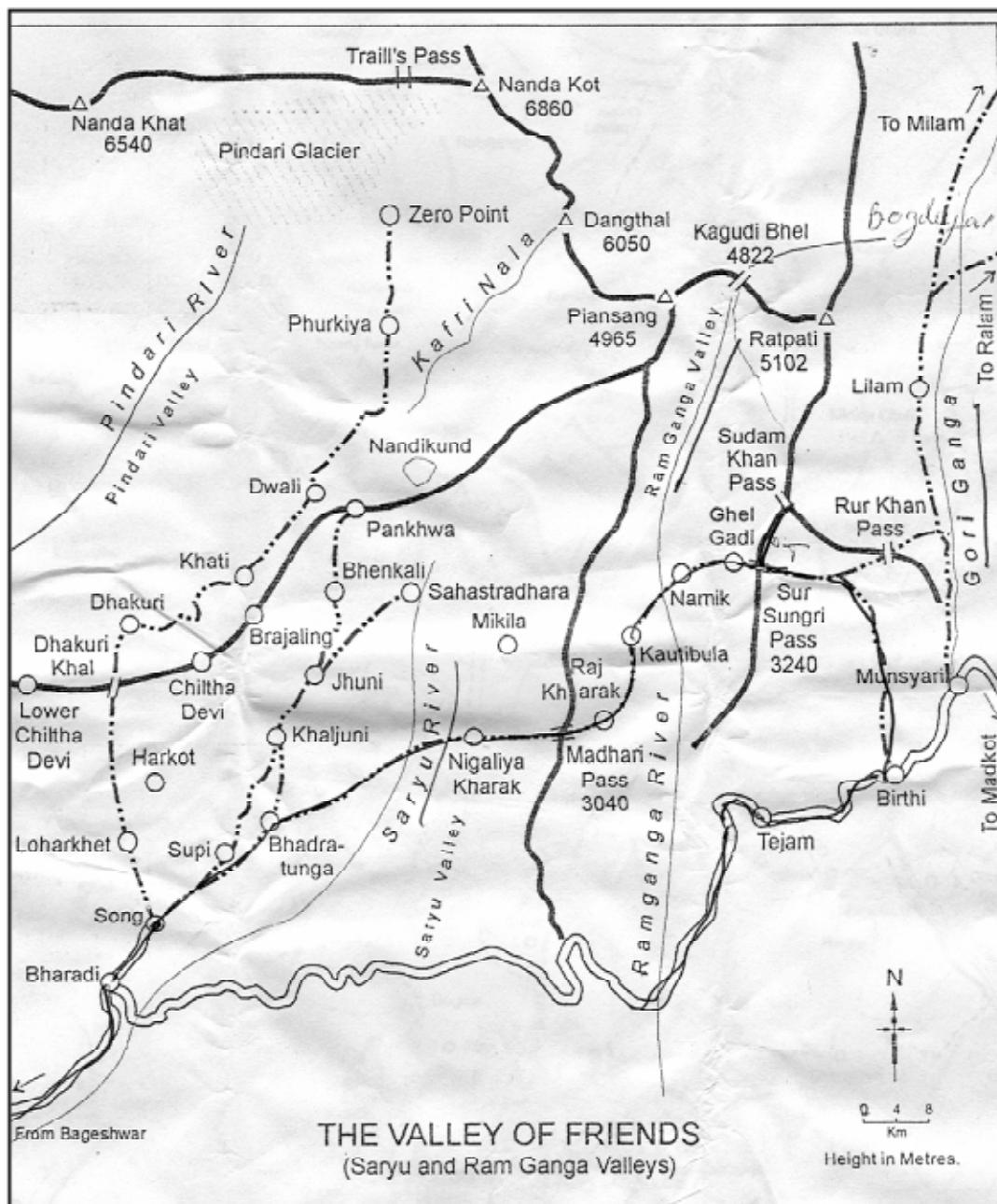
Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary, Almora district (12 km from Almora town): Vegetation mainly of Sub-tropical Chir pine and Himalayan moist-temperate with Ban Oak and Deodar forest on the ridges. I trekked in a nearby village and to the highest point in the sanctuary. Unique sightings included: Rufous-bellied *Dendrocopos hyperythrus* (= *Hypopicus hyperythrus*) and Himalayan Pied Woodpecker pairs feeding on a pine tree on which many Brown-fronted Pied Woodpeckers *D. auriceps* were also present. At night, calls of Asian Barred Owl *Glaucidium cuculoides* ('Kao-kuk') and Spotted Scops-Owl (?) *Otus spilocephalus* (a metallic 'poop-poop'), were heard. Other birds recorded at Binsar were: Oriental Honey-Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus*, Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*, Red Junglefowl *Gallus gallus*, Oriental Turtle-Dove *Streptopelia orientalis*, Wedge-tailed Green-Pigeon *Treron sphenura*, Slaty-headed Parakeet, Oriental Cuckoo *Cuculus*

saturatus, Great Barbet *Megalaima virens*, Blue-throated Barbet, Black-naped Green Woodpecker *Picus canus*, Himalayan Pied Woodpecker, Ashy Drongo, Pied Flycatcher-Shrike *Hemipus picatus*, Eurasian Jay, Black-headed Jay, Red-billed Blue Magpie *Urocissa erythrorhyncha*, Grey Treepie *Dendrocitta formosae*, Long-tailed Minivet *Pericrocotus ethologus*, Black Bulbul, Rusty-cheeked Scimitar-Babbler *Pomatorhinus erythrognys*, Black-chinned Babbler *Stachyris pyrrhops*, Red-winged Shrike-Babbler *Pteruthius flaviscapis*, Green Shrike-Babbler *P. xanthochlorus*, Rufous Sibia, Striated Laughingthrush, Streaked Laughingthrush *Garrulax lineatus* (= *Trochalopteron lineatum*), Sooty Fly-

catcher *Muscicapa sibirica*, Ultramarine Flycatcher, Little Pied Flycatcher *F. westermanni*, Grey-headed Flycatcher *Culicicapa ceylonensis*, Verditer Flycatcher, Grey-headed Flycatcher-Warbler *Sercercus xanthoschistos*, Greenish Leaf-Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides*, Grey Bushchat *Saxicola ferrea*, Chestnut-bellied Rock-Thrush *Monticola rufiventris*, Blue Whistling-Thrush, Plain-backed Thrush *Zoothera mollissima*, Grey-winged Black-bird *Turdus boulboul*, Great Tit *Parus major*, Black-lored Yellow Tit *Parus xanthogenys*, Green Backed Tit *P. monticolus*, Spot-winged Crested Tit, Red-headed Tit *Aegithalos concinnus*, Bar-tailed Tree-Creeper *Certhia himalayana*, White-

tailed Nuthatch *Sitta himalayensis*, Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*, Fire-breasted Flowerpecker *Dicaeum ignipectus*, Cinnamon Tree Sparrow *Passer rutilans*, Crested Bunting *Melophus lathami*, etc.

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Map: The trek route starting from Song and ending at Birthi, Bageshwar district, Uttarakhand, India.

Changing nest site preference for holes in earth cuttings in Spotted Owlet *Athene brama*

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Introduction

Spotted Owlet *Athene brama* is a common, crepuscular and nocturnal, resident, Indian raptor occurring south of 20°N latitude (Ali & Ripley 1969). It usually breeds in natural hollows in tree trunks, holes in dilapidated walls, between ceiling and roof in deserted or occupied dwellings (Ali & Ripley 1969); in eaves of houses (Jerdon 1862); in nest-boxes (Naik 2004, Jadhav & Parasharya 2003); or in holes in stone wall of open wells (Kumar 1985). A niche in the porch of a house has also been reported as a rare nest site (Dewar 1929). Other odd and rare nesting sites reported are pillars of a verandah and holes in banks and rocks (Baker 1930). Such diverse nest sites indicate the adaptive ability of the Spotted Owlet.

In this paper we describe the changing pattern of the nest site preference of the Spotted Owlet. We have studied the nesting of the Spotted Owlet in and around Saswad (18°15'N-18°21'N 73°57'E-74°09'E), in Pune district, Maharashtra, from January 2003 to March 2005. The habitats in this semi-arid and low rainfall area comprise of semi-urban residential zones, mixed scrub and agricultural cropland, dry riverine areas and groves.

Observations and results

Nests were located by surveying the area at dawn and dusk, when Spotted Owlets are most vocal. Inputs were also obtained from local people. Altogether, 41 nest sites were observed during the study period. Of these, 23 sites were used only for nesting whereas 18 were occupied for nesting as well as roosting. 31 nests were in groves, scrub, agricultural and riverine habitats; while the remaining 10 were in semi-urban localities. Various nest site preferences were categorized and tabulated along with their number, relative percentage in each category, their height from ground level (Table 1). Table 1 also shows the maximum and minimum nest height for each category of nest site preference. Interestingly, the minimum nest height of 1 m from the ground was a hole in a constructed wall under a bridge, where human activity was absent. Inaccessible nests in vertical earth cuttings of walls in wells were also just 1.5-3 m below the ground level. The trees used for nesting

were *Ficus religiosa* (n-3), *Tamarindus indicus* (n-2), *Mangifera indica* (n-2), *Ficus bengalensis* (n-2), *Moringa oleifera* (n-1) and *Melia azaderach* (n-1).

Table 1 also shows an equal preference given by Spotted Owlets to tree holes (26.8%) and earth cuttings (26.8%), followed by occupied residential premises (21.9%). A 9.8% nest site preference was for crevices and holes in ruins and abandoned buildings and a similar 9.8% preference was for hole in the wall under a bridge. A 4.9% preference was for hole in constructed wall in well. Kumar (1985), in his studies at Hyderabad, found that preference for nests in holes in constructed wall of open wells was 2.4%, as compared to tree holes (56.7%) and man made structures (39.7%). He has further stated that the Spotted Owlet bred in all nest sites. He has not reported nests in earth cuttings.

Our study revealed that Spotted Owlets have a higher preference for holes in earth cuttings and tree hollows, followed by residential, occupied premises and holes in other man made structures. This indicates a possible changing pattern in nest site preference to holes in earth cuttings in banks, cliffs or the walls of open wells.

Holes in earth cuttings in well walls are created to support bamboo scaffolding while digging a well. These walls were not finished with stone masonry and were left as they were. Such wells were found in small villages like Kodit, Garade, Chamli and Hiware near Saswad and near Jejuri townships, in Pune district. It was also found that some larger holes in earth cuttings in earth banks and vertical cliffs were dug by bandicoots (*Bandicota* spp.) or birds like White-breasted Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis*. Spotted Owlets did not occupy shallow natural holes or holes with narrow entrance, dug by birds like Small Bee-eaters *Merops orientalis*. Spotted Owlets occupied deep holes with broad entrances (minimum diameter 15 cm.). Incidentally, in one nest hollow in the trunk of a *Ficus bengalensis* tree, an active 10 cm sized beehive of *Apis* sp., was present along with eggs of a Spotted Owlet. This association is probably not reported earlier. These eggs were subsequently predated and the hive was also not seen.

Ali & Ripley (1969) do not mention

Spotted Owlets nesting in earth cuttings and record only the Little Owl *Athene noctua bactriana* nesting in holes in earth cliffs, amongst the various species of owls from the Indian subcontinent. Nesting of Spotted Owlet in earth cuttings is an interesting observation, which may justify further discussion, especially since it appears to be an increasing preference, and is not reported after Baker's observation in 1930. Owlets use only such holes in earth cuttings in walls of open wells or vertical cliffs and banks that are at a gradient of almost 90 degrees. The access to such nests by ground predators is difficult. The loose surface soil and the steep gradient make even human approach far from easy. Most nests in wells are quite high from the bottom of the well. Less rainfall in the study area usually does not flood the nests. We have observed the flooding of a few nests in August 2004, a year of plentiful rain, but this occurred outside the nesting period of the Spotted Owlets. A land-slide could however adversely affect the nest hole in an earth embankment. Such an incidence, for the nest of a Small Bee-eater has been reported by Pande et al. (2003). Our study revealed that the horizontal depth of nest tunnels in earth cuttings in wells or in banks was about 45 cm. The tunnels were often curved one way or the other preventing easy extraction of their contents. The vertical depth of holes in trees was up to 60 cm. Chicks easily climb the inner walls of tunnels to emerge at its mouth. Nest holes are often filled with pellets, bones, insect elytra, feathers and other debris (Pande et al. 2004).

It is quite likely that felling of not only *Acacia* spp. trees, but also of larger and older trees of *Ficus* spp., mango and other larger species, has resulted in a scarcity of natural hollows that can be used for nesting in the study area. Avian nest hole excavators in the study area are Yellow-fronted Pied Woodpecker *Dendrocopos mahrattensis* and Coppersmith Barbet *Megalaima haemacephala*, which make holes much smaller in diameter than are required by the spotted owlets. Spotted Owlets do not excavate nest holes but occupy existing hollows and holes.

We have recorded instances of people killing Spotted Owlets, either for fun or due to various superstitions attached to them.

Increasing intolerance towards Barn Owls (Pande et al. 2005) and Spotted Owlets, is gradually driving them away from human habitation. Utilization of holes in earth cuttings in cliffs, banks or well walls, which are often away from human activity, appears to be an adaptive response to such disturbance.

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Table 1: Nest site preference and nest height in Spotted Owllet

S. No.	Nest Sites	No. of Nests (n=41)	%	Nest height in meters
1	Tree hollow	11	26.8	2.5-8.0
2	Occupied residential premises: under roof, holes, niches, etc.	9	21.9	4.0-8.5
3	Abandoned buildings & ruins: crevices, holes, etc.	4	9.8	3.0-8.0
4	Earth cuttings: a) In walls of wells b) In earth banks, cliffs	11 (7) (4)	26.8	1.5-3.0
5	Under bridge in constructed wall	4	9.8	1.0-6.0
6	Well walls with stone masonry	2	4.9	3.0-6.0

Some interesting bird records from Manali, Himachal Pradesh

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In autumn 1996 I spent one month (15.x-12.xi) birding in Manali, Himachal Pradesh. I returned in the following winter from 10.xi.1997-10.i.1998 and 22.ii-25.iv.1998.

This gave me the opportunity to observe the autumn, spring and altitudinal migration. Some of my observations, which were at that time considered vagrant or rare, have since been accepted as regular winter or passage migrants. However one record of a Gold-naped Finch *Pyrrhoplectes epauletta* stands out as unique.

I had visited camp Lamadukh (3,400 m) to the west of Manali on a couple of occasions and had found it especially interesting as it was at the edge of the tree-line and at that time also the snow-line. The climb up from

Manali is 1,400 m, and steep, which does not leave much time for birding. Consequently I decided to camp up there for three days from 3-6.xi.1996.

On 5.xi.1996 I was exploring the hill above Lamadukh, which is above the tree-line, comprising grassland with scattered bushes. At this particular time the snow-line was at about 3,500 m altitude. At dusk I was descending to camp when I startled a small sparrow-sized passerine from a rhododendron type shrub at about 3,500 m altitude. The bird flew deeper into the bush but was still so close that I had to step back to focus my binoculars. The bird must have felt that it was well hidden and therefore safe and so it allowed me to spend a few

minutes observing it. Although I could not see the whole bird at one time by changing my position I managed to get a good description of the very distinctive features and took notes on the spot and then continued downwards as it was getting late.

The bird was overall a brownish colour, except the crown which was yellowish-green; the mantle and nape were grey; the primaries and tail were blackish; and on the perched bird with closed wings there was one very clear long broad strip of white along the centre of the 'back', created by the broad white inner webs to the tertials. Because of the foliage I did not get a view of the bill. The strong contrast between the ear-coverts and throat shown in the

illustration in Grimmett et al. (1988), was not present, the natural colours being more blended. This bird was a female or juvenile. A call was heard, which was presumed to come from this bird, comprising of a two-note whistle, the first note high, the second lower.

This species has only been recorded once west of Nepal at Simla, H.P. which Rasmussen & Anderton (2005) dispute, but in light of this recent sighting, the old record should be considered valid unless evidence can be provided to the contrary. Manali is about 135 km due north of Simla and so these two records constitute the most westerly records to date.

Other records from Manali, which were considered rare at the time of observation but are now considered regular, include Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* and Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug*.

Chaffinch was recorded at about 1,900 m, 3-4 km north of old Manali in or near the apple orchards on 6.xi.1996 (1), 22.xi.1997 (2), 12.xii.1997 (2), on 14.xii.1997 (4) and another was recorded at the outskirts of the Great Himalayan National Park on 26.xii.1997. den Besten (2004) has recorded this species regularly at Kangra and Rasmussen & Anderton (2005) record it as 'casual' in the Himalayas.

Saker Falcon was recorded north of the Forest Rest House (2,700 m), Manali Sanctuary, on 9.xi.1996 and presumably the same individual again on 10.xi.1996. This species has also been recorded twice at Pong Dam, H.P. by den Besten (2004), in Ladakh by Pfister (2004) and also in Nepal (Inskipp & Inskipp 1991; *pers. obs.*). Kangra Valley is about 80 km west of Manali.

Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla* was recorded only once, just above Llamadukh

(3,400 m) on 5.xi.1996 and may indeed be rare in this region although it has now also been recorded at Kangra (den Besten 2004) and Rasmussen & Anderton (2005) give the wintering range east of Pakistan as 'Himalayas sporadically to Nepal, with reports as far as Bhutan.'

The following additional observations, all from 3-5 km north of old Manali, are either at the edge of their previously recorded range or altitudinal records of interest, although the records of Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina* and Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus* concur with the distributions given in Rasmussen & Anderton 2005.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* One in iv.1998 observed at about 2,000 m flying overhead heading north.

Black Stork *Ciconia nigra* Two on 24.iv.1998 observed at about 2,000 m flying overhead heading north.

European White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* One on 4.iv.1998 observed at about 2,000 m flying overhead heading north.

Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus* Two on 28.iii.1998, one on 9.iii.1998, one on 6.iv.1998, one on 7.iv.1998 and one on 8.iv.1998 all observed at about 2000m flying overhead heading north.

Upland Buzzard *Buteo hemilasius* One on 26.x.96 at about 2,000 m, observed perched and in flight for an hour.

Eastern Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca* One immature on 6.iv.1998 and one on 7.iv.1998 observed at about 2000m flying overhead heading north (incorrectly given as 'Mandi' in BirdLife International 2001).

Plum-headed Parakeet *Psittacula cyanocephala* Two females / juveniles on 11.iv.1998 at about 2000m, both with an all yellow bill. The range of this species is given as up to 1,525 m (Grimmett et al.

1998, Rasmussen & Anderton 2005).

Small Bee-eater *Merops orientalis* A pair from 12.iv.1998 until at least 25.iv.1998, at about 2000m. Grimmett et al. (1998) give the range in India as up to 1,800 m, Rasmussen & Anderton (2005) up to 1,500 m 'in Himalayas (exceptionally to 2,800 m).' Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina* One on 28.iii.1998 at about 2,000m.

Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* One on 10.iv.1998, two on 12.iv.1998 and two on 18.iv.1998 all at about 2,000m.

[Spot-winged Rosefinch *Carpodacus rodopeplus*] One female on 23.iv.1998 at about 1,900m. The females of this group are difficult to identify although the diagnostic white tips to the tertials were observed. This would be a westward expansion of its known range and therefore need confirmation.

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Sighting of a Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus* in Rangareddi district, Andhra Pradesh, India

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(With one colour photograph on back cover)

The Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus* is the largest of the Old World vultures. It is a resident in the Himalayas, wintering down to 21°N latitude. It is generally found in northern India (BirdLife International 2001). However, it has been recorded as an occasional vagrant in peninsular India, coming down to Maharashtra (Satara) and Kerala (9°03'-9°30'N) (Ali 1996). BirdLife International (2001) has categorized it as Near Threatened.

It is also listed in Schedule I of The Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972. CITES lists the Cinereous Vulture in Appendix II "Threatened", a species likely to be moved into the "Endangered" category in the near future (American Zoo and Aquarium Association 1998). It prefers open savannahs and semi desert country. It feeds mainly on carrion and rarely takes live prey, generally preferring disabled individuals. The Cinereous Vulture is not as gregarious

as other vulture species and is usually seen singly or in pairs (American Zoo and Aquarium Association 1998).

On 26.i.2001 (13:30hrs), while I was on my way to Hyderabad from Anantgiri Reserve Forest (where I was monitoring a pair of nesting Bonelli's Eagles *Hieraetus fasciatus*), I saw a Tawny Eagle *Aquila rapax* mobbing a huge dark black vulture near the 'Star-chick' poultry farm, located about 3 km from Chevella (Rangareddi

district), to the way to Hyderabad. This big vulture dwarfed the eagle and as they passed over the road they came right above me. Through binoculars, I could see a feathered head and a relatively short neck apart from the huge size and black colour; all these features confirmed that this was indeed a Cinereous Vulture.

I saw the Cinereous Vulture again on 28.i.2001 (16:45hrs), perched on the upper branches of a medium-sized *Ficus* sp., tree in a fallow field next to the Star-chick poultry. It allowed me to approach very close and I was able to get some good photographs. At that proximity, I could clearly see the massive bill and the head covered with down like feathers on the occiput, cheek and lores. This was a juvenile (adults are sooty-brown, juveniles, jet black – hence the name, 'European Black Vulture' (American Zoo and Aquarium Association 1998). The reason it stuck around in this area was obvious: the offal dumped by the poultry farm was an attraction not only for the vulture but also for Tawny Eagles. I have seen Tawny Eagles near the poultry farm quite often, squabbling and chasing each

other for scraps of chicken carcasses. On later visits, I noticed that the *Ficus* sp., tree on which the bird was seen had been cut down.

The Cinereous Vulture is a scarce and uncommon winter visitor to south India and sighting one near Chevella was totally unexpected. Other reports of this species from south India include: Karimnagar district, Andhra Pradesh (Choudhury 1990); Nelapattu Wildlife Sanctuary, Nellore district, Andhra Pradesh (Perennou & Santharam 1990); Kerala (Kumar 1991); Coorg district, Karnataka (Subramanya 2001); Mysore, Karnataka (Shivanand 2002).

Based on the above reports, it is possible that the Cinereous Vulture spreads to peninsular and southern India more than we are aware. Birdwatchers from these regions would do well to keep a lookout for this species.

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The Lesser Florican *Sypheotides indica* in Mainpuri, Uttar Pradesh, India

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The Lesser Florican *Sypheotides indica* is a globally endangered species with a small and declining population due to degradation and shrinkage of preferred grassland habitats (Sankaran 2000). Most records of this species in India are from Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. In Uttar Pradesh, in recent times, the species has been sighted only in Dudwa National Park (Javed & Rahmani 1998), while other records from the state are from the 1880s (BirdLife International 2001). In this note I report a sighting of this species in Mainpuri district, Uttar Pradesh.

During a routine road transect to record large waterbirds in the area bordering Etawah and Mainpuri districts on 15.vi.2005, one male and one female Lesser Floricans were sighted foraging in an uncultivated agriculture field with low grass. The male could be photographed and was in partial moult. The field was previously part of the Kudaiyya wetland but was drained for agriculture by a wasteland reclamation project in 2001 (personal observation). Rainfall during 2004-2005 had been poor and the area was reeling under a dry spell. On

second visit to the area (5.viii.2005) we saw that the field was being cultivated with rice paddy after a good spell of showers in July in August. There was no sign of the floricans. During earlier, regular field visits to the same site and other sites in the two districts, from December 1999 to July 2002, I had never sighted the species.

There is one past record of this species from the area; a male was collected from the neighbouring Etawah district in August 1869 (BirdLife International 2001). The Lesser Florican therefore appears to be an infrequent vagrant to Etawah and Mainpuri districts when conditions are right, occurring in small and scattered populations. Males of this species are known to moult into breeding plumage in June and July (Sankaran & Rahmani 1986). It is likely that the individuals seen in Mainpuri were on their way to breeding grounds.

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Foundation and the Wildlife Protection Society of India provided facilities that assisted during the two visits and during the writing of the note, and are gratefully acknowledged.

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Grey-crowned Prinia *Prinia cinereocapilla* in Sukhna Wildlife Sanctuary, Chandigarh, northern India

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While touring (25-28.v.2005) Sukhna Wildlife Sanctuary (area: 26km²; alt.: 300-600 m; 33°44'-33°49'N 76°48'-76°54'E), located north of Chandigarh city, on the Shivalik mountain ranges along the Haryana-Punjab state border, I was able to record the presence of Grey-crowned Prinia *Prinia cinereocapilla* at two sites. Both sightings were along a small reservoir in the Kansal (River) forest range (400 m in Punjab), in an opening with a grassy patch, in dry-deciduous vegetation, mainly comprising *Dalbergia sissoo* and *Acacia nilotica*.

First, I heard a prinia call for a few minutes. It was a loud and squeezed note, "tweetoo-weetoo-weetoo-weetoo- tr-ti—", which attracted attention. The same call was heard again at a second location about 100 m ahead. Here I saw a bird in the crown of a large-sized shrub / small tree, with dense foliage, along the trail surrounded by grass. It was moving nervously from branch to branch overhead and giving forth a soft "tsirr-tsirrt-sirr" note. From below, the light orangey-buff wash on the sides of the breast and a typical prinia under-tail with black terminal spots, were visible. Then through binoculars, the bird was observed looking down, clearly revealing its head, which had a bluish-grey cap, back bill, a distinct orangey supercilium contrasting with a black line between the eye and the bill. It then flew away in a typical loose prinia-flight to an acacia tree nearby. In flight, its uniform rufous upperparts and tail were noticed. On this tree, it climbed up the branches slowly, clearly showing its plumage and size and then vanished into the bushes further ahead.

The call, plumage and habits of this species are distinct and cannot be confused with other prinias present here (Plain *Prinia inornata*, Ashy *P. socialis*, Grey-breasted *P. hodgsonii*, Striated *P. crinigera* and Rufous-fronted *P. buchanani*). The distinctive features being uniform rufous brown upperparts, light orangey under parts, a greyish crown with orangey-buff supercilium contrasting with a dark line joining the eye and a black bill below the supercilium and, its arboreal nature.

The present sighting bridges the gap in the distribution range of this globally Vulnerable species, as Sukhna lies between Margalla hills (450-1,000 m) in Pakistan (see below) and Corbett National Park (Uttaranchal) in India (Grimmett et al. 1998,

Kazmierczak 2000). Roberts (1992) first came across this taxon in the Margalla hills, "an extension of over 725 km...westwards of its known range (p. 205). However, subsequent searches in the Margalla hills have not been able to relocate this bird (Islam & Rahmani 2002), thus raising doubts about its presence in Pakistan as the species can be confused with its congeners (Islam & Rahmani 2002). Besides, there have been no recent records of this species from West Bengal and Assam and the current unquantified populations are known in only a few protected areas in Uttaranchal. The main threats outlined for this species are ecological disturbance causing loss and degradation of *terai* grasslands and forests and as the species is especially vulnerable to grassland degradation it is believed not colonize re-growth until well developed (Islam & Rahmani 2002).

In my opinion *P. cinereocapilla* can easily be overlooked if one is not familiar with it or its call or does not hear its call while searching in potential habitat. The chances of sighting this uncommon species dwindle as it is relatively shy compared to other *Prinia* spp. present in the same area, and sulks once it gets alarmed. The habitat at Sukhna, where it was found, is un-eroded / undisturbed dry deciduous forest with tall uncut grass in the lower southern aspect of the Shivaliks. At Sukhna sanctuary extensive soil and water conservation measures have been undertaken by the forest department. But, similar habitats in the adjoining Haryana and Punjab are degraded and threatened with deforestation and soil erosion. The situation is similar in unprotected areas all over the western Himalaya where very few well-forested and un-eroded tracts remain. So suitable habitat for this species in this region is not only highly fragmented but also might be prone to seasonal changes. A similar situation might exist further west in Pakistan. Besides, the lower Shivalik tracts in the western Himalaya have also not been explored to their full potential for the species. So the chances of sighting again at the same place may be less but not impossible. There is a greater chance of recording it during its breeding season, when it is vocal. In addition, bird watching skills differ from person to person. Maybe *P. cinereocapilla* is a seasonal migrant to Margalla Hills in

Pakistan or Roberts recorded it at a point of time when this species was trying to expand its range to Margalla Hills when suitable habitat was present there. Later, fluid environmental conditions were not conducive for the species (e.g. Hooded Pitta *Pitta sordida* or Tickell's Blue-Flycatcher *Cyornis tickelliae* or even Brooks's Flycatcher *C. polioegenys* migrate to the Himalaya for breeding every summer from the south and thus extend their range in the western Himalaya up to the lower foothills of Himachal Pradesh during some years, but not every year). Thus, Roberts' records cannot be overlooked or underestimated just because it was not located subsequently. What will happen to the record of Himalayan Quail *Ophrysia superciliosa* (now Critically Endangered) from Uttaranchal if we begin doubting past established records without scientific reasoning? The rationale behind the present sighting of this species at Sukhna is that a decade of conservation efforts in the Shivaliks has started bearing fruit.

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Interaction of Indian White-backed Vulture *Gyps bengalensis* with wild dog *Cuon alpinus* in Kanha National Park

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Indian White-backed Vulture *Gyps bengalensis* is a carrion-feeder and useful scavenger in the countryside and in the environs of towns and villages (Ali 1979). Once common across India, the Indian White-backed Vulture has become 'Critically' endangered (Islam & Rahmani 2002) in recent years. However it is still plentiful and commonly seen in the Kanha National Park (Madhya Pradesh, India).

On 15.iii.1996, I watched a pack of wild dogs *Cuon alpinus* hunt spotted deer *Axis axis* in the meadows (22°17'N 80°37'E) of Kanha National Park. A pack of six wild dogs chased a spotted deer until it was exhausted. Then they tore its hip muscle, making it lame. They clung to the live prey and began tearing pieces of its flesh.

Several soaring vultures, circling over an area, are an indication of a kill (carcase).

They are guided to the carcase by crows, dogs and jackals (Ali & Ripley 1989). Within no time, 60 Indian White-backed Vultures descended to the carcase, edging out the canids by sheer numbers, took possession of it and devoured the carcase within a few minutes. The wild dogs watched helplessly from a distance.

A pack of hungry wild dogs, if sufficiently numerous, will not hesitate to attack a panther *Panthera pardus*, a sloth bear *Melursus ursinus* or even a tiger *Panthera tigris*. Indeed, they are known not only to appropriate the kill of a tiger, but also to kill it during a chance encounter (Prater 1980). That such formidable predators were driven away from their kill, which was usurped and consumed by Indian White-backed Vultures, is an indication that vultures will compete with wild dogs for food.

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Himalayan (White-tailed) Rubythroat *Luscinia pectoralis* at Londa, Karnataka, a deletion

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Whilst researching bird records from western Maharashtra, I came across the paper by Koelz (1942) from Londa, Karnataka and his specimen of a female Himalayan Rubythroat *Luscinia pectoralis* shot at Londa on 15.ii.1938. I entered it into my database of birds of the region, noting that the specimen was also cited by Ali and Ripley (1983), Grimmett et al. (1998) and Kazmierczak (2000) but as the bird was outside the region I was studying, thought no more about it until I came across *BirdSpot* 3.5 (Shyamal 2003), which listed Siberian Rubythroat *Luscinia calliope* at Londa and not Himalayan Rubythroat.

I saw that the citation given by Shyamal (2003) was the electronic database of the Field Museum of Natural History (FMNH) Chicago (http://www.museumboerhaave.nl/e_intro.html), but convinced that there was a mistake I checked the web-site and found that the museum did indeed list specimen #239109 as Siberian Rubythroat and not Himalayan Rubythroat from Londa on exactly the same date as that given by Koelz. I checked Koelz (1942) and Ali and Ripley (1982) again to make sure the mistake was not mine and on confirming that it was not, wrote to Dave Willard at the FMNH

enquiring whether there was a mistake in the database. He very kindly checked the specimen and wrote back, "It appears there is little question that it is correctly identified as *Erithacus calliope*." He also wrote to other American museums that also housed Koelz specimens and they wrote to inform me that they had no specimens of Himalayan Rubythroat from that region. This was not surprising as it is inconceivable that there could have been two different rubythroat species shot on exactly the same day at the same location especially without Koelz mentioning it in his paper, in which he very clearly wrote, "Only a single specimen was observed, a female collected in an old rice field on February 15th".

It is clear that Koelz mis-identified this specimen and that Himalayan Rubythroat *Luscinia pectoralis* previously named *Erithacus pectoralis* should be deleted from the Karnataka and indeed peninsular list and re-instated as a record of Siberian Rubythroat *Luscinia calliope*.

Incidentally there is one other record of *calliope* from this region, "Jerdon mentions having once seen a specimen that had taken refuge on board ship, a little south of Bombay, in the month of November," (Butler

1881).

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Thanks to L. Shyamal for alerting me to this record (and to electronic Museum databases) and Dave Willard (FMNH) for checking the specimen. Also thanks to Janet Hinshaw (University of Michigan) and Paul Sweet (American Museum of Natural History) for checking their Koelz collections.

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Sighting of Crested Tree-Swift *Hemiprocne coronata* in north Gujarat

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During a survey and sampling of the forests of Ambaji, Abakanta, Taranga and Vijaynagar, of the north Gujarat region, in May and June 2005, we heard a muted, shikra-like call on 18.v.2005 around 11:00 hrs. Walking towards the sound, we reached a check-dam across a small forest stream (24°18'N 72°51'E). This was in the dry deciduous forests of the southern Aravalli hills, near Pancha village, close to Ambaji (Banaskantha district) in northern Gujarat. The call led us to two Crested Tree-Swift *Hemiprocne coronata*, which were diving and drinking water, in mid-flight, from the surface of the dam. They flew off after drinking four more times.

We heard this species again, on another occasion, in the dry deciduous forests on some rocky and highly undulating hills, (24°18'N 72°50'E; 437 m asl), north-west of Kumbharia village, on the outskirts of Ambaji. Seven birds were gliding above the tree canopy on a hill top calling frequently and probably hawking insects. Two birds were also seen perched on a tertiary branch at the top of a 12 m tall *Lannea coromadelica* tree, growing on the sloping side of a hill.

Three more individuals of this species were sighted on two occasions. Once near

Naliavada village (23°55'N 73°18'E; 295 m), and the second time at Bhayala village (24°17'N 72°44'E; 410 m).

Crested Tree-Swift, is distributed practically across entire India, barring the north-west (Ali 1996). In Gujarat it has been reported from Gir forest in Saurashtra (Dharmakumarsinhji 1956), Juna Rajpipla, Songadh (Surat district) (Ali 1954) and Shoolpaneshwar Sanctuary (Monga & Naoroji 1984). This species has not been reported from the forests of north Gujarat region by either Grimmett et al. (1999) or Kazmierczak (2000). Our observations extend the distribution range of this species.

Acknowledgements

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Bar-headed Geese *Anser indicus* at Walayar dam, Kerala, India

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A small gaggle of Bar-headed Goose *Anser indicus* was sighted by one of us (RJG) at Walayar dam (10°85'N 76°85'E, c. 200 m above m.s.l.) on 25.xii.1999. These birds, numbering eight individuals, were also seen on 27.xii.1999 (RJG), 29.xii.1999 (RJG) and 1.i.2000 (RJG & PJ). They were rather confiding and allowed us close proximity. The birds were seen preening near the banks and later swam across to another shore. The same birds were later recorded during the Asian Wetland Census on 16.i.2000 by one of us (PJ) along with 26 Painted Storks *Mycteria leucocephala*.

Two years later, on 29.i.2002, one of us (PJ) saw four birds again at Walayar dam. K.V. Eldhose was also present at that time.

Sight records of Bar-headed Goose are

few from Kerala. Ali (1969) did not record this species in Kerala. In 1987 one bird was recorded from Kadalundi by D.N. Kurup (Neelakantan et al. 1993). In recent years, K.V. Eldhose (verbally, i.2006) informed one of us (PJ) that he spotted five Bar-headed Geese at Purathur, Bharathapuzha estuary, in December 2005. P.P.Sreenivasan (verbally, i.2006) also informed (PJ) that he spotted six birds at Kole Wetlands, Thrissur district.

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Praveen J. is an amateur bird watcher actively pursuing the hobby for the last fifteen years. He is interested in the distribution and movements of birds of the Western Ghats and South India. He is the moderator for the e-mail discussion groups for birds for Kerala (KeralaBirder) and north-east India (birdsofNEIndia).

Renju Jacob George is an amateur bird watcher who has been doing active birdwatching at Walayar dam and adjoining areas since 1992.

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Sighting of Indian Pitta *Pitta brachyura* in north Gujarat

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On 20.v.2005 we spotted an Indian Pitta *Pitta brachyura* at 09:38 hrs, in the forested environs (24°24'N 73°00'E) of Bora village, Sabarkantha district (Gujarat). It was perched 8 m above ground, on the primary branch of a *Ficus bengalensis* tree in a degraded dry deciduous forest, with sparse vegetation and agriculture on either side. This region forms the southern portion of the Aravali Hills.

Indian Pitta is known to occur in well-

wooded regions of India, south of 1,200 m in the Himalaya range, central India, Bihar, Jharkhand, some parts of Western Ghats, and south Gujarat (Ali 1996, Grimmett et al. 1999). In Gujarat it is reported from Saurashtra (Dharmakumarsinhji 1956), but there is no record of its presence in north Gujarat. The distribution maps in Grimmett et al. (1999) and Kazmierczak (2000) indicate that it is a summer visitor only to parts of south Gujarat.

After our initial sighting, the Indian Pitta was either sighted or heard three times in summer (June) and 16 times during the monsoon (July-September), in various types of habitat. A majority of the sightings were in the dry deciduous forest. The details on the forest type, altitude, coordinates and place for each sighting and number of birds seen are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Details on sighting location of Indian Pitta in the forests of north Gujarat region (May-September 2005)

No.	Place of sighting (# sighted)	Forest type	Co-ordinates	Altitude (m)
I Summer (May & June)				
1.	Near Vanaj (1)	Moist deciduous	23°59'N 73°18'E	407
2.	Near Ajepur (2)	Agriculture fringe	23°59'N 73°14'E	298
3.	Vagheshwari village (1)	Dry deciduous	23°50'N 73°15'E	319
II Monsoon (July-September)				
4.	Near Pansa (1)	Dry deciduous	24°17'N 72°50'E	460
5.	Borli village (1)	Dry deciduous	24°16'N 72°49'E	495
6.	Trishulia Ghat (2)	Dry deciduous	24°15'N 72°48'E	412
7.	Near Viramveri (2)	Dry deciduous	24°17'N 72°47'E	428
8.	Piplavali Vav (3)	Dry deciduous	24°14'N 72°48'E	331
9.	Ghareda (1)	Dry deciduous	24°16'N 72°47'E	295
10.	Rapat (2)	Dry deciduous	24°14'N 72°48'E	338
11.	Harivav (2)	Dry deciduous	24°14'N 72°47'E	297
12.	Khokhra Ghat (1)	Dry deciduous	24°13'N 72°47'E	349
13.	Isharia village (1)	Thorn mix dry deciduous	24°17'N 72°43'E	383
14.	Way to Guda village (2)	Dry deciduous	24°20'N 72°45'E	433
15.	Near Bhayala village (1)	Dry deciduous	24°17'N 72°44'E	?
16.	After Viramveri (2)	Dry deciduous	24°17'N 72°45'E	447
17.	Ranpur bungalow (1)	Riverine forest	24°18'N 72°55'E	310
18.	Danta to Hardad (1)	Dry deciduous	24°11'N 72°47'E	339
19.	Danta to Hardad (1)	Dry deciduous	24°11'N 72°49'E	376

The above sightings establish the fact that the Indian Pitta is not only a summer visitor to Gujarat, but also remains in the monsoon season, as mentioned by Dharmakumarsinhji (1956), based on his sighting and breeding records from the Saurashtra region. Though we saw displaying birds along the upper slopes of river valleys with dense shrub undergrowth and trees till the end of September, we could not locate a nest as evidence of its breeding

in north Gujarat. It has been reported to breed regularly in valleys close to the base of the hill in Gir forest and occasionally in other parts of Saurashtra (Dharmakumarsinhji 1956).

Our observations update the distributional range for this species.

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for funding the Biodiversity study in this region, which enabled us to do the survey. The Gujarat State Forest Department is also acknowledged for permitting us to work in the forest area. Gujarat Institute of Desert Ecology, Bhuj-Kachchh is acknowledged for facilitating the project.

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Nest structure variation in Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius* in Kutch, Gujarat

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(With one photograph online at: www.indianbirds.in)

Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius* is seen throughout the desert district of Kutch (Gujarat, India). Here its nesting season is from June to September, when broad-leaved monsoon plants appear. The usual nest type i.e., a pouch formed by stitching together two leaves, was observed in Bhuj (Gujarat) by S.N. Varu (*verbally*). Ali (1945) suspected that in Kutch, owing to scarcity of large-leaved plants, Common Tailorbirds might be forced to construct a

different type of nest, perhaps a purse of woven fibres, as the *Prinias* (*Prinia* spp.) generally do. He added, "I leave this point to other observers to verify".

On 2.vii.2005 we came across a nest of a Common Tailorbird in Mr Dilip Khatau's farmhouse, on the way to Nani Aral in Kutch. The nest was a cup of soft material, slung from a small shelter of dry and dead date-palm leaves, 1.2 m above the ground. The use of plant leaves, stitched together to

form a pouch, was not present. Neither was green grass, used by Rufous-fronted *Prinia* *Prinia buchanani* and Grey-breasted *Prinia* *P. hodgsonii* in the construction of their nests, present. The nest contained three bluish-white eggs, which a Common Tailorbird was incubating.

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Nesting of Plum-headed Parakeet *Psittacula cyanocephala* in a building

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This note reports an instance of Plum-headed Parakeet *Psittacula cyanocephala*, which is primarily a tree hole nesting species, nesting in a hole in the wall of a double-storey building in Pune city, Maharashtra state.

The residential area of Kothrud, in the western part of Pune, has a lot of tree cover, primarily road-side, fruit and ornamental trees and plants in the gardens and parks that attract a wide variety of birds. Small flocks of Plum-headed Parakeet are regularly heard, identified by their distinctive "tooi?" calls, as they fly through our neighbourhood. They are often seen feeding in the gardens. The area is also home to the Rose-ringed Parakeet *P. krameri* and Alexandrine Parakeet *P. eupatria*.

Along a busy lane that serves as an access to my housing colony, between September and April 2005, I regularly observed a small flock of Plum-headed Parakeet flying around a two-storey stone-walled house that adjoins the road. The birds were seen landing on the trees around the house and often descending into a custard apple tree *Annona* sp., to eat the

fruit.

From 21.ii.2005 onwards, I observed that a pair was regularly perching around a horizontal crack in the vertical wall of the building just below the flat concrete roof (see photo). The crack was over 30 cm in length and about 5 cm at its widest. One or both birds would descend from the roof and land on the crack or land on the roof and then fly down and perch at the edge of the crack. Both sexes were observed disappearing into the crack and remaining in the hole for the duration of my observations, which lasted 5-10 minutes each time as I did not want to attract the attention of people to the nest.

On 2.iv.2005 I took a few photos of the bird at the hole from the street, an action that caught the attention of the people using the lane. A road-side bicycle repairer, whose shop is opposite the house, informed me that the parakeets had been nesting there for several years.

A search of observations on the nesting habits of the Plum-headed Parakeet in literature and on the Internet produced only a single reference to a website on parakeets

in which it is recorded that the species occasionally nests in crevices of buildings (<http://home.wanadoo.nl/psittaculaworld/Species/P-cyanocephala.htm>, accessed on 16.iv.2005). All other references to the breeding habits of the species refer to its tree hole nesting habit (Ali & Ripley 1983, Grimmett et al. 1998), although the Delhi Bird Club has beautiful photographs of the bird taking to nesting in a wooden nest-box placed on a tree (Gopi Sundar *in litt.*, April 2005).

During this period, I regularly observed the female going into the nest hole. In addition, on more than one occasion, I also observed the male disappear into the nest hole and remain there for at least several minutes at a time. It is likely that it was involved in incubating eggs and or brooding chicks. However, Ali & Ripley (1983) state that incubation and feeding of chicks appears to be the sole responsibility of the hen and further, the contribution of the male to the process, if any, is unknown. However, L. Namassivayan (*in litt.*, March 2005) informed me that in the Wynaad district of Kerala where he and his

colleagues have found many pairs nesting, they have observed and photographed both parents taking part in all family duties.

Additional observations of the nesting of Plum-headed Parakeet in human-built structures would be useful to understand whether this is a more common habit than has been previously observed. Secondly,

the contribution of the male in incubation and feeding of chicks needs to be properly documented.

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Birds of Sirumalai, Tamil Nadu

V. Narayan Swami

I have never been as serious a birdwatcher as many contributors to *Indian Birds* and during the past ten years my birding has been pitifully casual. But I have always had a strong, latent interest in the activity. So, I have been keeping casual note of Sirumalai birdlife during my movements around the estate, especially those species that I think are uncommon. Through this note I bring to your notice how some of the birds listed as threatened in Santharam (2005), fare in Sirumalai.

Sirumalai is the eastern-most outcrop or spur of the Western Ghats and not, as held by some authorities, an independent range. For one thing, a look at any satellite map will validate what I am saying, with only the Dindigul or Kodai Road pass separating Sirumalai from the Palnis. The pass itself is only 10 to 15 KM wide and is mostly tableland about 150–300 m above m.s.l. And the Sirumalai range stretches about 45 km on the Dindigul Madurai road with its width being about 15–25 km. There is no independent range in Tamil Nadu which is as big - the comparable ranges, the Shevaroy, the Kalrayan and the Kollimalai, all being part of the Eastern Ghats complex.

The flora, of equivalent altitudes, is largely similar between Sirumalai and the Palnis - a comparison of Pallithanam (2001) with either Fyson (1932) or Matthew (1999) will bear this out.

The highest peak of the range abuts our estate (our boundary runs a third of the way up this peak) and is 1,560 m above m.s.l. The house I live in is 1,335 m above m.s.l., and the estate itself ranges from 1,160–1,400 m above m.s.l. The average altitude of the Sirumalai table-top is 1,250 m above m.s.l., with some outlying areas being c. 1,000–1,200 m. So, our climate is pretty much identical to that of Yercaud, the altitudes being similar.

Notes on some common birds in Sirumalai:

Mountain Hawk-Eagle *Spizaetus nipalensis*

Very common. Can be seen almost daily, flying low around the house (trying, no doubt, to get at the chicken run!) or perched on a *Terminalia bellerica* tree and preening. It is quite common all over Sirumalai, including at altitudes up to 1,066 m and I have noticed it several times myself. It is always single, a lazy, low, slow flyer and often simply perched on a convenient tree. **Ceylon Frogmouth *Batrachostomus moniliger*** Quite common. Visible at dusk – less so on our property than at places of slightly lower elevation, say 1,200–1,300 m. One evening, at about 20:00 hrs, one struck the wind-shield of our Jeep (it was probably disoriented by the lights), as we were returning to the estate up the Ghat road, at an elevation of about 1,000 m. I had the driver reverse to where the dying bird was lying and picked it up. It was a male Ceylon Frogmouth. The next day, I had him cleaned, dressed and prepared by one of the workers (we have more than a few who are quite good at it) but, as luck would have it, I was out of arsenic at the time. By the time a supply arrived it was late evening, and maggots had begun their work. My hopes of mounting it for the Bombay Natural History Society were dashed. But the bird is quite common in Sirumalai (and, I suspect, in the Palnis too, at least at similar altitudes, although I am not able to verify this).

Great Eared-Nightjar *Eurostopodus macrotis* Very common again. Usually found squatting in the middle of the road both inside the estate and, especially, on the public roads on the hill-top as well as the Ghat road. Early morning (around 05:00 hrs) drives out of the estate are the best time to see it, although it is seen through the night too, framed in the headlights of the Jeep until one is almost upon it, when this outsized nightjar rises up, wings a-flutter, and, flies in front of the vehicle for some time! That is the time to note the diagnostic neck-band, the large, mottled-brown wings and the (seemingly) ungainly

flight. I have also noticed its ear tufts at times, while it sat in the middle of the road. Most days, on some stretches of the road, one could see a bird every 30 m!

Nilgiri Flycatcher *Eumyias albicaudata* I won't say it is common - far from it, but I have seen this bird on the small lawn in front of the house, for three years running, always late in the spring or early summer. At first glimpse I wondered what a Verditer Flycatcher *E. thalassina* was doing there but then the pale breast was exposed and a quick look at a couple of handy field-guides established its identity. At least on one of the three seasons, I saw a pair, more than once. And, for such shy birds, they are quite venturesome, approaching within 6 m of us as we took tea on the lawn. I saw it mostly foraging on the ground, and occasionally on bush-tops, but never at greater heights than that.

Other interesting species: Of course, we have plenty of Black Eagles *Ictinaetus malayensis*. I call them our 'signature birds' and am very proud of those big boys, weaving in and out effortlessly through and between our Silver Oaks' tops. They are seen almost daily and more than a few times sometimes, always circling under the Silver Oak canopy, never in any trouble weaving in and out between the close-planted trees! Occasionally they perch on a Silver Oak, but, being wary birds, unlike the Mountain Hawk-Eagle, never permit a close approach, flying off at the merest sign of movement.

The Emerald Dove *Chalcophaps indica*, which is very common in the Palnis, is conspicuous by its absence in our hills. The biotopes are similar between the hills but we do not have the Kurinchi *Strobilanthes kuntiana*, perhaps because we have 1,346 mm average rainfall as against 1,498 mm for the Lower Palnis, i.e., at comparable altitudes. Maybe the Emerald Dove prefers a marginally wetter climate, but I wonder. There are plenty of White-cheeked Barbets *Megalaima viridis* and Blue-winged

Parakeets *Psittacula columboides* all over the place - the latter preferring Guava trees for nesting. Also, the Malabar Whistling-Thrush *Myophonus horsfieldii*, more heard than seen, but sometimes flying past, always in groups of six or eight, cobalt-blue wings glistening and, on such occasions, raucous screeches rather than song. And, interestingly, our resident (and fiercely aggressive) Magpie Robin *Copsychus saularis* makes a very passable imitation of the Malabar Whistling-Thrush and the Black-headed Oriole *Oriolus xanthornus* as

well as the Redwattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus* - how he has learnt the call of the last I cannot say as the few we hear pass high overhead.

I have not used any Latin names because I still think *Rhopodytes viridirostris* for the Green-billed Malkoha (common in scrub and bush on lower slopes/foothills), but I am aware the evolutionary taxonomists or DNA wallahs have gone and revised that name!

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The birds at home

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Having lived all my life in the urban jungle of Kolkata (= Calcutta), I was fascinated by the greenery of my in-law's residence in rural Karnataka (Dakshin Kannad). The first things I noticed about my new home were the many birds in the garden and in the trees around the house and the family sawmill nearby. I did not, however, begin to study them seriously till about ten years ago when my husband presented me with a copy of Martin Woodcock's *Collins handguide to the birds of the Indian sub-continent including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri-Lanka and Nepal*.

Armed with the book and an ancient pair of binoculars belonging to my father-in-law, I started taking great pleasure in identifying the birds around me. The black birds with forked tails were Black Drongos *Dicrurus macrocerus*, the small purple bird with curved beak was the Purple Sunbird *Nectarinia asiatica*, the black and yellow bird that sang beautifully was the Black-headed Oriole *Oriolus xanthornus*, etc.

All my bird watching is done around my house and as I don't see the same birds week after week, the thrill of bird watching has not yet declined for me. Our garden has flowering plants like rose, jasmine, lantana, marigold and hibiscus and trees like coconut, areca nut, mango, jackfruit, chikoo and silk cotton. We also have plants like papaya, banana and pineapple. Though there is no water body here, the ditches get full with water from the surrounding elevated places in the monsoons and common kingfishers *Alcedo atthis*, red-wattled lapwings *Vanellus indicus* and white-breasted waterhens *Amaurornis phoenicurus* make their appearance. I have not made a scientific study of the birds but

I do take great pleasure in spending the early mornings of most Sundays roaming around our garden and the adjacent mill compound, together comprising about three and a half acres of land.

Cut logs stacked around the saw mill attract woodpeckers, wagtails, bee-eaters and flycatchers. There are two trees, locally called "Daddal" *Careya arborea* and "Maruwa or Hunal" *Terminalia paniculata*, which attract many birds. Sometimes I have seen more than fifteen or twenty species foraging on the trees at the same time. They are always visited by practically every species that can be seen here.

The plot adjacent to the mill compound was vacant till three years ago. It used to be visited by many birds, particularly babblers *Turdoides* spp., and Pittas *Pitta brachyura*. But now people have bought the land and built houses and as a result I no longer see these birds there.

One interesting fact is that Indian Robins *Saxicoloides fulicata* were the most common birds in the mill area. One could always see them on trees or on the logs. I once even found a nest, in a hole in one of the logs, containing three off-white pitted eggs. Funnily, there were never any Indian Robins in our house garden though only a simple fence separated the mill compound from the garden. About three years ago, the numbers of Indian Robins began to dwindle from the usual number of about five to ten pairs till I no longer saw them anymore. Their habitat, the logs and the trees, are still present, as is plenty of food in the shape of insects, and the only explanation seems to be that they were preyed upon by crows *Corvus* spp., and Greater Coucals *Centropus sinensis*. The disappearance of the Indian Robins also coincided with the

adjacent vacant plot getting filled.

The following is a list of the birds I have seen around my house in the past ten years.

White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus*
 Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus*
 Blue Rock Pigeon *Columba livia*
 Spotted Dove *Streptopelia chinensis*
 Indian Hanging-Parrot *Loriculus vernalis*
 Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri*
 Plum-headed Parakeet *Psittacula cyanocephala*
 Brainfever Bird *Hierococcyx varius*
 Asian Koel *Eudynamis scolopacea*
 Greater Coucal *Centropus sinensis*
 Asian Palm-Swift *Cypsiurus balasiensis*
 House Swift *Apus affinis*
 Small Blue Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*
 White-breasted Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis*
 Small Bee-eater *Merops orientalis*
 Chestnut-headed Bee-eater *Merops leschenaulti*
 White-cheeked Barbet *Megalaima viridis*
 Coppersmith Barbet *Megalaima haemacephala*
 Small Yellow-naped Woodpecker *Picus chlorolophus*
 Lesser Golden-backed Woodpecker *Dinopium benghalense*
 Heart-spotted Woodpecker *Hemicircus canente*
 Indian Pitta *Pitta brachyura*
 Large Pied Wagtail *Motacilla maderaspatensis*
 Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*
 Large Cuckoo-Shrike *Coracina macei*
 Black-headed Cuckoo-Shrike *Coracina melanoptera*
 Small Minivet *Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*
 Scarlet Minivet *Pericrocotus flammeus*
 Ruby-throated Bulbul *Pycnonotus melanicterus gularis*
 Red-whiskered Bulbul *P. jocosus*
 Red-vented Bulbul *P. cafer*
 Yellow-browed Bulbul *Iole indica*
 Common Iora *Aegithina tiphia*

Jerdon's Chloropsis *Chloropsis cochinchinensis*
 Golden-fronted Chloropsis *Chloropsis aurifrons*
 Orange-headed Thrush *Zoothera citrina*
 Oriental Magpie-Robin *Copsychus saularis*
 Indian Robin *Saxicoloides fulicata*
 Spotted Babbler *Pellorneum ruficeps*
 Black-headed Babbler *Rhopocichla atriceps*
 Jungle Babbler *Turdoides striatus*
 Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius*
 Asian Paradise-Flycatcher *Terpsiphone paradisi*
 Black-naped Monarch-Flycatcher *Hypothymis azurea*

Tickell's Flowerpecker *Dicaeum erythrorhynchos*
 Purple Sunbird *Nectarinia asiatica*
 Loten's Sunbird *Nectarinia lotenia*
 Black-headed Munia *Lonchura malacca*
 Grey-headed Starling *Sturnus malabaricus*
 Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*
 Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*
 Black-headed Oriole *O. xanthornus*
 Black Drongo *Dicrurus microcercus*
 Ashy Drongo *D. leucophaeus*
 Greater Racket-tailed Drongo *D. paradiseus*
 Indian Treepie *Dendrocitta vagabunda*
 House Crow *Corvus splendens*
 Jungle Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos*

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Can we augment the Important Bird Area concept in India? The role of large landholdings outside Protected Areas

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Two crucial aspects to bird conservation are identifying areas that are important for birds and then protecting these areas from habitat destruction or other threats to wildlife. BirdLife International has made a promising start in finding key areas by coming up with criteria that can be used to identify Important Bird Areas (IBAs). A recent compendium of IBAs in India (Islam & Rahmani 2004), compiled by the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) through the Indian Bird Conservation Network (IBCN) highlights the utility of this approach.

Once important sites are identified, how should we go about protecting them? Some of these areas are already under nominal protection by the designated government agencies: the Forest Departments of various States. These areas stand notified as Protected Areas (PAs), such as Biosphere Reserves, Ramsar sites, National Parks, Tiger Reserves, Sanctuaries, and so on. If these wilderness entities were to be afforded the protection that their designated status prescribes, most of India's current biodiversity would be likely to survive in the long term.

Sadly, the reality is quite different. Today the entire network of PAs is under an unrelenting siege (political, administrative, socio-economic and societal), which constricts it increasingly by the day. Hardly a year passes without one or the other of these critical wildernesses being violated through their denotification as protected landscapes. Conservationists do protest, but are largely ignored by the State. Given this scenario, the IBA programme is a laudable concept, in that it shines the spotlight on areas important for bird

conservation, regardless of whether or not these areas are under legal protection. But highlighting valuable wilderness areas is only the first step: what should we do next?

One strategy to protect key areas is to purchase them outright. This option has been successfully pursued by BirdLife International's partner in the UK, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB). The RSPB purchases land where needed, and establishes a scientifically managed bird reserve under its own ownership. Where the looming extinction of a species is attributed basically to the loss of its habitat (e.g. Jerdon's Courser *Rhinoptilus bitorquatus*) and the fight for its survival has reached a critical juncture, the strategy of purchasing land would appear to be the only pragmatic course of action with high probability of success.

Regrettably, we in India have little chance of adopting this strategy. Wilderness areas in India usually fall under land classified by the government as agricultural, wasteland, or forest. The limit to private ownership of agricultural land under our laws is in the region of 20 ha, so there is little chance of acquiring a large, contiguous patch. Acquiring government "wasteland" or forest land is next to impossible. Furthermore, the demands on land for agricultural, industrial and urban needs are so extensive and growing by the day that altogether this strategy will find few enthusiasts. And lastly, it is a tall order indeed for the BNHS or any other Indian conservation organisation to be able to raise the funds for purchasing even one substantial area, say 1000 ha in extent, to provide space just for one species (like the

Jerdon's Courser) threatened with extinction by the loss of its habitat. So, we must look to other options.

Conservation outside Protected Areas

Today, with forest cover declining at alarming rates, our wildlife is being pushed to extreme limits of survival. This being so, we should press for the conservation of all remaining habitat that have the potential to support populations of wild species, whether or not these habitats are under the control of the Forest Department. I suggest that we should negotiate partnerships with establishments, public and private, that own vast real estate, which in many cases are already avian havens or have the potential to become so. Such areas are unlikely to hold much intact forest, but instead may contain woodland or other habitats, and still be valuable for conservation.

The kind of areas that come to mind are on the very extensive campuses that are under that control of large government establishments and private enterprises. Such areas exist in every biogeographic zone of India. Large wooded areas have become a common feature in the layout of the work places and living spaces of these organisations. Almost as a rule, these spaces are inviolate to trespass, with their perimeters being walled or fenced. Besides providing security to the inhabitants and equipment, these measures also ensure that the enclosed wooded areas are relatively undisturbed. In large part, these areas will not fit the criteria for inclusion as IBAs. Nevertheless, they are of potential importance for conservation (as I describe below), and the IBCN would do well to use

these as a second tier of areas (outside IBAs and outside PPAs) worth conserving for birds.

Some examples

A good example is the very large and excellent wilderness surrounding the Sriharikota missile launch establishment in Andhra Pradesh. Right now, BNHS researchers, Ranjit Manakadan and S. Sivakumar are working on a 3-year assignment to catalogue the rich biodiversity, including avifauna, of this island. Also on the east coast is the Indian Navy's training establishment at Chilika in Orissa. As an interesting aside let me recount that the BNHS had strongly opposed INS Chilika as the site was considered a critical wilderness area. The BNHS relented once an undertaking was given in Parliament that the wilderness safeguards stipulated by the late Salim Ali would be complied with. As a part of these safeguards the BNHS was to inspect the site annually to monitor their implementation. That wilderness within the perimeter of INS Chilika remains intact (a road signpost I saw in 1991 declared "Partridge crossing, drive slow") and its future well-being looks good. A further example is provided by the National Defence Academy, Khadakvasla (Pune district, Maharashtra), which had a "reserve" forest on its estate, later given the status of a sanctuary. Again, the BNHS and Salim Ali were closely associated with the development of this wilderness. How an Army cantonment can be made into stable bird holding and breeding areas is illustrated in Singh (2000).

Some well-known wooded areas under the Army's ownership are worth mentioning here. Lavkumar Khachar spent a few days in 1995 at an Army depot at Pulgaon (near Nagpur). This wooded area is close to 260 km² in extent. He had also evaluated another depot in north Sikkim as a potential home to the Kaleej Pheasant *Lophura leucomelanos*, Impeyan Monal *Lophophorus impejanus*, a *Tragopan* sp., and the red panda *Ailurus fulgens*. Erach Bharucha made several visits in 1993 to the Army depot at Dehu Road (Pune) and later, in 1998, to the artillery firing range at Deolali (Maharashtra); he found their wilderness potential to be high enough that he suggested they be declared wildlife sanctuaries. There is clear international precedent in using military land for conservation. For example, all firing ranges

of the armed forces in the USA double as wildlife refuges by congressional legislation. Camp Pembleton, the largest US combined forces' firing range, which is active every day of the year, is a sanctuary for about 90 prairie bison *Bison bison*.

Prakash Gole has assisted in improving the wilderness around the College of Military Engineering (CME), Kirkee (near Pune). I have first-hand knowledge of a few hundred hectares of tropical forest inside a walled enclosure (yes, forest inside a walled enclosure!) at Narangi, a military cantonment on the outskirts of Guwahati, Assam. In 1990-1994 it housed the largest heronry of the Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* that I had ever seen, and Lesser Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna javanica* bred there in the hundreds. Moreover, it is a promising home for the endangered Greater Adjutant-Stork *Leptoptilos dubius*, two pairs of which were found nesting in 1990-1991.

In Delhi, the cantonment on the Delhi Ridge has probably the single largest collection of Indian Peafowl *Pavo cristatus* in any city in the country (have I invited protests?). The national bird in the nation's capital: what could be more deserving of attention from the IBCN? Midway on the road from Delhi to Meerut is the Army's Equine Breeding Stud Farm at Babugarh, which teems with Peafowl and other birds, and its boundary is wire-fenced. I doubt if Lavkumar Khachar would easily forget an afternoon spent there in 1993-1994, driven in a gig harnessed to a handsome chestnut mare, with Peafowl continuously flying across its path.

There are several Border Security Force establishments across the country of similar merit. Not far from where I live, the Indian Explosives, Gomoh (Jharkhand) boasts of a large wilderness for which they had sought the status of a sanctuary; WWF-India's Eastern Region Office evaluated it in 1992-1993, but I am not aware of the outcome. The wooded areas of the Forest Research Institute, Dehra Dun are well known, and so are those of many an Indian Air Force base.

Wilderness areas are not under the exclusive control of government bodies, by any means. To mention one private enterprise, the Mann Tea Estate, Dharmsala (Himachal Pradesh), has been owned by one family for the last hundred years; they have let a third of the total area remain forested and preserved as best possible to this day. It is home to almost all bird species of the

Kangra Valley. In Mukteshwar (Uttaranchal) there is an ashram set amidst a large wilderness, which is nurtured by its rishi and is a home to the flourishing wildlife of the area. One of my several failures as a trustee of WWF-India was my inability to get the board to sanction or raise funds for the rishi to put up a stone enclosure to keep the animals from simply walking out and into the laps of poachers.

Conclusions and the way forward

These are a few examples of woodlands outside PAs that have immense conservation potential. I have focussed largely on land under the control of the armed forces because these are the areas I have become most familiar with over 40 years in the defence services. But the concept is certainly not limited to woodland or to military establishments. Artificially created water-bodies on the precincts of oil refineries at Mathura (Uttar Pradesh), and more recently, the refinery at Panipat (Haryana), have been or are being accorded "ecological park" status by their managements. The IBCN will discover a rich patchwork of suitable sites, with varying habitat, under both government and private control, and covering all biogeographic zones of the country. These areas should be evaluated for inclusion into a second tier of IBAs in India. To best protect bird life in India for the future, the IBCN must have some such strategy in addition to its usual IBA site selection criteria, devised with Indian conditions in mind. Such sites could be called "Special Bird Preserve" or "Bird Preserve". Though they may not have any legal protection, their security will be determined by the stewardship of the organisations on whose land they are established. This will be new ground for Indian conservationists, and the task of setting up these areas as sites for conservation will be hard to accomplish. But because when nothing is ventured, nothing is gained either, I feel that the time is right for a wide-ranging discussion on the utility and acceptability of this strategy for conservation outside traditional protected areas.

I would suggest that the following steps need be taken for this idea to proceed.

1. Take a closer look at existing information on non-PA sites under the control of public or private organisations. Detailed biodiversity reports already exist for several such areas, and should be in the libraries of

the BNHS or WWF-India. These include reports by Erach Bharucha on Army establishments around Pune and on the Field Firing Ranges at Deolali; by Prakash Gole on CME, Kirkee; by Lavkumar Khachar on the Army's establishments at Pulgaon and a few in North Sikkim. The BNHS has similar information on many estates of corporate houses such as that of Godrej at Vikhroli mangroves, Tata's (Telco) land near Pune, Indian Oil Corporation's refineries at Mathura and Panipat, and so on. The BNHS has a fair idea of the habitat status at Sriharikota, at several Indian Air Force facilities and in the Indian Navy's training establishment at Chilika. These reports need to be studied to see whether they support the ideas presented here.

2. If the conservation potential of these areas matches what I have claimed above, the search should be broadened. IBCN partners and other interested organisations and individuals should submit the names of sites they consider suitable. A preliminary evaluation of key areas could be carried out. This should include discussion with the management of these areas to identify opportunities, and to listen to their

suggestions. It will be particularly important to the success of such a scheme to design it in a way that maximises the cooperation of those who are in charge of these areas.

3. It is likely that we will need a way to confer some sort of recognition on these areas, perhaps by calling them "Special Sites of Conservation Interest" or "Special Bird Preserves"—basically, a way to generate a little publicity, and reward organisations for their conservation efforts. The management of the selected sites could be given "Conservation Stewardship Awards", for example.
4. We will have to decide on a set of criteria by which to judge an area's conservation value, and to decide whether it is worth pursuing for conservation goals. These criteria could include the size of the area, the intactness of habitat, the commitment of the management to some form of conservation, and the number and species of birds that use the area (including for nesting, roosting, and so on).
5. We also need a way to regularly monitor the sites, and to provide conservation advice and consultancy to the management of the sites. This

will also provide a mechanism to upgrade or downgrade sites accordingly (there could be different levels of conservation value, for example).

6. In carrying out these steps, all interested individuals should be encouraged to contribute to the discussion and implementation of these ideas, and a nationwide consultation is desirable. In this, the lead should be taken by organisations like the BNHS, with discussion and debate being facilitated by publications like *Indian Birds*.

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Lt. General Baljit Singh has been interested in nature conservation for the past 50 years and has been a Trustee of WWF-India and a member of the advisory committee at BNHS. He was instrumental in getting officers of the Indian Army actively involved in nature conservation.

Recoveries from the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* (1964) – 9

Zafar Futehally

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In 1963 the *Newsletter* was sent to 415 people though the total subscribers were only 165. The complementary copies must have helped to create a growing interest in birdwatching. The total expenses for the year amounted to Rs 2,888/-, which was underwritten by a business house. The annual subscription remained at Rs 5/-.

In the January 1964 issue there is a fine article by Horace Alexander, the internationally acclaimed Quaker, a great supporter of Mahatma Gandhi as well as a keen ornithologist and a friend of Salim Ali. On his return to Delhi on 25.x.1963 he said, "We had a brief outing with General Harold Williams. Mrs. (Usha) Ganguly had advised us that we might do well to visit the River Jamuna (= Yamuna) above Delhi, near the new bridge. So thither we went. Before we even reached the river, we found a vast concourse of Terns beating up and down over the dirty brook that flows past the

ancient mosque just before Timapur. It was impossible to estimate exact numbers, especially as the population was constantly changing. But as we stood beside the stream, with the birds flying to and fro within a few yards, I concluded that three hundred would not have been an over estimate. The great majority was River Terns, but one Gullbilled Tern came close past, already in winter plumage with almost white head, and at least two much smaller Whiskered Terns, one of them still showing slight flakings of its dark breast plumage. After a time a single Brownheaded Gull appeared in the throng. Perhaps it had that moment arrived from further north."

Brother Navarro SJ of St. Xavier's High School, Bombay, during his visit to Mussoorie, was delighted with the sight of White-capped and Plumbeous Redstarts, and forktails; but it was the Brown Dipper which thrilled him. "It was a most amusing

sight to see the ease with which they used to dip into the stream. Sometimes it looked as if by accident the dipper had slipped from the boulder and fallen into the water. Their entrance into the water was effortless and certainly there was not a single time when the act of submerging could be called a dive. The legs were always first when touching the water and the rest of their bodies followed without a change in this position. The dipper appears at the surface of the water as easily as it submerges and then jumps to the boulder. This operation is performed so neatly that it looks as if the dipper springs from the bottom of the stream to the top of the boulders in a single continuous action as if there were no water at all. This is a different way from that of the divers and other aquatic birds which rise from the surface of the water."

Another note by Br. Navarro was about "Round the Clock Vigil at a Coral Tree". This

tree was in the compound of the school in crowded Bombay, and yet 22 species were recorded.

In light of the remarkable growth in the number of birders in Gujarat in recent years, this note sent by K.S. Lavkumar, then at Rajkumar College, Rajkot is of some interest. He wrote, "You will be gratified to read that the cautious beginning of a Birdwatchers' Group we had formed here has been successful and our second meeting saw 15 people, all genuinely keen. We are all going out to see duck on 29th December morning. I have to discuss the future of this little group and give you my report which I should have done during the Annual General Meeting."

The material chosen by birds for nest making is of some significance, but if S.V. Nilakanta is right the birds also have fore knowledge of how the leaf will eventually shape. The Tailor Bird *Orthotomus sutorius*, as an example, uses a leaf of the Indian almond tree *Terminalia catappa*, only at a particular period during the growth of the leaf. He said, "The bird had chosen a leaf which: a) Was tender enough for the edges to be drawn together and stitched, b) Had grown to full area, c) Could be predicted to grow to the correct pendant position in a given time, d) Could become less conspicuous with the growth of additional leaves and, e) Could be guaranteed to remain strong and firm till nesting was completed." Quite remarkable, this knowledge, of the tree's phenology.

He concluded by reporting that, "on 9th February the fledglings had left the nest and were perching on various other trees and bushes in the compound."

Salim was fortunate in finding several keen birders to assist him in his ringing operations. One such was Julian P. Donahue who arrived in February 1964. He remained devoted to Salim and was of great help in the ringing and migration studies. "I wish to specially thank Dr. Ali for introducing me to several 'life listers' at the Sanctuary, including Marshall's Iora and the Spotted Grey Creeper." He produced a carefully researched list of 163 species of birds seen during that period in Bharatpur.

Gift Siromoney of the Madras Christian College participated in one of the bird ringing camps in the Rann of Kutch. He was an exceptionally keen naturalist, and it is a tragedy that he died so young... I reproduce his note on the migration of butterflies, which appeared in the March 1964 issue of the *Newsletter*.

A plea for the study of migration of butterflies

There was an interesting report by Mrs. Ganguli in the *Newsletter* (October 1963) about bulbuls in Delhi feeding their young ones with certain common butterflies, with wings and all. There have been reports of butterflies being eaten by birds such as bee-eaters and drongos (Wynter-Blyth, *Butterflies of the Indian region*: 52). The fact that the bulbuls were feeding their young ones with the common species like the Plain Tiger or the Danaid Eggfly shows that it is not an accident. It is very likely that butterflies form a regular part of the diet of the young ones, if not the adult birds. Mrs. Ganguli's report is also interesting from the fact that the Plain Tiger is commonly believed to be a species 'distasteful' to its predators and the Danaid Eggfly is said to get protection from the predators because of its striking resemblance to the former species. If the bulbul had taken the plain tiger then the bulbul did not mind the taste or on the other hand, if it had been the Danaid Eggfly that was caught, the bulbul had recognized the Eggfly in spite of the mimicry!

Several species of birds have been observed to eat butterflies in migration (C.B. Williams, *Insect migration*: 177-178) and we know that the availability of food, plays an important factor in the migration of birds. Very little is known about the migration of insects in India and the study of migration of marked butterflies may prove to be a useful venture, which amateur naturalists can easily undertake.

The author has recently started marking butterflies with paper labels, each label has a registration number and the legend 'Inform Christian College, Madras-45' and a record is kept with the date of marking and the name of the species for each marked individual with its registration number. We adopt the method (Williams, *Insect migration*: 201) of folding the paper and sticking the label soaked in 'quikfix'. The adhesive soaks through the wing when

some pressure is applied and the label is waterproof. The author has chosen two main species, namely the Blue Tiger (*Danaeus lemnice*) and the Common Indian Crow (*Euploea core*), which are known to be migratory (R. Reuben, *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* 58: 815). These butterflies are tough and easy to catch as they congregate on *Crotalaria* plants and settle down on flowers.

In other parts of the world marked butterflies have been recovered even at a distance of 850 miles from the place of marking and most butterflies have a life span of several months. Readers of the *Newsletter* are asked to look for marked butterflies and to start projects of their own. The author shall be equally grateful for bird notes connection with butterflies.

Gift Siromoney, Madras Christian College, Madras

Not many police officers these days indulge in birdwatching, but Pratap Singh, SDO of Morena district, M.P., found time to do so in that dacoit-infested district. On 19.x.1963 he observed a bird that intrigued him and he thought it was a Striolated Bunting *Emberiza striolata*. But on 2.iv.1964 he was able to see the bird from just 1 m and was sure that it was a Wryneck *Jynx torquilla* when it "thrust forth a black tongue and started pecking ants from the ground."

Padmashri Zafar Futehally is the founder-editor of *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* which he edited for 40 years. He is the recipient of several national and international awards in the field of wildlife conservation including Order of the Golden Ark (1981) and the Salim Ali International Award for Nature Conservation (1997). He is editor emeritus of *Indian Birds*.

First South Indian Bird Watcher's Fair

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When I met Joe Homan¹, I was surprised to see an older man than I was expecting. It is truly remarkable that a person who came to India forty years ago – ventured into rural, agrarian industries like brick-making, poultry and farming, founded the Boys Town Society and, starting in Madurai (Tamil Nadu), successfully established more than a dozen boys towns in that state – would have the time, at his present age, to become the Honorary Secretary of The Palani Hills Bird Watcher's Society and, to top it, organise a bird fair as its first major project! At the heart of that final decision was a simple secret, which Joe revealed on the drive back to his lovely home, Lakeside Guesthouse, at the end of the Fair. He was passionate about birds since he could remember!

Joe visited the Italian Bird Fair (www.podeltabirdfair.it) (29.iv-2.v.2004) and on returning discussed with friends and colleagues, including Dr S. Balachandran of the Bombay Natural History Society (in August 2004), the feasibility of a similar event in south India. They decided to work under a formal organisation that would take the responsibility of organising a bird fair. The Palani Hills Bird Watcher's Society was registered on 16.iii.2005 with Dr A. David Ravindran, Reader, Dept., of Biology at Gandhigram Rural Institute – Deemed University (GRI), Dindigul district, Tamil Nadu, as its founding President and Joe its founding Secretary. The First South Indian Bird Watcher's Fair was organised from 3-5.ii.2006 at GRI. Sri S. Murugaiah, Collector, Dindigul district, inaugurated the Fair, stating that if held regularly, it would enhance the enormous tourism potential of this wonderful piece of the spectacular Western Ghats. S. Theodore Baskaran, special invitee, addressed the gathering on the need for Indian society's active involvement with environmental issues and lamented the disuse of classical Tamil nomenclature for the natural world. Dr Thilagavathy Daniel, Professor and Head of Dept., of Biology, who graced the occasion, invited participants to send papers that she would get translated into Tamil and distributed to various colleges.

The primary aim of the Fair was to popularise birds among students (school and college), the future guardians of the environment, and did it succeed in doing that! Staff and students from 24 colleges and 35 higher secondary schools attended, some coming even from Kodaikanal (45 students) and Chennai (40). In all, at least 1,500 people visited the Fair, if not more. Several activities kept them interested, enthralled, aghast and busy, all by turns. There were more than 20 stalls put up to display and inform of varied organisations and their work. There were eats and items made in cottage industry (nest boxes, bird feeders, wooden bird models, organic foods, ayurvedic remedies, books on nature, glass-paintings of birds, etc). A photographic competition was organised and the entries displayed. The BNHS had a stall as did the Madras naturalists' Society. The Institute of Bird Studies & Natural History's 'Home study course in ornithology' and New Ornithology Foundation's *Indian Birds* shared a stall. Visiting school children were treated to at least two wildlife films simultaneously to accommodate a larger audience. All this activity will no doubt, result in several bird clubs sprouting in schools and many a young aspiring birder will look at neighbourhood birds with renewed interest.

Several prominent birdwatchers / ornithologists of south India were invited / participated in this event. Among them was Dr S. Subramanya, who gave a presentation on the heronries of Tamil Nadu; Dr V. Santharam (introduced the home study course in ornithology and gave an audio-visual talk on woodpeckers of south India); Dr S. Balachandran (demonstrated mist-netting and bird-ringing to an excited ring of kids); L. Shyamal (gave a presentation on documented ornithology in India and its future using computer programmes like his BirdSpot, for recording birding data); Dr Somasundaram (spoke on the avifauna of the Palani Hills); D. Rajkumar (spoke on Bandipur National Park and on south Indian snakes), Dr A. Relton (organised the photographic competition and spoke to the kids), K.V. Sudhakar (Hon. Treasurer of

Madras Naturalists' Society, spoke on his trip to the Kumaon); Dr P. Pramod (Education Officer at SACON, spoke to children on birds of the Western Ghats); S. Theodore Baskaran (author, spoke on classical Tamil nomenclature for nature). Dr Badhri Narayanan (Ophthalmologist!), Kumaran Sathasivam, and Dr Ambudoss, all from Madurai, supported the Bird Fair in several ways.

There were some nice birdwatching outings with colleagues at Lakeside Guesthouse, along the foot of the Lower Palani hills, on the northern shore of Kamraj Dam, where the haunting calls of Stork-billed Kingfishers *Pelargopsis capensis*, which I heard for the first time, rippled ceaselessly across the waters every morning. Rolling hills, fields, water, birds, and great birding company are incomparable ingredients of bliss. One day someone observed that this was good country for Black Eagles *Ictinaetus malayensis* and the next morning, as if it had been whistled up, there was one sailing against the shoulder of the hill. One evening, walking along the dirt road from Lakeside, we approached an ancient banyan tree, with aerial roots firmly entrenched in the ground at various places and the omnipresent village deity underneath. Dusk was on its way and Santharam, shushing everyone, said he'd heard a Blue-throated Flycatcher *Cyornis rubeculoides*. In the back and forth of its energetic whirring flight and that loud electric spark call, all of us watched, enchanted by the orange blush on its chest, which stopped short of the blue throat. A Paradise Flycatcher *Terpsiphone paradisi* pranced in the numberless shadows and a Brown Flycatcher *Muscicapa dauurica* sprang momentarily onto an overhead wire. No one spoke out loud what must have been ringing in every heart. Those bright-eyed youngsters at the Fair have an amazing, entirely new world awaiting them!

¹ For more information visit www.joehoman.org.uk.

Correspondence

Territoriality tiff between an Indian Courser and a Fan-throated Lizard

We were at Pandavleni grasslands, on the Mumbai-Nashik highway (Maharashtra, India), one morning in April 2005 (10:30hrs), at the height of the fan-throated lizards' *Sitana ponticeriana* breeding season. Displaying lizards occupied prominent places, like the tops of termite mounds, and other high projecting mounds of earth. On one such vantage point, an Indian Courser *Cursorius coromandelicus* was standing and taking in the scenery. All of a sudden, from the front came a fan-throated lizard, displaying his brilliant blue fan, which was fully outstretched. The startled courser immediately withdrew, walking away from the spot. The lizard chased it for a few feet, simultaneously displaying, and only when it was convinced that the courser was well out of its way did it proceed to the successfully claimed vantage point, and started to display!

Bishwarup Raha¹, Gowri Mallapur & N. Bhure

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Face to face with "Grandala" – A Himalayan experience

Summer months are for treks in high altitudes. This year Nature Club Surat took a batch of 45 trekkers to the slopes of the Himalaya. The renowned naturalist Mr Lavkumar Khacher organized the camp. On 16.v.2005, we were on the trek to 'Bhruhu Lake' situated at an altitude of 4,270 m. As the snow started melting on the normal trekking route, the guide decided to take us by different route. The climb was steeper than the normal route. After 3,350 m the snow had to be cut into steps before we could climb. It was a lot of manual work for the two local guides.

The weather changed when we neared 4,100 m, so we had to pull back. It was already 12:00 hrs and low clouds had gathered. The locals, who best judge such situations, suggested we return. We were all very disappointed, but retreated. All of a sudden, from nowhere, many bluish-violet coloured, bulbul sized birds, started flying past us. On a closer look we found that among them were brown birds as well. We thought of all the blue coloured birds that we knew, but none resembled these. So we decided to consult Mr Khacher.

At the base camp we immediately reported our sighting to Mr Khacher. He was silent

for some time then shot a series of questions at us. His expression showed that he was happy with our answers and then he flashed his rare broad smile. He told us that what we had seen was a very high altitude bird that must have come down because of bad weather. The bird's name was Grandala *Grandala coelicolor*. He then told us about the bird, its habitat and the difficulty in spotting it. He decided to name the new route after the bird, making our initial disappointment disappear.

Nirmala Chathoth
Nature Club Surat

Painted Sandgrouse at Kevadia colony, Gujarat

On 7.viii.2005, some friends and I visited Sardar Sarovar dam at Kevadia colony, in Narmada district, Gujarat. After lunch, near the back-waters of the lake, Ms. Lajwanti Notani, spotted a bird on the ground and immediately called me. It took me about 10 minutes to spot the bird as it was well camouflaged. Even after being spotting, it was difficult to locate again when we changed the binoculars.

The color of the bird merged marvelously with the dry grass and yellow-gray stones. A beautiful golden yellow with black bars on the head and body, neck and throat without bars and a bright saffron beak—it was none other than a Painted Sandgrouse *Pterocles indicus*. The bird sat peacefully and we had a good view through the binoculars for well over 30 minutes. Thereafter, we gradually moved nearer, and as we reached within 3 m, it took off. In flight, we were able to view it easily with the naked eye.

As per Kazmierczak (*A field guide to the birds of India*, 2000), the bird was formerly found almost all over India but is now rare and no recent records are available. In light of which, we feel that this is an important record for Gujarat.

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Birding in Kadapa district, Andhra Pradesh

I had occasion recently to indulge in a spot of birding in the Kadapa district [earlier Cuddapah] of Andhra Pradesh. This was on the outskirts of a village called Kalluru (Prodattur mandal). On 14.i.2006 at approximately 17:00 hrs I had a very enjoyable session of which I would

particularly like to report two sightings. The first was of Blue-throated Flycatchers *Cynornis rubeculoides*, of which I saw four numbers and the other of a Eurasian Blackbird *Turdus merula*.

I almost thought I was seeing the more familiar, around these parts, Tickell's Blue-flycatcher *Cyornis tickelliae* till I saw the distinct dark throat. It was greatly satisfying to have it confirmed that the Blue-throated Flycatcher is indeed a winter visitor to these parts (Rasmussen & Anderton. 2005. *Birds of South India. The Ripley guide*).

The other exciting find that day was the Eurasian Blackbird. I was unfamiliar with this bird. But because of its distinct pale yellow patch around the eye and pale beak I arrived at it through a process of elimination.

Apart from these birds I saw large numbers of Wire-tailed Swallows *Hirundo smithii* and Common Swallows *H. rustica* over fields, several Eurasian Collared-Doves *Streptopelia decaocto*, a Brahminy Starling *Sturnus pagodarum*, Bay-backed Shrikes *Lanius vittatus*, a Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*, a Common Hoopoe *Upupa epops* and dozens of raucous Rose-ringed Parakeets *Psittacula krameri* among several other staple birds.

Also happy to report abundant numbers of House Sparrows *Passer domesticus*!

Shweta Vyas
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Bouquets and brickbats

I am writing to you from my Himalayan hideout some distance from Manali, Himachal Pradesh. The weather is raw outside and snow is falling on the surrounding mountains. The conditions are wonderful to be indoors, reading and writing, i.e. if there is a warm fire or a good electric heater.

I have been critically going over every page of *Indian Birds* volume 1 number 2 (March-April 2005) and must congratulate you on the excellent outlay – so reader friendly and, what tends to be taken for granted, the editing. We all need to be grateful to you.

Sachin Jaltare's Shovellers [*Anas clypeata*] on the cover got me confused – the beaks are too scaup-like. He needs to improve on his perspectives – the three birds in the background are too large.

Lt. Gen. Baljit Singh's photographs of the chat [*Oenanthe xanthopyrma*] are great. I have seen this chat near Hingolghadh

[Gujarat], another on the great escarpment overlooking the Great Rann of Kachchh and near Delhi among the huge boulders that were so characteristic of the country around the Qutab Minar when I was a student in Delhi in the 1940s-1950s. This was after *Birds of Delhi and district* was brought out in 1950. The above list has one record by a Holmer, "...on site of New Delhi c. 1920".

Lavkumar Khacher
Hinglaj Baug, Vashishta, Manali, H.P.
28.xi.2005

A bird hospital at Cambay in Gujarat

I came across this extract from an Italian traveller's visit to Cambay (= Khambhat, Gujarat) in the 17th Century and thought it might interest you.

"Pietro della Valle (1586-1652): Italian traveller. He sailed from Venice in 1614, spent a year in Constantinople, then travelled to Egypt, the Holy Land, Arabia, Persia and India, returning to Italy in 1626.

"The people of *Cambaia* are most part Gentiles; and here, more than elsewhere,

their vain superstitions are observed with rigour. Wherefore we, who came particularly to see these things the same day of our arrival, after we had din'd and rested a while, caus'd ourselves to be conducted to see a famous Hospital of Birds of all sorts, which for being sick, lame, depriv'd of their mates, or otherwise needing food and care of them are tended there with diligence; as also the men who take care of them are maintain'd by the publick alms; the Indian Gentiles, who, with *Pythagoras* and other ancient Egyptians (the first Authors of this opinion according to *Herodotus*) believe in the Transmigration of Souls, not onely from Man to Man, but also from Man to brute beast, conceiving it no less a work of Charity to do good to beasts than to Man. The House of this Hospital is small, a little room sufficing for many Birds: yet I saw if full of Birds of all sorts which need tendance, as Cocks, Hens, Pigeons, Peacocks, Ducks and small Birds, which during their being lame, or sick, or mateless, are kept here, but being recover'd and in good plight, if they be wild

they are let go at liberty: if domestick they are given to some pious person who keeps them in his House. The most curious thing I saw in this place were certain little Mice, who being found orphans without Sire or Dam to tend them, were put into this Hospital, and a venerable Old Man with a white Beard, keeping them in a box amongst Cotton, very diligently tended them with his spectacles on his nose, giving them milk to eat with a bird's feather, because they were so little that as yet they could eat nothing else, and, as he told us, he intended when they were grown up to let them go free whither they pleased."

[*A book of travellers' tales*. Assembled by Eric Newby. London: The Folio Society. 2005: 282-283.]

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Editorial

At the commencement of this second volume of *Indian Birds*, I have the pleasant task of announcing the winner of the award for best article, given by Padmashri Zafar Futehally, in memory of his daughter, Shama Futehally. You will recall that an award of Rs 5,000/- was announced in 2004, in the last issue of *Newsletter for Ornithologists* (p. 92). The editors agree that this award be presented to the authors of 'Some significant records of birds from the central Indian highlands of Madhya Pradesh' – and congratulate R. Jayapal, Qamar Qureshi and Ravi Chellam for their well-researched, readable paper, which appeared in the September-October 2005 issue of *Indian Birds*.

In February 2005 I attended a public hearing of the Central Empowered Committee (CEC) in Hyderabad, where two public interest litigations (PIL), one on the

fate of a critically endangered endemic species, the Jerdon's Courser *Rhinoptilus bitorquatus* and another on that of an entire habitat, the vast complex of wetlands known as Kolleru Lake, which is also a sanctuary declared under the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972, were being argued. It was truly gratifying to see the way the CEC works to safeguard our environment. While both cases are still in progress, they move inexorably towards either the most judicious alternative available, in the case of Jerdon's Courser, or outright eviction of land-grabbers and restoration of habitat, in the case of Kolleru Lake. I am happy to report that at least in Kolleru, work is well underway towards implementing the strict directions of the CEC. The parties that have filed PILs are to be heartily congratulated, though celebrations cannot really commence till the destructive activities are

stopped altogether and the lake is restored to its former glory. My only fear is that, given human nature and enough time, there might be a detrimental reversal of affairs after a few years. Though NGOs act as watchdogs, it would perhaps be proper to institutionalise periodical reports on ground realities, from the local administration, say District Collectors, to the honourable courts and to make such authorities responsible for preventing such reversals.

Several of you would have received reminders to renew your subscriptions. If you haven't already sent in your cheques, please do so now and continue to receive *Indian Birds*.

An index for volume 1 of *Indian Birds* is enclosed with this copy.

- Aasheesh Pittie

Back cover (clockwise from top): Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus* (Photo: J. P. Rao), Yellow-breasted Greenfinch *Carduelis spinoides*, Rufous Sibia *Heterophasia capistrata*, Yellow-naped Yuhina *Yuhina flavicollis* (Photos: Arun P. Singh).



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