Nesting of Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* in Kerala

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The Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* is considered a rare bird in Kerala. Ali (1969) did not record the nesting of the Common Moorhen from Kerala. Fergusson and Bourdillon (1904) stated that it was uncommon in Travancore.

On 1.vi.2003, around 15:30hrs, I was birdwatching at Enamavu Kole wetlands in Thrissur District, Kerala. There I observed a nest of the Common Moorhen in a waterlogged, reed-covered part of the swamp. The nest was at least 10-15m away from the bund. It was a mass of aquatic plants placed on a small heap of mud and sodden aquatic vegetation a few inches above the water level.

A Common Moorhen was incubating on the nest when I approached the spot. Its mate was always seen feeding and / or swimming quite near the nest. Sometimes the mate carried nesting material and just dumped it on the nesting site. The incubating bird always glanced behind when its mate deposited the nesting material.

Once the mate uttered a rather high pitched double call note, "*kek-kek*".

On 8.vi.2003 (the monsoon had not commenced), I went to look for the nest. The bird in the nest was a close sitter. It left the nest only when I stood near it. After a few minutes the bird returned to the nest and resumed incubation. The bird always re-arranged all the eggs with its beak before sitting on them. Thus, I had a number of glimpses of the eggs through binoculars. The eggs were of a dull whitish or pale stone colour, with small blotches of dark reddish-brown all over. The incubating bird frequently jerked its tail while it sat in the nest.

It seemed that both parents incubated. Once I saw the birds exchanging places to incubate.

References

ALI, Salim. 1969. *Birds of Kerala*. 2nd ed. (1st ed. published as *The Birds of Travancore and Cochin*.) Bombay: Oxford University Press.

FERGUSSON, H. S., and T. F. Bourdillon. 1904. The birds of Travancore, with notes on their nidification. Part III. *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* XVI (1) (17 December): 1-18.

Recoveries from *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* – 5.

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I started this series on 'Recoveries' to give readers an idea about how and why the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* was started in December 1960, the type of articles initially received, the limited interest in birdwatching at the time, the dependence for articles on a few stalwarts, the mainstays being Salim Ali and S. K. Lavkumar. Joseph George, Capt. N. S. Tyabji and a few others, helped to give the initial push. Slowly, very slowly the circle widened.

It would help me to proceed with this series if readers would let me know whether the sort of reporting I have done – quoting from articles and comments chronologically is of interest, or is this progress too slow and boring to the modern well-informed reader. If so, I could leap frog over the years and reproduce only sections of the more noteworthy contributions.

It is interesting to note how seemingly minor items led to significant results in the study of bird migration. The two innovations which proved indispensable were the numbered aluminium rings with the legend "inform BNHS" supplied by Sweden, and the mist nets sent from Japan. In his autobiography (p. 65), Salim Ali says, "…after using them (mist nets) in the last few years, I am convinced that no field collecting can be regarded as thorough where mist nets have not been employed to supplement shooting and visual observation. The unsuspected presence of many shy and skulking birds of dense shrubbery, specially of tropical jungle, as in the East Himalayan foothills, has revealed only when they fall into nest suitably deployed…" He continues to say that the lack of these earlier, "have somewhat shaken my confidence in the comprehensiveness of my collecting (e.g., Hyderabad Survey) before that time."

For the June 1961 issue, Salim Ali wrote on Bird Migration Study in India. I quote him at some length because though some sporadic ringing of birds had been done in the past, the effort was too limited to come to any definite conclusions.

"…Organised bird ringing and the study of migration began for the first time about two years ago. The opportunity to do so came as an unexpected windfall. The discovery that the virus of the Kyasanur Forest Disease of Mysore was a member of a group of viruses whose known focus was in parts of the U.S.S.R., suggested that its presence in India may have something to do with the migratory birds coming from that area. Thus the W.H.O. became interested in investigating the problem, and made a monetary grant to the Bombay Natural History Society for conducting the necessary fieldwork. The Virus Research Centre in Poona, maintained jointly by the Indian Council of Medical Research and the Rockefeller Foundation, which is directly interested in the KFD problem, was expected to cooperate in the project from the virological angle.

"The first field session, held in Kutch in autumn of 1955, was more in the nature of a training camp. Dr A. Schifferli, Director of the Swiss Bird Migration Centre at Sempach, was invited to…train local personnel in the use of Japanese mist nets and in the techniques employed in modern bird migration study. The VRC, Poona, deputed some of their technicians to work with the BNHS field party in order to collect ticks and other relevant data from the netted birds…

"Since the session of September 1960, there have been three more field session in Kutch and Saurashtra, of 3 or 4 weeks' duration each – in March 1960, September 1960, and March 1961. In these four sessions over 7,500 birds were caught and ringed, of which about 20% were migrant, the rest resident. From the viewpoint of the study of bird movements, the ringing of even the so-called 'resident' birds is not without importance. Many resident birds are subject

to seasonal movements involving hundreds of miles within the country, about which we know practically nothing. The ringing of these birds on a large scale should provide useful data concerning their local migrations, as well as about other facets of their biology which cannot be studied without individual recognition of the birds. The catches, moreover, provided the VRC investigators with opportunities of examining large samples of resident birds, in addition to the migrants, and of obtaining useful data on tick infestation and the problem of dissemination of arthropod-borne viruses through bird agency…"

The next piece, by K. S. Lavkumar, described a swallow roost (Common and Wire-tailed Swallows, Sand Martins) near Rajkot. Apparently here the mist nets were not too successful, and Lavkumar writes: "We tried using mist nets in what appeared to be a truly ingenious manner but caught only six birds and even these almost got away. It was all very disappointing but we did learn the limitations of mist nets in trapping birds. The swallows are close roosters and do not fly off easily. They have to be almost shoved off their niches. We hope therefore, to try out a modified Butterfly Net Trap in scooping the sleeping birds up for ringing."

Justice S. G. Patwardhan and his wife reported seeing a massive migration of Rosy Pastors on the evening of 17 March 1961. The birds were coming from the East and going towards the West. They came in batches and the flow was intermittent. The procession was first noticed at 19:15hrs and continued for about half an hour. They were sure that the number exceeded several thousands.

In the 'Notes and comments' section there was a discussion about standardising Hindi and English names of birds. With regard to the English names, the following was proposed:

1. When the name is a compound of two bird names, capitalise both with a hyphen between thus: Crow-Pheasant, Bustard-Quail, Hawk-Eagle and Tit-Babbler.
2. When the first half of the name is descriptive of the bird or its habits or habitat, capitalise both without the hyphen thus: Bush Quail, Rock Sparrow, Leaf Warbler, and House Crow.
3. Except where convention is established otherwise, thus: Junglefowl, Spurfowl, and Sandgrouse.

I see that the BNHS continues to follow this practice, but in other books there are other patterns. The recent practice of using the *lower case* for common names seems to be a convenient one if it is followed by the scientific name.

Reviews

***Birds of Nashik*.** By: B. Raha, N. Bhure, and D. Ugaonkar. (Eds.) 2004. Nashik: Nature Conservation Society of Nashik. Paperback. (10.5 x 19.0cm, with illus. cover), pp. 1-24, 10 col. photos (cover by; Uddhav Thackeray. Others by; B. Raha), 1 map (fold., back endpapers). Price: Not mentioned.

Contents: Imprint (fold-out, front endpapers); Foreword (front endpapers, by; Asad R. Rahmani); About us (p. 1); Mission (p. 1); Ongoing activities (p. 2); Introduction (pp. 3-5); Checklist of the birds of Nashik (pp. 6-23); Bird observation notes (pp. 22-24).

A checklist of 325 species found in Nashik District, Maharashtra, India, with abbreviated annotations. The list is arranged in tabular format. Various columns give the following information: English, scientific, and Marathi names, size, frequency of sighting (e.g. common, rare, etc.), residential status, direction of possible sighting with Nashik town as centre (east of Nashik, etc.), habitat in which the species is found and plate numbers, from Grimmett, Inskipp and Inskipp's *Pocket guide to the birds of the Indian subcontinent*, on which the species is depicted. Threatened and Near-threatened species are marked before their English names with a red or black asterisk respectively. Areas around Nashik, with different types of habitats like grasslands, waterbodies, forest, groves, are given in a table on p. 5.

Modern DNA-based studies are revealing new relationships among taxa and authors of new works would do well to keep themselves updated on these, for change is the order of the day and old sequences, names, relationships, etc., are in flux. A case in point is the entry "Lesser Spotted-Eagle *Aquila pomarina*" (p. 8). It is now widely known that this taxon has been split and the sedentary species in India is the Indian Spotted Eagle *Aquila hastata*. The authors have listed only those species that they have themselves seen on their birding trips (Raha, *pers. comm.*). No historical data is included, which could have resulted in at least some species being left out. The authors have got the sequence of the Sylviinae (p. 18) mixed up. These are minor blemishes that can be easily cleared in the next edition. The authors need to be complimented for creating and publishing this checklist, a database for future work. Compiling and publishing district checklists like the one under review should now be the priority for Indian birdwatchers.

—Aasheesh Pittie

A checklist of the birds of Gujarat. By: B. M. Parasharya, C. K. Borad, and D. N. Rank. (Eds.) 2004. 1st ed. Gujarat: Bird Conservation Society. Pbk. (28.5cm x 21.0cm), 2 pr. ll., pp. 1-27+1. Price: Rs 30/- (postage extra).

Contents: Title, imprint, contents (preliminary leaves); Preface (p. 1, by; B.M. Parasharya, C.K. Borad and D.N. Rank, dated 16.ix.2004); Introduction (p. 2); checklist (pp. 3-25); References (p. 26).

This is a bare checklist of 526 taxa (species and sub-species) from the state of Gujarat, India. Gujarati names and abbreviated status of taxa are also given.

The following errors were noted: *Rallus aquaticus* is listed under Gruidae instead of Rallidae (p. 8); "Phalaropidae" should be 'Phalaropopidae' (p. 10); *Treron pompadora* is listed under Pteroclididae instead of Columbidae (p. 12); "Broadbills: Eurylaimidae" should read 'Pittas: Pittidae' (p. 15); several species under Sylviinae and Monarchinae are interchanged (p. 20); "*Sylvia blythi*" should read *Sylvia curruca* (p. 21); the family Paridae is missing though its members are listed under "Turdinae" (p. 23). The inclusion of *Ardeola bacchus* (p. 3) seems to be an error, for most records from India are from the north-east.

For a checklist, the size of this publication is a bit odd for it cannot be taken out conveniently into the field. These glitches notwithstanding, the checklist is a valuable addition to the literature of the region.

—Aasheesh Pittie