

—In the news¹—

Compiled by Praveen J.

Great Himalayan Bird Count - 2009

After the grand success of “Great Himalayan Bird Count, Winter of 2008”, Action and Research for Conservation of Himalayas (ARCH) has announced the dates of this year’s counts. “Great Himalayan Bird Count, Winter of 2009” is planned along 36 popular trekking trails situated in the valleys of rivers Tons, Yamuna, Bhagirathi, Bhilingna, Ganga, Mandakini, and Alaknanda, in the Garhwal Himalayas, including Asan, and Jhilmil Jheel Conservation Reserves in Dehradun, and Haridwar districts, respectively. The bird count will start on 7 November 2009 at Dehradun and finish three days later, on 10 November, at the same location. Sixteen groups will undertake 36 different treks of roughly ten kilometers each, during these days. ARCH is encouraging the participation of school children as they strongly feel that young minds should start thinking of conservation as an academic and career pursuit rather than as just another creative pastime. This event will be organized with the support of the forest department of Uttarakhand. For more details on participation and methodology please email arch.himalayas@yahoo.co.in or arch.birdcount@yahoo.in.

A new ‘Bald’ Bulbul from Laos

An odd songbird with a bald head, living in a rugged terrain in Laos, has been discovered by scientists of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), and the University of Melbourne, as part of a project funded and managed by the mining company Minerals and Metals Group (MMG). Named Bare-faced Bulbul *Pycnonotus hualon*, because of the lack of feathers on its face and part of its head, it is the only example of a bald songbird in mainland Asia. It is the first new species of bulbul, a family of about 130 spp., described from Asia in over a century. A description of the new species has been published in the July 2009 issue of *Forktail*, the journal of the Oriental Bird Club. The thrush-sized bird is greenish-olive, with a light-coloured breast, a distinctive, featherless, pink face with bluish skin around the eye, extending to the bill, and a narrow line of hair-like feathers down the centre of the crown. The bird seems to be primarily tree dwelling. It was found in an area of sparse forest, on rugged limestone karsts—a little-visited habitat known for unusual wildlife discoveries. This discovery highlights the importance of this region for birds and biodiversity. Fortunately, much of the bird’s presumed habitat falls within legally protected areas in Laos. However, quarrying of limestone looms as a potential threat to wildlife in this area, along with conversion of habitat for agriculture (<http://www.birdlife.org>).

From the field

Vivek Tiwari reported an Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* along with other birds like Wedge-tailed Green Pigeon *Treron sphenura*, Sooty Flycatcher *Muscicapa sibirica*, Spotted Forktail *Enicurus maculatus*, Yellow-breasted Greenfinch *Carduelis spinoides*, and Greater Pied Kingfisher *Todiramphus chloris* between 6–8 August 2009 at Sat Tal, Uttarakhand (*DelhiBird*). Mohina Macker and others reported Bridled *Sterna anaethetus* and White-cheeked *S. repressa* Terns near Colaba fishing village, Mumbai on 26 July 2009 (*BirdsofBombay*). A set of coucal photographs taken by Bhaskar Das on 25 August 2009

from the Howrah area, in West Bengal, also showed a sub-adult Lesser Coucal *Centropus bengalensis*. Sumit Sen (Kolkata) believes that this area might hold a good population of Lesser Coucals (*BengalBird*). Anand Arya photographed a Common Redshank *Tringa totanus* with a ring on its right leg. S. Balachandran of BNHS felt that this bird could have been one of several ringed during September 2002 at the Basai wetlands. BNHS puts rings on the right legs of birds during even years, and on the left, during odd (*DelhiBird*). Kiran Srivastava reported a pair of Blue-winged Parakeets *Psittacula columboides* from Sanjay Gandhi National Park, Mumbai, on 9 August 2009—a species not seen often around Mumbai (*BirdsofBombay*). Uma K., and friends reported an Indian Cuckoo *Cuculus micropterus* chick being parented by Black Drongos *Dicrurus macrocercus* at Biligirirangan Hills, southern Karnataka, in June 2009 (*BngBirds*). Dipu Karuthedathu reported a similar observation of a juvenile Brainfever Bird *Hierococcyx varius* among a group of Jungle Babblers *Turdoides striatus* on 16 August 2009 from Shornur, Kerala (*KeralaBirder*). Vivek Tiwari and other delhibirders reported a Common Cuckoo *C. canorus*, presumably on passage, at Sultanpur on 1 August 2009 (*DelhiBird*). Vaibhav Deshmukh reported a juvenile Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo* on passage, busy feeding on dragonflies, near Alibag, Maharashtra on 5 August 2009 (*BirdsofBombay*). On 12 July 2009, Gnaneskandan Keshavbharathi reported a sighting of Fulvous Whistling Ducks *Dendrocyna bicolor* at Pallikaraini Marsh near Chennai (*TamilBirds*). Manjula Mathur reported a Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin *Cercotrichas galactotes* at Taal Chhappar on 8 August 2009 (*DelhiBird*). Tulsi R. Subedi reported a large congregation of 240 Indian White-backed Vultures *Gyps bengalensis*, along with one Himalayan Griffon *G. himalayensis*, one Slender-billed *G. tenuirostris*, two Red-headed *Sarcogyps calvus*, and nine Egyptian *Neophron percnopterus* Vultures on a single carcass in Nepal, evoking interest in population recovery of these critically endangered birds (*OrientalBirding*). Anshuman Varma and friends reported Koklass Pheasant *Pucrasia macrolopha*, Blue-throated Flycatcher *Cyornis rubeculoides*, Speckled Piculet *Picumnus innominatus*, and Black-throated Sunbird *Aethopyga saturata* among other birds from a trip to Pangot, Uttarakhand between 26 and 28 June 2009 (*DelhiBird*).

A quest for ‘lost’ birds

BirdLife International is launching a global bid to try to confirm the continued existence of 47 spp., of birds that have not been seen for up to 184 years. The list of potentially lost birds is a tantalising mix of species ranging from those inhabiting the least visited places on earth—such as remote islands, and parts of the western Himalayas—to those occurring in parts of Europe, and the United States of America. Some of the species high in the list of lost birds are Ivory-billed Woodpecker *Campephilus principalis*, Jamaican Petrel *Pterodroma caribbaea*, Hooded Seedeater *Sporophila melanops*, and our own Himalayan Quail *Galloperdix bicalcarata* and Pink-headed Duck *Rhodonessa caryophyllacea*. History of ornithology has shown that we should not give up on species that are feared to have gone extinct. Species like Cebu Flowerpecker *Dicaeum quadricolor*, and closer to home, Jerdon’s Courser *Rhinoptilus bitorquatus* and Forest Owlet *Heteroglaux blewitti*, have been rediscovered at the eleventh hour, just before the last remnants of their habitats were

¹ For the period 15th June–15th August 2009.

destroyed. The announcement of the quest for lost species is being made at the launch of the 21st British Birdwatching Fair at Rutland Water, UK. Cebu Flowerpecker is chosen as the emblem of this year's fair, because it provides hope and inspiration not to give up on a lost species. Philippines Ministry of Tourism has agreed to become the BirdLife Species Champion for this forest jewel. However in India, we continue our quest to get such a species champion for the Jerdon's Courser, which inhabits the scrub jungle in and around Sri Lankamalleswaram Wildlife Sanctuary in Kadapa district, with their numbers reduced to just about 50 birds. Funding from the UK's Darwin Initiative, which helped in studying its population, alternative habitat, and conservation requirements, is nearing its end, and BirdLife International has stepped in to highlight the urgent need for a Species Champion (<http://www.birdlife.org>).

Birders contribute \$36 billion to US economy

According to a new report released by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service in mid July 2009, birdwatchers contributed a whopping \$ 36 billion to the economy of United States in 2006. One out of every five Americans, 48 million people in all, watch birds. The report identifies who birders are, where they live, how avid they are, and what kinds of birds they watch, along with how much they spend on their hobby, and the economic impact of such spending. Participation in bird watching is highest in the northern half of the U.S., with the most number of birders in Montana, Maine, Vermont, Minnesota, and Iowa. The report is an addendum to the 2006 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation. The survey, conducted by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service in partnership with state wildlife agencies and national conservation organizations, has become the reference for participation and expenditure information on fish and wildlife recreation in the United States. The survey helps quantify how enjoyment of the outdoors and wildlife contributes to society, and promotes a healthy economy—and further strengthens the Service's commitment to conserve the nation's wildlife for the enjoyment and benefit of its citizens. It would be an interesting idea to start such a survey in India and study the eco-trend of our population (<http://www.citizen-times.com>).

Hundreds of new species being discovered in eastern Himalayas

Over 350 new species, including the world's smallest deer, a "flying frog", an exquisitely coloured bird, and a 100 million-years old gecko have been discovered in the eastern Himalayas, a biological treasure trove that is now threatened by climate change. A decade of research carried out by scientists in remote mountain areas endangered by rising global temperatures brought exciting discoveries such as a bright green frog that uses its red, and long, webbed feet to glide in the air. The beautiful Bugun Liocichla *Liocichla bugunorum*, discovered just a couple of years ago from Eaglenest (Arunachal Pradesh) has catapulted the eastern Himalayas onto all bird conservation maps. One of the other significant findings was not exactly "new" in the classic sense. A 100-million year-old gecko, the oldest fossil gecko species known to science, was discovered in an amber mine in the Hukawng Valley in northern Myanmar. A report entitled *The eastern Himalayas—where worlds collide* by WWF details discoveries made by scientists from various organisations between 1998 and 2008 in a region reaching across Bhutan and north-eastern India to the far north of Myanmar as well as Nepal, and the southern parts of the Tibet Autonomous Region (China). However, the good news of this explosion in species discoveries is tempered by the increasing threats to the Himalaya's cultural and biological diversity. This rugged and remarkable landscape is already seeing direct, measurable impacts from climate change, and risks being lost forever. The report describes more than 350 new spp., discovered, including 244 plants, 16 amphibians, 16 reptiles, 14 fish, two birds, two mammals, and at least 60 new invertebrates. The eastern Himalayas harbor a staggering 10,000 plant, 300 mammal, 977 bird, 176 reptile, 105 amphibian, and 269 freshwater fish species. Historically, the rugged and largely inaccessible landscape of the eastern Himalayas has made biological surveys in the region extremely difficult. As a result, wildlife has remained poorly surveyed with large areas still remaining biologically unexplored. Today, further spp., continue to be unearthed, and many more spp., of amphibians, reptiles, and fish are currently in the process of being officially named by scientists (<http://www.sciencedaily.com>).

— Editorial —

Early this year, when Ravi Sankaran passed away so unexpectedly, all I could think of was how *Indian Birds* could carry forward the memory of this charismatic ornithologist. I wrote to several of his seniors, colleagues, friends, well-wishers, and students, and asked them to write something which they would like to offer for publication 'as a tribute to the memory of Ravi Sankaran', in a special memorial issue of *Indian Birds*. Their response was spontaneous and generous—you have the result in your hands. Of course, given our schedule, some could not send a paper in time, but their work, in the fields of ornithology and conservation, is the type of memorial Ravi would have understood and appreciated.

Shankar Raman heard about our plans and emailed me his wish to contribute a joint paper with Divya! Lalita Vijayan, convalescing from an illness, wrote about SACON's work in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands. Asad R. Rahmani's comprehensive assessment of Ravi's telling contribution to Indian ornithology is the most personal among all the papers, as he revisited memories of Ravi with every word he set down. Shirish Manchi, Ravi's student, was the first to send in his note. Pankaj Sekhsaria sent several pictures, and a note on how our quirky legal system created a paradox for the Edible-nest Swiftlet's survival. Aparajita Datta kept her promise and rushed in her paper in the nick of time. Ashish Chandola's reminiscences touch the heart about a man who delighted in the call of the Rain Quail *Coturnix coromandelica*. Carl D'Silva allowed us to use a picture of his brilliantly rendered glass etching, and Ramki Sreenivasan sent in his brilliant photograph of a displaying male Lesser Florican *Sypheotides indica*.

I would like to thank all of them making this issue of *Indian Birds* possible.

"Vivat, crescat, floreat Ornithologia Indiae." [May Indian Ornithology live, grow and flourish.]

– Ernst Mayr. Rec. Indian Mus. 1952. L (1): 2.

– Aasheesh Pittie