The text needs to be heavily edited, though there is no doubt it does make for delightful reading in its present form—"Edges of lake! Oh! Bring me immense joy. See there!" (p. 5); " After repeated attempts only, the female accepts the overtures of the cock like the heroine of a cinema love story" (p. 32); "It is like a meditative bird with valour" (p. 118); "If the cock offers the gift mouth to mouth the two develop closeness just like a boy offering a boquet or ice cream to the girl he loves" (p. 195); "They become exceedingly noisy, hurling acrimonious abuses at each other. I saw on several occasions a pair of Black Drongos perched on a telegraphic wire yelling at each other in rhythm, one after another. They indulge in premarital display" (p 143). Often, the interpretations of bird behaviour tend to be completely anthropomorphic.

Though this book has presented several interesting and original observations, the authenticity of these have not been cross-checked. For instance, the book states that the Yellow-wattled Lapwing's eggs hatch in 17 days, the Indian Courser's in 13–15 days, the Red-wattled Lapwing's in 17 days, the Spot-billed Duck's in 15 days, whereas, being nidifugous, the chicks of these species need longer periods of time to develop. The book gives the incubation periods for smaller birds that have nidicolous chicks as follows: Coppersmith Barbet, 13 days; Hoopoe, 16 days; Small Bee-eater, 17 days; and so on. The average incubation period for lapwings is about 4 weeks. I had observed this from the close study of a nest of a Yellow-wattled Lapwing at the Adyar Estuary, several years ago (Santharam 1995). The authors have not described their methodology of studying nests, especially for those birds that nest in holes, where there are problems determining clutch sizes, incubation period, *etc*. Also, there are no indications as to how many nests were studied to arrive at the results presented.

There are some statements that need further substantiation: "A pelican consumes *at least 5 kgs*. of fish a day"; "it has *worms* inside the stomach which devour the fish in minutes"(pg. 103); "the male and female *discussed* this sitting on a twig" (p. 186, while describing an incident when the nest of a sunbird was damaged by a cat). [The italics are mine].

There are a few other minor errors in the text: The authors have misidentified the Lesser Golden-backed Woodpecker *Dinopium benghalense* as the Greater Golden-backed Woodpecker *Chrysocolaptes lucidus*. We are left to guess the identity of the "Little Falcon" and the "non-venomous water viper" (p. 48).

All these may mar the scientific value of this publication.

The book is printed on art paper and the choice of photographs could have been more selective, as they are of varying quality and in some instances, repetitive. This would have allowed more space to print the better ones on a larger format, adding more appeal to the book. I also feel that the inclusion of close-up photographs of newly hatched chicks at the nests should have been avoided since some of these could have been subject to predation thanks to the attention drawn to it by the photographers. Some of the line drawings too could have been avoided, and the captions chosen more carefully.

Overall, though this is a good effort to document the nesting behaviour of Indian birds, inaccuracies, poor editing and interpretation of behavioural data, make this book only acceptable in parts, but may not find favour among the scientific community. Hopefully it would help encourage more birdwatchers shift from a "listing mode" to the more serious "study mode", which would contribute to our collective knowledge of the habits of our birds, including the commonest species.

References

Santharam, V. 1995. Some observations on the ground nesting birds at the Adyar Estuary, Madras. *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* 35 (2): 24–25.

—V. Santharam

— Postcard from Singapore —

5th International Hornbill Conference

Ragupathy Kannan

When Singapore announced its intent to host the 5th International Hornbill Conference some birders' eyebrows, including my own, were raised. After all, Singapore, a bustling city-state, which was once cloaked in dense tropical rainforest, lost all its hornbills over a century ago, with the last Oriental Pied Hornbill recorded in 1855. But many of the delegates were pleasantly surprised to learn that the Oriental Pied Hornbills are back. After more than 130 years, they reappeared in 1994 in Pulau Ubin, an islet north of the main island of Singapore. Since then about 40 birds have been spotted, some even in "mainland" Singapore.

The organisers effectively used these welcome newcomers as the mascots of the conference (22–25 March 2009). Singaporeans presented fascinating papers on their effort to protect this locally rare population. In post conference fieldtrips, the organisers proudly showed off the birds in the wild, including some carefully controlled group visits to a pair breeding in an artificial nest box in Pulau Ubin. And what a 'wired' artificial box it was! Some of the most fascinating papers stemmed from these ultra modern "smart" boxes, which not only have video cameras monitoring every activity round the clock, but also record weights of parents and chicks, and even that of the morsels brought in by the parents by weighing parent before and after food delivery! The video cameras successfully documented infanticide-cum-cannibalism in this species.

Over a hundred participants, hailing from 19 countries, presented a wide variety of papers. Topics ranged from status and distribution to home ranges, breeding biology, impact of humans, and research methods in captivity and in the wild. Surprisingly, none of the papers directly addressed seed dispersal services rendered by hornbills, obviously showing how neglected this topic is, an issue that was raised by Margaret Kinnaird's keynote address (more on this later in this report). There was a noteworthy and ground-breaking

paper on wood decay fungi in hornbill nest cavities from Thailand. Another new find was the documentation, by field observations, photographs, and DNA studies, of a hybrid between Great and Rhinoceros Hornbills in the wild in Thailand, which aroused disturbing implications on the impact of forest fragmentation.

The veterans of hornbill studies were all there. Alan and Meg Kemp gave a fascinating keynote address on diversity and radiation of hornbills, which summed up what we know about the evolution of the now 60 species—up from 45 with lots of splitting. With new evidence, they reiterated their support for the assumption that the hoopoes and woodhoopoes were the sister clade to hornbills, with the hornbill line having branched off about 49 million years ago. Pilai Poonswad continues to lead a team of enthusiastic and competent Thai researchers who continue to break new ground. She and her team impressed the audience with the amazing work they have done to successfully repair old nests in the wild (which had shrunk or become misshaped) to ensure continued usage. They also presented on their successful installation of artificial nest cavities in the wild. Margaret Kinnaird's keynote address on past and future directions in hornbill research analysed 700 publications on hornbills, of which, the bulk (27%) focused on ecology, and a miniscule (2%) addressed genetics. She highlighted the lacuna in seed dispersal studies and urged researchers to move away from nests and roosts into the forests to address seed dispersal queries.

Papers from the Indian Subcontinent included Sneha Vijayakumar's fascinating follow-up status survey of the Malabar Pied Hornbill in Dandeli, in which she re-surveyed tracts covered over 20 years ago by Reddy and fortunately reported no decline in this crucial hornbill area; Amitha Bachan and others' work on involvement of local Kadar tribesmen in monitoring and conservation of hornbills in Anaimalais of Kerala; Abrar Ahmed's report from TRAFFIC India on illegal trade in hornbills, which disturbingly reported 60 hornbills (including stuffed specimens and casques) of five species between 1995 and 2008; E. Santhoshkumar and P. Balasubramanian's study of fruit diet of Indian Grey Hornbills in the Eastern Ghats; Raju Kasambe and others' study of the same species from central India; and Amitha Bachan, R. Kannan, and Doug James' pilot study of installing artificial nest cavities for the Great Hornbill in southern India (which reported no usage in the wild so far, but the developments from Thailand lead them to believe that this may be just a matter of time).

The organisers have to be commended for successfully staging a truly grand international conference despite the severe worldwide economic downturn. The lush and bird-rich Singapore Botanic Gardens served as an attractive venue and participants were treated to some great Singaporean cuisine, which presented a delightful blend of Indian and Chinese fare with lots of seafood and other delicacies.

— *In the news*[1] —

Compiled by Prashanth N. S.

Pied Cuckoo Clamator jacobinus *campaign by MigrantWatch*

After covering two successive migration seasons, MigrantWatch, a first-of-its-kind web-based citizen science initiative in India, has launched the Pied Cuckoo Campaign on 13th May 2009, to track the movements of the 'rain bird', the Pied Cuckoo *Clamator jacobinus*. The campaign is similar to the ongoing MigrantWatch initiative, wherein birdwatchers from all over the country are reporting first and last sighting information from particular locations, in addition to stray sightings of migrant birds from anywhere. In this new campaign, participants contribute information on first sightings of the Pied Cuckoo in this calendar year. This information, plus records of presence through the year will help to assess whether Pied Cuckoos really do proclaim the advent of the monsoon (and, if so, by how many days); and will also provide valuable data to separate migratory versus resident populations. MigrantWatch is the first volunteer-based project in India devoted to collecting information on the timing of bird migration. Baseline information collected in the first few years of the project will be used to assess changes in the timing of migration over the medium-to-long term. As of 22nd December 2008, on the MigrantWatch website, there have been 1,889 first sightings of 171 migrant species from the 2008–2009 season, contributed by 188 participants from 24 Indian states. A blog was launched on 25th May 2009 to provide a forum for posting and discussing migrants' related information.

The website features details of the campaign, information on the Pied Cuckoo with identification tips, photos, illustrations and call recordings. Reporting the cuckoo sightings is similar to reporting any migrant sightings using the same login username and password. For those, who haven't yet logged in to MigrantWatch, here's a chance to be a part of one of the country's fast growing citizen science initiatives at: *www.migrantwatch.in*. See 'Mendiratta & Quader. 2009. *Indian Birds* 4 (4): 122–126 (2008)' for an analysis of the results of the second MigrantWatch season. For the blog, go to: *www.migrantwatch.in/blog/*.

How well do you know your scientific names?

Use of scientific names for birds reduces confusion, and increasingly, birdwatchers have adopted use of scientific names on the Internet, on discussion groups and blogs. A very basic application for self-testing one's knowledge of scientific names of birds of the Oriental region was launched in April 2009. Sharing the link on *Delhibird*, the author, Abhijit Menon-Sen, shared that the application is based on the database of common and scientific names available at the Oriental Bird Club Image database. For the tester, see: *www. toroid.org/misc/randomname.cgi*. For the OBC Image database, see: *www.orientalbirdimages.org*.

[1] For the period 15th May–15th June 2009.