

Recoveries from the Newsletter for Birdwatchers (1969)—18

Zafar Futehally

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Zafar Futehally, #2205 Oakwood Apartments, Jakkasandra Layout, Koramangala 3rd Block, 8th Main, Bangalore 560034,
Karnataka, India. Email: zafar123blr@dataone.in

In my previous offering I had said that at my age of 87, and looking at the ground still to be covered to reach the winning post (December 2004 when I retired as Editor of the NLBW) I would have to increase the pace and so skip over the many interesting pieces in the *Newsletter* of this period. On reconsideration this seems to be an undesirable step. In fact I should cover the ground more intensively, otherwise the atmosphere of the old days when people wrote in a more leisurely manner (less concerned with sub-species, and more with describing the joys of the scene) will be missed. And so I continue with the fine article written by Sydney K. Reeves, part of which was published in Vol. 3 No. 2 of *Indian Birds*.

“We were without transport of any kind, so that we were limited to the birds we could see within in walking distance of our hotel, or during the various coach trips we made to other parts of the country. However, fortune smiled on us. The rainy season in Tunisia lasts from November to March, but because of the nature of the soil, the rivers very quickly dry up, but we were lucky to find two wadis quite close to our hotel, each of which contained one or more sizeable pools, just at their mouths, where they run into the sea. The pool in the nearer of these wadis was bordered by olive groves on one side and by the grounds of a hotel on the other. The pools in the farther wadi were surrounded by open fallow ground.

“We arrived at our hotel fairly late at night, so that no bird watching could be done then, but what a joy it was next morning to see a Little Brown Dove (*Streptopelia senegalensis*) in the hotel grounds. The Tunisian bird is, of course, a different subspecies to the Indian one and is known locally as the Palm Dove. Later we found it to be fairly common, but what a pleasure it was to hear that delightful soft cooing again and to see once more such an old and ubiquitous friend of the Indian plains. Another very old Indian friend who introduced himself early on, and of whom we saw a lot, was *Columba livia* – the Blue Rock Pigeon, known in Europe as the Rock Dove. It may seem strange to Indian readers that anyone would get excited about seeing a Blue Rock Pigeon, but, generally speaking, pure specimens of this species are only found in the British Isles in parts of Scotland and Ireland where they are decreasing in numbers.

“The Turtle Dove (*Streptopelia turtur*) was common, but we were surprised not to see its close congener *Streptopelia decaocto* – the Indian Ring Dove.

“Later in the day we made the acquaintance of the

handsome Hoopoe (*Upupa epops*), which was only to be expected, as the bird is comparatively common. We saw one or more on most days in various parts of the country.

“It was not long before we both heard and saw the Crested Lark (*Galerida cristata*). This bird was very common and every piece of bare or open ground would hold a number of them. We looked at them very closely as they can be easily confused in the field with the Thekla Lark (*Galerida theklae*). Of other larks which are also seen in India, we saw the Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla*, known as *Calandrella cinerea* by some authorities, including Dillon Ripley, as in his *Synopsis of the Birds of India and Pakistan* and the Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) which did not seem nearly so plentiful as in England.

“Shortly after seeing our first Crested Lark, as we were walking along the beach to Hammamet we saw a party of four Black Kites (*Milvus migrans*) flying over the sea just offshore southwards from Hammamet. Three days later we saw eight more. The birds were obviously passing through, as on neither occasion did they seem to linger in search of food and soon disappeared out of sight. We were very surprised not to find any resident birds and thought they would have been quite common. This bird is the same species as the Pariah Kite of India, but a different subspecies. It does, however, extend as far east as the northwestern corner of India.

Birds of prey, generally, were rather scarce. We were obviously just a little too early to see the migrants of this family passing through in numbers. The Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*) we saw on a number of occasions. On one occasion my wife saw one which had some kind of prey in its talons which it ate by tearing off pieces as it flew along.

“One day on a trip to Kairouan in the steppe country of Central Tunisia and Egyptian or White Scavenger Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*) flew right in front of the coach, affording and excellent, but momentary view. On the same trip, in the very far distance, two large birds of distinctly vulturine appearance could be seen circling, but could not be identified specifically. Incidentally, we soon learnt that bird watching from a coach is most unrewarding. The approach of the coach tends to frighten away birds on telegraph wires, fences, trees, bushes or on the ground in the vicinity of the road; because of the motion of the coach binoculars cannot be used and viewing with the naked eye is impeded; and finally because of the speed of the coach the time available for observation is generally insufficient.

“The only other bird of prey we saw during the holiday was a fine specimen of a male Montague’s Harrier (*Circus pygargus*) which, quite oblivious of our presence, flew quite close to us, hunting as it went along, but the bird did not linger and was soon lost to view and not seen again.

“We were most struck by the paucity of Corvidae. I believe I am right in saying that during the whole of our holiday we did not see a single Carrion Crow (*Corvus corone*), Rook (*Corvus frugilegus*) or Jackdaw (*Corvus monedula*). At first, one is surprised at the fact that this general area has not evolved a species of crow which is peculiar to it, but one has to be constantly conscious of the fact that North Africa is in the same zoo-geographical region as the British Isles, namely the Palearctic.

“On our second day, we paid a visit to the nearest of the two wadis. We found that there was always at least two and some times as many as about four or five Kentish Plovers (*Charadrius alexandrinus*) present. One pair showed every sign of intending to breed, but I fear that the presence of horse and camel riders, holiday-makers and passing Arabs will prove too inimical.

“On this day we saw our first Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*). We saw the birds in varying numbers on a number of other days, including a flock of fifteen which we inadvertently put up, together with a flock of nine Black-winged Stilts (*Himantopus himantopus*), as we came round the bend in a river bed. Flying with the Black-winged Stilts was another large wader which we were not able to identify, but which was probably a Greenshank (*Tringa nebularia*), a bird we often saw, and pleasurably heard, but generally as a singleton. A close relative of the Greenshank’s is the Marsh Sandpiper (*Tringa stagnatilis*). We had excellent views of this dainty, elegant wader for two days in succession and then it was gone.

“Reverting to our second day, we also saw a Temminck’s Stint (*Calidris temminckii*). Later, we were to see Little Stints (*Calidris minuta*) in fair numbers almost every day, rising to a maximum of 20–25 one day. The piece de resistance of our watching on this day, however, was the excellent views we had of a Little Bittern (*Ixobrychus minutus*) sitting in some brushwood at the side of river. The bird was stalked and put up by a black and white hotel cat. The bittern flew about thirty yards further up the river bed and again perched in brushwood, but this time further out into the water. The cat marked the bird down, got back on to the riverbank, crept along until it got opposite the bittern and once again stalked it, getting out over the water in the brushwood. The bittern was, however, too alert and flew off further down stream and settled in brushwood even further out on the stream. After a moment or two, no doubt feeling that even this perch was too insecure from so persistent a cat, who was still prosecuting his murderous intentions, it flew about thirty feet up into some mimosa trees. All this, of course, afforded us excellent views of the bird, which we saw on a number of occasions subsequently, until one day we put up a female Little Bittern at the same spot, just after having seen the male. Once we saw two males on the same day in this locality.

“Apart from the waders already mentioned, we saw Sanderlings (*Crocethia alba*) [= *Calidris alba*] in small numbers – up to about nine, on most days. The same applies to Ringed Plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*), Little Ringed Plover (*Charadrius dubius*), Common Sandpipers (*Tringa hypoleucos*) and Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*). We saw two Wood-Sandpipers (*Tringa glareola*), and Ruffs (*Philomachus pugnax*) often, with a maximum number of five. We saw only one Grey Plover (*Charadrius squatarola*) in a pool by the sea shore, looking disconsolate and undecided as to whether to stay or to go. Eventually it chose to go.

“Of duck, we saw but two, a White-eyed Pochard (*Aythya nyroca*), which got up at our feet from under the river bank and went off at great speed and a Shelduck (*Tadorna tadorna*), which dropped in for a few minutes and then passed on. There were a few small rafts of duck on the Lac de Tunis, but these were too far out to permit of identification.

“The Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) we saw on many occasions, as one would expect, but we were very surprised not to have seen either the Cattle Egret (*Ardeola ibis*: *Bubulcus ibis* of some taxonomists) or the Purple Heron (*Ardeola purpurea*). However, we were compensated by being afforded grand views of a White Stork (*Ciconia ciconia*) as it suddenly appeared flying towards us and sailed majestically overhead.

“On our trip to Kairouan (founded A.D. 672 and the fourth holiest city of the Moslems) we felt sure that we saw a party of three or four Great Bustards (*Otis tarda*). They were a long way off and were only seen with the naked eye from a moving coach, but the size, general coloration and general posture of the birds, individually and as a group, made us feel that they could have been no other species. On another occasion on this trip, we thought we may have seen a Little Bustard (*Otis tetrax*) in some short green crops. We saw Pratincoles (*Glareola pratincola*) in flight on a number of occasions, as well as Grouse sp., but were unable to identify them.

“Great Grey Shrikes (*Lanius excubitor*) and Woodchat Shrikes (*Lanius senator*) were common. The latter is a doubtful Indian species. We did not see any Redbacked Shrikes (*Lanius collurio*) this, however, is a very uncommon species in Tunisia.

“The most colourful species we saw were, of course, the Roller (*Coracias garrulus*) which we saw once sitting on some telegraph wires and then later in flight; the Bee-eaters (*Merops apiaster*) of which we saw three or four on a number of days and which gave signs of intending to nest in the very suitable banks of the river; and the Golden Orioles (*Oriolus oriolus*). We were extremely lucky in seeing the last-mentioned species on about three days. One day we saw two females and another day two males. To make the experience even more thrilling, on one occasion they were seen at the same time as we saw the Roller and another time while we were watching the Bee-eaters. We had excellent views of all three species and were enchanted. To watch a party of bee-eaters, with the sun shining on their glorious plumage, flying about in the dry bed of an African river, flying up to prospective nest holes in the banks, catching their prey on the wing and then settling on rootlets growing out of the bank and beating them to death before eating them, is an unforgettable sight and provides a treasured memory.”