

—A flight down memory lane— Procrastination!

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I intend to dwell on this terrible failing of humanity for the very simple reason that it is something, which we all do every day of our lives and as a result, we not only reduce our personal levels of achievement, but also reduce our contribution to raising standards in society. What indeed has this got to do with *Indian Birds*? Everything really, here is a young editor striving to bring out a high quality publication and a large majority of us, including myself, are not being regular in sending him material. I am especially deserving of censure since he extends to me so much respect. The last time he gently reminded me that all my manuscripts had been used up and that I should send in something and, I made a lame excuse that at my age it was getting more and more difficult to put thoughts together! What absolute nonsense really. But then it is this putting off, to-be-done-later, which is the real excuse. Today, 16th February 2009, I simply forced myself to sit down and put thought to paper along with my morning coffee. At my age, I may be excused for giving a small homily on this very real weakness of the human race.

I have actually two articles outlined for *Indian Birds* one on how the Himalaya and Himalayan birds became an obsession, and the other on redstarts in my life that await to be fleshed out. It is just this universal failing of putting off things for another day that has prevented them from seeing the light of day. Well, the editor's polite prodding and the two last issues of *Indian Birds* finally compelled me to write this piece. The last two issues: vol. 4 (2) with the picture of the Western Tragopan *Tragopan melanocephalus* and vol. 4 (3) with the White-bellied Sea-Eagles *Haliaeetus leucogaster* brought great memories of years gone by, which I just have to share with all of you. The tragopan takes me back to the autumn of 1949 and the eagles to the winter of 1955–1956! And, how vivid the memories are!

In 1949, during a long weekend, I had taken the then rather ramshackle bus to Narkanda from Shimla and trekked along the upper Hindustan–Tibet road to Bahli. I had a booking in the delightfully sited forest rest house that overlooked a valley flowing to the south of the ridge connecting Mt. Hattoo east of Narkanda to Maralkanda, a prominent forested peak on the southern watershed of the deep Nogli Khad that drains the precipitous western face of the spectacular Hansbeshan massif into the Sutlej. The upper Hindustan road continues along this great ridge, itself a watershed of the Sutlej to the north and the Jamuna to the south. I regret never having done the trek along this stretch of road beyond Bahli, passing as it did through the then still extant primeval conifer and high altitude oak forests. But, I

did walk the forest trail west along the ridge to the open top of Hattoo with its panoramic views. It was a delightfully easy trek, which I took slowly, savoring the excellent bird watching as I loitered through some wonderful, undisturbed forests. There were tits, warblers, minivets, laughingthrushes, nuthatches, treecreepers and woodpeckers in the undergrowth, and up in the trees on every side. It was on this forest trail, at a little over 2,440 m, that I suddenly saw two large birds; the size of Impeyan Monal *Lophophorus impejanus*, squatting on the leaf littered path. In the gloom of the tall forest, the colors were not distinct, especially the crimson of the male, but even today I recall the white spotting against the dark background body plumage of what I presumed was the male. As I cautiously approached the crouching birds, they crouched lower and then suddenly flew off into the tall trees. None of the bird books I then possessed mentioned any tragopan, but I presumed they were a pair of Satyr Tragopan *T. satyra*, being familiar with a fine mounted specimen displayed back home in a glass case in the Jasdan palace card room. It was years later that I realised I had actually seen a pair of the Western Tragopan and not the commoner and more widespread Satyr. Significantly, the forests of the Maralkanda and the Nogli watershed were identified later as an area with a large population of Western Tragopan along with Monal and Koklas pheasants leading to the notification of the Dharanghati Wildlife Sanctuary. Vol. 4 No. 2 of *Indian Birds* carries a well-written paper on this area. My one complaint is that despite the use of satellite images from Google World, the authors have not provided names of ridges nor indicated the upper Hindustan–Tibet road on the excellent reproduction of the satellite image of the general area. The late M. A. Wynter-Blyth trekked along this road to Sangla in the Baspa Valley in the early 1950s and wrote a very readable account of his trek for the *Journal of Bombay Natural History Society* (JBNHS).

Fifty years later, I traveled from Manali across the Jalori Pass and the Sutlej to Narkanda, Shimla and on to Chandigarh. We broke journey at Narkanda, which has grown considerably and lost its early charm though I was delighted to find the forest still in excellent condition. Looking up at Hattoo I recalled my climb to the top and wondered whether the wildlife was still as plentiful as when I had been there half a century earlier. On the last occasion, on my way back during the late afternoon to the Bahli forest rest house I had heard two leopards *Panthera pardus* "sawing". From the account that prompts me to write this note, I see that there are plenty of tragopan and Monal in the Dharanghati Sanctuary.

The cover photograph of the White-bellied Sea-Eagles is outstanding. It brings out dramatically the aerial mastery of these attractive raptors, which happen to be my favorites, in a charismatic group. It was in February 1956 that the late Dharmakumarsinhji had visited Karwar and the Oyster Rocks lighthouse in his capacity as the Chief Wildlife Warden of the erstwhile Bombay State. Karwar was then part of the Bombay Sate (Presidency of British times). Dharmakumarsinhji was the first Wildlife Warden at a time when the post was first constituted and non-forest department individuals were appointed to the position. Being the great raptor expert that he was, he immediately noted a pair of these fine eagles nesting on a pinnacle of a stack to the west of the lighthouse island. On his return to Mumbai (Bombay of those days), he urgently called me over and directed me to proceed to Karwar to photograph the nesting pair. I was to be cared for by the

lighthouse keeper who was delighted to have me as his guest. The account of my experiences appears in the JBNHS. I spent several days in a hide observing and photographing the eagles during day and at night in a sleeping bag on the rocks below, just above the high tide mark. The experience was memorable; being the very first time I had spent days and nights alone by the sea. On my return to Karwar I was greeted by the news that I had become a father to a boy! My son now looks after the nature camps I first initiated in the 1980s at Hingol Gadh and his son, now in the last year of school, has extracted a promise from me to use my 'influence' with Romulus Whitaker to let him work at the Madras Crocodile Bank after he graduates! I hope the progeny of my pair of eagles is continuing to nest in the Oyster Rocks eerie. Incidentally, the illustrated pair shows the smaller male making a pass at the larger female.

—Reviews—

- Audio CD-call of Indian birds Vol 4. Produced by Nature Club Surat, Surat 395007, Gujarat, India. Price not mentioned.
- Audio-Visual CD-birds of Western Ghats. Produced by Birdsong, Sangli 416416, Maharashtra, India. MRP: Rs. 200/-.

Nature Club Surat have been quite active in the field of producing audio recordings of bird calls in India and the CD under review here is the fourth in their series. The collection on this CD consists of calls of 49 species of birds, recorded by Mukesh Bhatt. Each call is preceded by announcements of names of the bird in English and Gujarati. A booklet accompanies the CD and has illustrations of all the birds featured on the album. The illustrations (in colour) are by Dr Narasimhan, Falguni Patel and Vinit Patel.

Some of the interesting birds featured in this collection include Bronze-winged Jacana *Hydrophasianus chirurgus*, Crab-Plover *Dromas ardeola*, Malabar Trogon *Harpactes fasciatus*, Oriental Pied Hornbill *Anthracoceros albirostris*, Heart-spotted Woodpecker *Hemicircus canente*, Marshall's Iora *Aegithina nigrolutea*, Rufous-fronted Prinia *Prinia buchanani* and Black-breasted Weaver *Ploceus benghalensis*.

The recordings are of good quality, free from excessive background noise. They range from 0.27 to 1.33 min. in duration and the total duration of the CD is 46.04 min.

I have the following comments and suggestions on this CD.

The recordings of many species tend to lack variations in calls and tend to be too long (> 1 min). They are also repetitive for some species, e.g., Spot-billed Duck *Anas poecilorhyncha* and Bronze-winged Jacana. In some cases, only the song is included, e.g., Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*, but no indication is given as to the context of the call or whether the recording pertains to a song or a call. Since bird calls have

regional dialects, it would be helpful if the location from where the recording was made is mentioned in the booklet. For instance, I found that the call of the Common Woodshrike *Tephrodornis pondicerianus* is quite different from the calls I am familiar with in southern India. The Blyth's Reed-Warbler's *Acrocephalus dumetorum* calls sounded somewhat distorted in their tonal quality and appeared to be repeated more frequently.

I would also like to point out some ambiguity in the booklet. For the Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker *Dendrocopos nanus* (#22), the alternative name (?) is given in the bracket as Grey-crowned Pigmy Woodpecker *Dendrocopos canicapillus*, which is a distinct species. One is not sure if the recording of Black-crested Bulbul *Pycnonotus melanicterus* pertains to the northern or the southern subspecies (ruby-throated *gularis*). The absence of additional information such as scientific names and location adds to the confusion.

I would urge Nature Club Surat to seriously consider bringing out CDs that cater to specific regions of the country as the present one contains a mix of bird species occurring in various regions.

The second CD under review seems to be an answer to the suggestions made above. Here, one gets to not only hear the bird calls but also see various photographs of the songsters as well as their habitats. Calls or songs of 40 Western Ghats species are found on this CD. These have been recorded by Sharad Apte. There is also a running commentary throughout the entire duration on the Western Ghats, importance of bird calls, habits, habitats, conservation, etc., of birds. A few interesting tidbits concerning local knowledge/lore concerning the calls have been mentioned, e.g., Black-headed Cuckoo-Shrike *Coracina melanoptera*. The total duration of the CD is 1.15.08 hrs. Also there are legends that give essential details about the bird species discussed. Photographs have been contributed by Sharad Apte, Clement Francis and other well-known bird photographers.

Several interesting bird species feature in this collection, including endemics like Blue-winged Parakeet