

# —A flight down memory lane— The little brown puzzles–2

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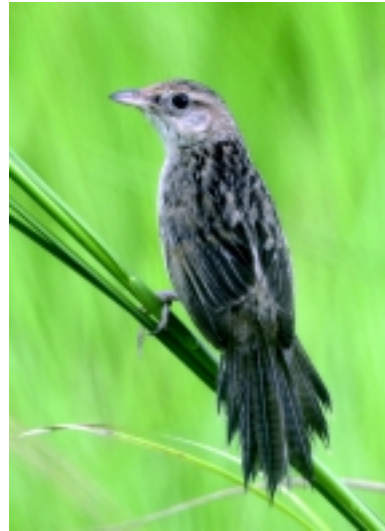
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**W**arblers, like most other passerines, are more heard than seen. Being skulkers and living for the most part in tangled vegetation, sound is an important way for them to communicate with one another and so they constantly keep calling. Their calls are very distinctive and often the best means for identification. In my early years of birdwatching, I had developed a rather enviable familiarity with the sounds of both our resident and migrant warblers. I am not sure I can today recognize the originator of a call, since one needs constant practice, something, which unfortunately I have not been able to keep up. With age, and weakening hearing certain sounds do not seem to register well. Now ‘the little brown puzzles’ have once again become just that! I will end this narration with a recent terrible mix up in identification, highlighting the fact that memory cannot be relied on and it is absolutely important to jot down notes and maintain proper records.



Both: Anand Ayya

Bristled Grass-Warbler. L: Male. R: Female



A classic example, of this aural recognition, is the tiny Streaked Fantail-Warbler *Cisticola juncidis*. Few birdwatchers can recollect seeing this tiny bird among its preferred habitat of reeds and grass, but all those who know it will immediately remember its zitting call as it flies in circles high above its territory; in fact it is now fittingly known as the Zitting *Cisticola*. It was among the very first of warblers that I got to know well because we had so many excellently preserved grasslands in Saurashtra in pre-Independence days. I never seriously bothered to locate a nest because I was always hesitant to walk around in grass, leaving a telltale trail leading foxes and jackals to the nest; in any case the birds were so tiny and I did not possess lenses that would get me worthwhile photographs. There is another species of

*Cisticola* occurring in NE and SW India, which I must have overlooked during my visits to those parts. I am surprised I never saw the Striated Marsh-Warbler *Megalurus palustris* or the Bristled Grass-Warbler *Chaetornis striatus* during my active birdwatching days in Delhi. Illustrated field guides indicate that both occur there and some excellent photographs are being posted on the ‘Delhibird’ website. The former is the largest of warblers and even if I had come across it, I must have passed it over as a Striated Babbler *Turdoides earlei*. Even more surprising is that neither of the

two species was recorded on the Delhi bird list prepared by the British birdwatchers of the day. The most plausible reason being that birdwatching was rarely indulged in during the heat of summer and the rainy season when these otherwise skulking birds would be calling and displaying. The winter months were for wagtails, pipits, and the several wintering warblers that were familiar to the British birders and which

drew attention to themselves by their constant calls. Any intrepid ‘Angrez Saab’ would be more interested in putting up a snipe or bringing down a duck for breakfast rather than be bothered about some streaked bird fussing about in the marsh vegetation.

In the 1940s my favorite pastime was to take a flat-bottomed boat on the river at Jasdan during the early winter mornings. In those days, the water was crystal clear and one could watch fish and turtles swimming among the aquatic vegetation, while gently floating along the tall rushes to see the moorhen and coots. From among the dense stands of reeds would come “tacks” and “churrs” drawing attention to the birds I gradually began to associate with the distinctive calls. With frequent observations, I learnt that specific calls



Blyth's Reed Warbler

came from specific levels of the vegetation. I cannot today with certainty say which “churr” and which “tak” was made by which warbler or emanated from what height above the water, but I do recollect that closest to the water was the Paddyfield Warbler *Acrocephalus agricola*, the reed-warbler with the most rufous in the upper plumage. Higher up and from the shrubberies bordering the reed beds would be the Blyth's Reed-Warbler *A. dumetorum*, which had no rufous tinge in its upper plumage, which was a grayish brown. I used to frequently confuse this warbler with the Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata*, but the latter showed a distinctly rounded head and a finer bill; it also flicked its wings. It was during the first bird banding camp in Kachchh, where both the Blyth's and the Booted were netted in great numbers, that I saw the very clear difference in the large bill and the flat crown forming almost a straight line from the bill to the tail tip. The two smaller reed-warblers do not flick their wings, which the Booted does, and this trait along with the rounded head and fine bill makes for mistaking it for the Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*, one of the then known willow-warblers. As a student in Delhi I was fortunate in having the differences between the Chiffchaff and the Booted Warbler pointed out to me by that great expert in willow-warblers, Horace Alexander. The former was far more active and flicked its wings and tail in a very characteristic manner to the flicking of the wings of the latter. In hand, as I saw during the banding operations in Bharatpur, the Chiffchaff shows an olive wash, which certainly is not visible in the field. Here were four confusing birds at first introduction, but which with familiarity became easy to recognize first by their very distinctive calls, then largely by the niche the call emanated from and finally by their physical characteristics and mannerisms. They were good introductions to the other members of their genera. Unfortunately, with the heavy destruction of all vegetation, niches have got very blurred and species are tending to get jumbled up creating stress to the birdwatcher and no doubt to the birds themselves. Every March, for the last couple of years, a Paddyfield Warbler spends a few days in my small Rajkot garden, and as it flits around the house, in the trees and shrubberies, it invariably flies down into a clump of reeds planted in a tiny water

feature and spends long periods close to the water. I suspect it attempts to pick up aquatic insects and in so doing must be destroying whatever mosquito larvae, hidden among the vegetation, having escaped the fish below. The largest and the noisiest of the *Acrocephalus* warblers common across the subcontinent, though particularly partial to taller and more extensive reeds on more expansive water bodies is the Indian Great Reed-Warbler *A. stentoreus*, to see and hear which, one should take a ‘shikara’ ride on the Dal Lake of Kashmir, as I did on a visit before the terrorists took over. It is a summer visitor there and breeds in large numbers. Surprisingly, this noisy bird is also heard the year round among mangrove thickets in the Gulf of Kachchh where I suspect it to be resident, as indeed it is in scattered marshlands around Delhi. I have not satisfactorily identified the wintering Mustached Warbler *A. melanopogon*; the most distinctively marked of the *Acrocephaline* warblers.

Another warbler, very similar in shape and partial to marsh vegetation that I have missed is the Pale Grasshopper-Warbler *Locustella naevia* and its less widespread cogenitors: the Streaked Grasshopper-Warbler *L. lanceolata* and the Rusty-rumped Grasshopper-Warbler *L. certhiola*. These three winter visitors, are great skulkers, and advertise their presence by their calls. Here indeed are challenges for the several determined photographers to go after as indeed they have been doing around Delhi after the Grass-birds.

... To be continued...



Booted Warbler