with them. A solitary Pond Heron *Ardeola grayii* came up and established itself aloofly on a patch of mud where it could feed undisturbed. A Pariah Kite *Milvus migrans* resting on a pylon called its usual shrill cry *cheel*, from which it gets its Indian name. So in the brief space of an hour I had seen over thirty species in this apparently uninteresting area. There must be, of course, many other species here as well, and I will pursue them on another Sunday.

Birdwatchers' Field Club outing—*Shama Futehally*

On Sunday 19th February, the Club met, not as it usually does at Tulsi, but at Andheri: breakfast at our house, and then a walk through the 'meadows' behind the house to Juhu. Although the area is being rapidly built up, on this trip we saw enough that was new and interesting to make it a memorable walk.

First, Rosy Pastors: two or three of them feeding off a blossoming silk cotton tree. We got a very good view of these, they did not fly off for a long time. Then there were the wagtails, a couple of white wagtails, and some Eastern Grey. There were plenty of European swallows. On the side of the road we were following, I saw one or two Tree Pipits, merging beautifully with the background, and a group of five or six Ring Plovers was startled into flight. There were many flocks of ordinary sparrows but one of them proved to consist in part of Brown Munias as well, established on barbed wire fences, taking off frequently to indulge in a short circular flight, returning to the identical spot again and again. Another discovery was one rather unusual bird, the Desert Wheatear. As far as I remember, this was perched on a stone wall and then on a boulder. There were two of them, some distance from each other. A thrilling new species, and if we had seen nothing else, they would have made the day.

Another lovely bird we saw was the Collared Bush Chat on a fence, one single male with a bright rose-orange breast, black head and back and white patches on the neck. We had a long and excellent view of this bird rummaging among the dust for food.

Later we settled round a creek with a few small islets, reputed to be covered over completely with migrant birds sometimes; but now had only a few stray Sandpipers, one Spotted; on Little Egret, and a couple of Common Kingfishers. Then we walked along beside the creek on a dirt track, thick mangrove vegetation at the side and there were Blyth's Reed Warblers by the dozen in the bushes. Incidentally, there was a train of camel-wallahs coming along and I had a jerky ride along the road. Once we were arrested by a loud and harsh *chuk-chuk* from the mangrove, punctuated by scuffling and the sound of creaking twigs. Dr. Salim Ali identified this as a Large Reed Warbler, uncommon in the area. But the bird, did not respond to our various eager claps and hisses, and remained hidden.

That makes about fifteen inspiring species, a revealing total for this otherwise dull and stony stretch of ground.

A flight down memory lane—2: Photographing birds in the Nineteen-forties

Lavkumar Khachar

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Some months ago, one of my former pupils handed me a laptop and said, "You write so much, perhaps this will help". It took me some time to learn how to operate the machine and here too another former pupil came to my aide. Heading a large education consortium, he had computer instructors who would come over after school and guide me through the basics. Fortunately I had taught myself typing years ago and so, once I learnt how to open the systems, I took to the marvelous invention like a duckling would to water. It was just a matter of time before I got onto the Internet and what a revelation it was! At every stage, Aasheesh helped me tide over difficulties by long-range tutoring from Hyderabad.

It was through *Indian Birds* that I discovered websites and bird groups on the Internet and very tentatively opened the one carrying photographs by the Delhi group. Since, during my student days I had been a very active and rather precocious young member of the Delhi Bird Watchers' Society, I asked to be taken on the group. I hoped to go out bird watching should I have a layover at Delhi during my seasonal spring and autumn migration between Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh. I never expected to see the daily flow of messages into my mailbox. It was a delight to realize how many young people were going out bird watching and taking photographs. Some of the pictures were excellent. Suddenly, there was a personal message for me from among the crowd.

Rajesh Shah, a youngster I had encouraged in Ahmedabad was posting some delightful photographs and suggested I join the group in Bangalore where he had shifted. From Bangalore there came an added deluge of messages and an invitation to join the Tamil group. Each time I open the computer now, there is mail awaiting me that would be worthy of some up and coming executive! With so many people active, I wonder why we cannot vie with the RSPB of Britain with its million-odd members. But here I digress. Seeing this deluge of photographs on almost a daily basis, I could not but recollect my own young days when the scenario was so very different.

My very first attempt at bird photography was with a Kodak box camera. It was in March 1945, or possibly 1946, I had been reading the then leading bird photographer, Erik

Hosking's books and I decided to try my hand at what seemed a delightful pastime. I had noted a pair of Indian Robins *Saxicoloides fulicata* continually flying to and fro to a roadside stump, the cock frequently perching, as Indian Robin males do, on top of the stump. The hen, I saw, was carrying straws to the base of the stump where I found a neat cup of rootlets being lined by the grass. I stood the camera tripod—in those far off days tripods were quite shaky, spidery-legged contraptions—some eight feet from the stump. There was no way I could photograph the nest and decided to snap the cock bird as he came and postured atop the stump. My camera could not focus close up at distances less than eight feet and so, when the birds showed no concern for the spindly contraption, I moved it to that distance; *measuring the distance by a tape*! The viewfinder was no help in confirming whether the focus was right, and in any case, in fixed focus cameras of the day there was no adjusting the focus which was fixed between the nearest and infinity.

Clement Francis

Male Small Minivet *Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*

The birds had shown no undue nervousness at my moving about in the vicinity, nor had they been concerned about the tripod. It was when I placed the camera on top that there was a little agitation, but its presence made the male come more frequently to perch on the stump and 'swear' at the camera—all to my advantage. It was then that I realized I had a problem on my hands; while the camera elicited swearing, the birds just refused to come with me standing so close. How was I to snap the angry bird? Next morning, I took a long string and attached it to the lever. Yes, half a century ago, cameras did not have buttons to release shutters—they had levers. On the first try, the entire contraption toppled over! It can be imagined what a commotion it caused and all the little birds in the vicinity came to have a look at what was troubling the robins. But, when they found no snake of monitor lizard around, they went their different ways and I stood the tripod up, wiped the dust from the lens. This time I widened the spindly legs of the tripod and placed one towards me—the direction of the pull. I got my picture and the robin showed no alarm at the click of the shutter. The problem was that I had to go to advance the film and cock the shutter each time I wished to make another exposure. I was terribly proud of my photographs that showed the bird, a trifle larger than a speck, yet easily recognizable with the tail cocked and the white shoulder patch clearly visible.

At the same time, an artist had been commissioned to make paintings of the Jasdan countryside. He was in Jasdan to take photographs from which to later paint in Bombay (now Mumbai). He was a pleasant young man who, seeing my enthusiasm, showed me his camera. It was one of the folding varieties, which had adjustable speeds and apertures, but the focusing was not linked to the viewfinder. Like my box camera, the distance had to be guessed for closer subjects, but it did have the advantage of being able to extend the focal length and so there was considerable depth of field. For me, all this talk of opening or closing the aperture and the complementary adjusting of the shutter speed was as confusing as the formulae explaining Einstein's concepts of space and light and the curvature of the Universe! To simplify matters, he closed down the aperture and fixed the shutter speed and told me to take the photograph in bright sunlight being sure to measure the distance for closer objects. The next morning my cousin, the late Shivrajkumar Khachar, and I drove off to Hingol Gadh where we knew sandgrouse came to drink in the morning. I lay down a few feet from the water's edge anticipating where the birds would alight before going for their drink; Shivrajkumar then buried me under grass and thorn on our understanding that I would be fully camouflaged from above (the Second World War was fresh in our memories and so we were quite well versed in war strategies) and I was to click the shutter as soon as the bird / s landed. It never quite occurred to either of us that there was a wide open stretch of water front and the birds need not land obligingly where I was focused, and this is precisely what they started doing. There were scores of pairs to my left and to my right. The hard rock began hurting my elbows, which held up the camera and the thorns and grass spikes made their presence felt; the sun was growing hot. Just as most of the birds lifted, a pair of late comers landed right in front of me, I clicked. On developing the film, we were thrilled that the shot was perfect! Even the glint in the eye of each startled bird was sharp.

Subsequently I acquired a Rolliecord and fabricated a cloth hide, which I often smothered in grass and brushwood to beguile the birds, and spent hours sitting over incubating birds, and birds feeding their fledglings. With pocket money I bought light meters and yellow filters, and of course books on photography. Late Dharmakumarsinhji used to visit us regularly at Jasdan and seeing our boyish enthusiasm, presented us, Shivrajkumar and me, a teak hide! It had openings on every side with sliding covers and a roof that

opened like the hatch of a tank's turret. In fact, it looked like a small replica of a "pillbox" and was coloured khaki similar to the clothing shikaris of the times were expected to wear. It certainly stood out like a sore thumb when it was placed in open spaces where many of the ground nesting birds preferred to site their nests, but I had learnt well from what I had read and the hide, initially placed far away, was slowly brought forward till at times I was barely three feet from my subject—the ideal distance for my camera to give me a large image of the bird. To photograph birds nesting in shrubs and trees, I now started constructing a scaffold and placing a canvas hide on top. The teak one was too heavy to lift.

The "pillbox" was first used on River *Sterna aurantia* and Black-bellied *S. acuticauda* Terns nesting on a small island in Jasdan Lake. The photographs were outstanding in clarity and when I attempted near life size enlargements, I began understanding film grain and speed. On the same island was a pair of Little Ringed Plovers *Charadrius dubius* with eggs and I spent several of the most delightful days of my life observing these attractive little birds. Rapidly, my photo album began to grow: Red-wattled *Vanellus indicus* and Yellow-wattled *V. malabaricus* Lapwings, Stone-Curlew *Burhinus oedicnemus*, and Great Stone-Plover *Esacus recurvirostris*. Shivrajkumar and I had a very interesting experience with a Yellow-wattled Lapwing, which a farmer, ploughing his field, had drawn our attention to. Having noticed the incubating bird, he steered his bullocks so as not to trample the sitting bird and in turn, the bird had accepted him and his animals as part of the surroundings! So confiding was the bird that we could stroke her and even very gently pass fingers under her to lift her up! But, as soon as her feet left the ground, she would get alarmed and flutter away a couple of feet and then rush back to settle onto the eggs. I attached a macro lens to the camera and took photographs from a few inches—just her head filling the entire screen. We then placed the hide, planning to take photographs of the parents changing incubation duty and, later seeing the eggs hatch. But as soon as I got in and my companion left, the bird, so extremely confiding, left the eggs and would not return. As soon as my companion came back to release me from the "pillbox" (it was impossible to get in and out of the sturdy hide without outside assistance), the bird immediately returned and settled on her eggs!

From December 1945 to 1953 photography had to be done during vacations since I was at school and later university. However the vacations conveniently coincided with the breeding season of a large majority of our birds: June and July and a fortnight's break in September / October. Colour film appeared in the market in the 1950s and I started taking photographs of the many brightly coloured birds found in our family forest of Motisari of Hingol Gadh, spending hours photographing Small *Pericrocotus cinnamomeus* and White-bellied *P. erythropygius* Minivets, Marshall's Ioras *Aegithina nigrolutea*, Yellow-eyed Babblers *Chrysomma sinense*, Redvented Bulbuls *Pycnonotus cafer* and Rufous-backed Shrikes *Lanius schach*.

Shivrajkumar and I were blissfully unaware that we were extremely fortunate and privileged in getting such opportunities for photographing birds in the Subcontinent. Others of our age and equally privileged spent their time shooting. It never occurred to either one of us to write detailed accounts of our experiences even after two of my write-ups on the birdwatching trek into Garhwal and Tibet in1954 had been accepted for the *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society*. In January 1956 Dharmakumarsinhji was appointed the first Chief Wildlife Warden of Maharashtra. During his tour of the state, he visited the Oyster Rock lighthouse off Karwar on the Arabian Sea coast north of Goa. Here he, the keen sportsman with an eye for raptors, noticed that a pair of White-bellied Seas-Eagles *Haliaeetus leucogaster* had newly hatched eaglets on a stack, out at sea, to the west of the lighthouse island. He press ganged me into going and even loaned me a camera with a telephoto lens. The photographs and the account of my experience with the grand eagles were also published in the *Journal*. Fortunately too, some of my photographs were published in *Sixty Indian birds*, a book Dharmakumarsinhji and I co-authored. Unfortunately, the rest of the black and white photographs faded and the colour slides discoloured. Thanks to sheer negligence, I do not possess any of the negatives. A most wonderful period of my life is but a memory.

Clement Francis

Female Indian Robin with nesting material *Saxicoloides fulicata*

Time is an unkind master. It throws up opportunities, if taken we are richer, but if neglected, the opportunity lapses. In my case, I could not

continue my passion for photography as a hobby because of the accelerating cost of films, their processing and printing. Also, camera equipment became prohibitively expensive unless one made photography an occupation. More and more people started using long focal length lenses and rightly too since the traditional method of putting up hides in forest country became increasingly difficult considering all the hassles of getting official permissions. Retaining field staff to locate nests and construct hides became a thing of the feudal past. As a conservationist, I soon felt that photographing birds at nests added to the danger of their nests getting attention of predators being drawn to them thus adding to the already many odds stacked against them. It is years now that I have followed a bird carrying food for its fledglings.

When the first digital cameras appeared, silver pieces, small enough to be slipped into the breast pocket and demanding nothing more of the user than pressing the button, I considered them more as playthings and decided they were not worth spending money on. Even when more sophisticated cameras, with interchangeable lenses, came on the market, I was not convinced they were as good as the traditional film cameras. It is only when I see the photographs pouring into my computer that I realize that digital technology has brought about a revolution for amateurs to start taking a delight in the beauty of birds. The high quality of some of the photographs proves that despite their sophistication, digital cameras need the photographer to develop high expertise, the aesthetics of an artist and the sensitivity of a naturalist. Costly equipment does not necessarily produce outstanding photographs. Like the shotgun of the early half of the last century, digital cameras of today are encouraging young people to go out into the countryside and in becoming, hopefully, members of the conservation lobby.

Correspondence

Farmer saves Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus*

There are many farmers who are instinctively, nature and bird lovers, but do not get known to bird-watchers or media. During their day-to-day activity of farming they observe nature, especially birds, keenly, giving their own interpretations to animal or bird behaviour. Some also contribute to conservation in their own ways.

Lal Chand Saini, a 28 year young farmer, of Maniawas, Jaipur (Rajasthan, India) is one such striking example. Love for nature seems to be in his genes, as his father, Sri Mool Chand Saini, too is a great nature lover and very keen observer. On 24.vii.2006 Lal Chand noticed two eggs of Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus* on one of the many heaps ('*dheris*') of farmyard manure he had placed for the next crop. On 25.vii.2006 a third egg was also laid by the lapwing, which was a permanent resident of his farm, where nobody disturbed or harassed the pair. On 27.vii.2006, before he started ploughing his field with a tractor, he cautiously transferred the eggs, along with 10 cm topsoil into a broken earthen pot, and replaced the pot at the same location after ploughing. The birds raised a hue and cry, and dive-bombed at him during the process, but began incubating the eggs eventually. They were never disturbed even when he or his family members passed close by.

In the early hours of 19.viii.2006, the first chick hatched. The second hatched at about 09:45 hrs. The third chick hatched on 20.viii.2006 at about 08:15 hrs and by 11:00 hrs all three chicks had left the modified nest, following their parents, into the cover of the cabbage crop. The incubation period lasted for 25 days from the laying of all three eggs. All the three chicks are now almost full grown, safe in their cryptic plumage.

Lal Chand Saini's concern for the birds' safety ensured that the breeding pair was successful. I am sure many farmers contribute in many ways towards conservation every year. This can be further enhanced by concerted efforts by bird-watcher groups, NGOs and government agencies, by spreading awareness for various species, especially the endangered ones, among them.

– Ram Gopal Soni
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