

cultivated and un-irrigated desert-like habitat is still present in its original form, possibly similar to what Whistler might have witnessed about a century ago. It was warm and we observed the birds from 14:00-15:30hrs. We restricted ourselves to a 20ha patch due to paucity of time.

Habitat

The habitat was a 500ha patch of typical desert. 30% of it was covered intermittently with bushes and herbs varying in height from 0.25-1.50m, 70% was a gently undulating open dry sandy stretch, broken up here and there. No cultivation was done here and therefore, no irrigation. But on two sides of its borders, mustard and wheat fields surround the area. Of vegetation, we were able to identify *Acacia nilotica*, *Calotropis* sp., *Aerva pseudotomentosa* and *Capparis deciduas*. The sandy, loose soil was bare of grass cover.

One of the birds, a sub-adult male, was coming into breeding plumage. He showed a distinct white supercilium. His upperparts appeared streaked due to his darkish head and back. The wing panel had buff fringes. He had dark ear-coverts and a white chin and throat. The second bird also showed a conspicuous supercilium and looked similar to the male but lacked dark ear-coverts and its underparts were washed with rufous. Both birds had a rufous rump. Though the second bird looked like a female, illustrated in Grimmett et al. (1998), a close examination of its photograph in Urquhart (2002) revealed that it was a first-winter male.

The Stoliczka's Bushchat could be confused with Common Stonechat *Saxicola torquata*. But white chin and throat, clearly visibly white supercilium, longer tail, and bill should be enough to avoid any confusion. Both birds appeared slimmer, longer and livelier during foraging.

Behaviour

The behaviour of both birds was more or less similar to what Rahmani (1996) had observed. During our observations of 90 minutes, the first-winter male hunted repeatedly. Usually, he would perch on any metre-tall bush and from there, alight on the ground to catch and eat insects. But thrice, we saw him on a three metre tall perch (leafless babul tree) and fly up a further 3 metres, hover for a while (not more than 2sec.), catch the flying insect and return to the same perch or a lower one. He restricted his perching and hunting forays to a 20m long and 6-8m wide stretch. The sub-adult male did not show much interest in catching insects in the air, but would frequently alight on the ground to catch and eat an insect. He was wary and hid behind a bush, or entered thin and leafless bushes. The first-winter male fed more actively than the sub-adult. The sub-adult, after eating an insect, would look in the direction of the first-winter bird and vocalise with puffed white throat feathers. We managed to hear his faint 'chai chai' call – audible upto 4-5m. Both birds kept to their individual 'foraging areas'. No other interaction was observed.

A male Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti*, in fine breeding plumage, moved about in the 'foraging territory' of the sub-adult bushchat, but we did not notice any hostility between the two. However, while on the ground, the sub-adult male would occasionally inflate his white throat and breast and sway a little bit, even though no other bird was seen nearby. No aggression was noted between the two bushchats and the wheatear.

Conclusion

This is largely an undisturbed area (no agriculture) except for grazing (goats), and

does not seem to be under any imminent threat. It is possible that more Stoliczka's Bushchats exist in this area and breeding may take place or might have occurred in the past. Regular monitoring may spring a few surprises for the ornithological community, though during 2004 winter the species was not seen.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Dr A. R. Rahmani for going through the manuscript and providing photocopies of his papers, to Nikhil Devasar for taking trouble to photograph the birds and to Ewan Urquhart for providing a photocopy of the chapter on Stoliczka's Bushchat from his book.

References

- Ali, Salim and S. D. Ripley. 1987. *Compact handbook of the birds of India and Pakistan together with those of Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka*. 2nd ed., Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Grimmett, Richard, C. Inskipp and T. Inskipp. 1998. *Birds of the Indian Subcontinent*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Rahmani, A. R. 1993. Little-known Oriental bird: White-browed Bushchat. *Oriental Bird Club Bulletin* 17: 28-30.
- Rahmani, A. R. 1996. Status and distribution of Stoliczka's Bushchat *Saxicola macrorhyncha* in India. *Forkltail* 12: 77-94.
- Urquhart, Ewan. 2002. *Stonechats: A guide to the genus*. 1st ed. London: Christopher Helm. Hbk. (24cm), pp. 1-320, illus. (by; Adam Bowley), maps.
- Whistler, H. 1915. Some birds in Hissar district, Punjab. *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* XXIV (1): 190-191.

Of birds and botanizing

Suchitra Ghosh

P-229 CIT Scheme VII-M, Block-B, Flat 12, Kolkata 700054, India. Email: suchitraghosh@softhome.net

We were travelling from Lalkuan (Lucknow district, Uttar Pradesh) to Kapkote (1,000m, Almora district, Uttaranchal) in June 2004. The rains had arrived and the vegetation all around was a glistening green. From time to time, we saw profusely flowering rose-coloured *Lagerstroemia indica*; they looked gorgeous. We do see it flower in the plains

but never in such profusion as we did in the Himalayan foothills.

Kapkote is about 24km from Bageshwar on the bank of river Saraju. It is a quiet little village with a number of low-forested hills. The main thoroughfare here runs on a shelf above the river and has many interesting species of plants. Tilphar *Cocculus laurifolius* was one of them. It is a common

evergreen shrub found almost everywhere. There was one Kakri *Pistacia integerrima* (Anacardiaceae) festooned with *Aerides multiflora* (Orchidaceae), which bloomed *en masse*. Of the figs, Timul *Ficus auriculata* was quite common. Most of them were laden with edible figs.

Khinna *Sapium insigne* (Euphorbiaceae) is quite common in Kapkote

and a host plant for *Aerides multiflora* as well. It is a deciduous tree but now in June was sporting bright green foliage. It flowers in January-March, while the tree is leafless. Its fruit is a spike of numerous ovoid capsules on a thick rachis. At Jainti (northern West Bengal) we found, in late March, the green pigeon feeding on them.

We had been to Kapkote before but did not stay long enough to go round the place. This time we stayed there for about a week and went further afield. Sri Rajendra Kapkoti who runs an NGO (HEED = Hill Ecology & Environment Development Society) helped us in this. He took us to Falda-Ason village on a ridge that we liked very much. It had a stream below it that had fish with bands along the body and a jungle on the opposite slope. It was pretty wild and the stream added to its charm.

Here we came across a Kakri tree. We found birds of many hues guzzling its fruit (a drupe). Rathpath *Ajuga bracteosa* was identified. The other interesting tree that we saw was Silang *Osmanthus fragrans* (Oleaceae). Flower white or light yellow, exquisitely fragrant. Sri Kapkoti said it was the only specimen he had seen in the area. We came across some clumps of Ningal *Thamnocalamus falconeri*.

It rained pretty heavily at Kapkote and we started worrying about the next leg of our journey. Would it be worthwhile going to Mukteshwar (2,286m, Nainital district, Uttaranchal)? What if it rained? We would be stuck indoors. However, we noticed that it usually rained in the evening or at night. That decided for us. We would take a chance. On the morning of the 23rd we took

the bus to Bhowali (1,706m, Nainital district) en route to Mukteshwar.

On arrival we found that the last bus to Mukteshwar had left. We took a jeep to Ramgarh (1,789m, Nainital district). We decided to stay at Ramgarh because we found Bhowali very crowded.

Ramgarh has a Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam tourist lodge where we stayed for two nights. This was the apple-season and there was much packing and shipping activity visible. A 10-kg box of apples was selling for Rs 150.00.

There were a number of nests of Common Swallow *Hirundo rustica* at Ramgarh. One such nest was above the entrance of a grocery. What amused us was the feeding sequence by the parents. The adult bird flew in with a morsel and put it in the mouth of Chick No. 1. The next time food was put in the mouth of Chick No. 2. Each chick was treated at par with the other! In another provisions store we found a number of swallows perched on whatever there was to roost on, near the ceiling. Nobody disturbed the birds, neither at the nest nor at the perch. They were indeed treated with a great deal of indulgence.

On the way to Mukteshwar we noticed a lily growing at many places. It could have been “the orange-coloured lily, the round hard seeds of which can be used as shot in a muzzle loading gun” as mentioned by Jim Corbett in Muktesar man-eater. We are not sure if it was the Red-hot poker (Liliaceae) *Kniphofia* sp. – flowers in dense terminal racemes atop leafless stems. There was another lily on the grounds of the Indian Veterinary Research Institute (IVRI)

hospital. We presumed it was the African lily (Alliaceae) *Agapanthus* sp. Headbourne Hybrid – flowers in rounded umbels (very pretty).

At Ramgarh we had seen swallows feeding chicks. Here we observed the perseverance of a nesting Himalayan Pied Woodpecker *Dendrocopos himalayensis*. On the grounds of IVRI there was a Walnut tree *Juglans regia*. Its fruit is a drupe with an outer fleshy covering. The bird kept hammering at the fruit until it reached the kernel inside the hard shell. It then filled its beak with the pulp and fed the chick. This went on for sometime. It was intermittently calling while feeding the chick and this attracted our attention.

The place has excellent stands of oak, especially around Chauki Ki Jali. Besides oak there was Deodar *Cedrus deodara*, Kail *Pinus wallichiana*, Katus *Castanopsis indica*, Columbine *Aquilegia pubiflora*, Darhaldi *Berberis aristata*, Pangar *Aesculus indica*, and *Roscoeia purpurea*, among others.

We stayed three nights at Mukteshwar KMVN dormitory, which fortunately, was a detached unit of the tourist lodge. This saved us from the boisterous gang that had taken over the entire lodge. We are grateful to the staff. They ensured our comfort and that we had our meals in peace.

Whenever I see people making a nuisance of themselves and defiling the sanctity of a place like Mukteshwar I am reminded of Noel Coward’s “Please do not think that I criticize or cavil / At a genuine urge to roam / But why oh why do the wrong people travel / When right people stay back at home?”

List of birds seen at Kapkote, Ramgarh and Mukteshwar from 18-28 June 2004

Legend: 1 = Kapkote (1,000m); 2 = Ramgarh (1,789m); 3 = Mukteshwar (2,286m).

Indian Pond-Heron <i>Ardeola grayii</i> 1	Slaty-headed Parakeet <i>Psittacula himalayana</i> 2 3
Black-shouldered Kite <i>Elanus caeruleus</i> 2	Plum-headed Parakeet <i>Psittacula cyanocephala</i> 1
Black Kite <i>Milvus migrans</i> 1	Brainfever Bird <i>Hierococcyx varius</i> 1
Egyptian Vulture <i>Neophron percnopterus</i> 1	Indian Cuckoo <i>Cuculus micropterus</i> 2 3
Himalayan Griffon <i>Gyps himalayensis</i> 1	Common Cuckoo <i>Cuculus canorus</i> 2
Shikra <i>Accipiter badius</i> 1	Oriental Cuckoo <i>Cuculus saturatus</i> 2
Black Eagle <i>Ictinaetus malayensis</i> 2	Asian Koel <i>Eudynamis scolopacea</i> 1
Common Kestrel <i>Falco tinnunculus</i> 3	Asian Barred Owlet <i>Glaucidium cuculoides</i> 1
Black Francolin <i>Francolinus francolinus</i> 1 2 3	Small Blue Kingfisher <i>Alcedo atthis</i> 1
Red-wattled Lapwing <i>Vanellus indicus</i> 1	White-breasted Kingfisher <i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i> 1
Blue Rock Pigeon <i>Columba livia</i> 1 2 3	Greater Pied Kingfisher <i>Megaceryle lugubris</i> 1
Oriental Turtle Dove <i>Streptopelia orientalis</i> 1 2 3	Lesser Pied Kingfisher <i>Ceryle rudis</i> 1
Spotted Dove <i>Streptopelia chinensis</i> 1 2	Great Barbet <i>Megalaima virens</i> 1 2 3
Eurasian Collared Dove <i>Streptopelia decaocto</i> 1 2	Blue-throated Barbet <i>Megalaima asiatica</i> 1
Emerald Dove <i>Chalcophaps indica</i> 1	Fulvous-breasted Pied Woodpecker <i>Dendrocopos macei</i> 3
Wedge-tailed Green Pigeon <i>Treeron sphenura</i> 2	Yellow-fronted Pied Woodpecker <i>Dendrocopos mahrattensis</i> 2 3

Himalayan Pied Woodpecker <i>Dendrocopos himalayensis</i> 3	Rufous-bellied Niltava <i>Niltava sundara</i> 3
Little Scaly-bellied Green Woodpecker <i>Picus xanthopygaeus</i> 1	Grey-headed Flycatcher <i>Culicicapa ceylonensis</i> 1
Black-naped Green Woodpecker <i>Picus canus</i> 1 2 3	Asian Paradise Flycatcher <i>Terpsiphone paradisi</i> 1
Common Swallow <i>Hirundo rustica</i> 1 2 3	White-throated Fantail Flycatcher <i>Rhipidura albicollis</i> 1 2
Red-rumped Swallow <i>Hirundo smithii</i> 1 2 3	Red-headed Tit <i>Aegithalos concinnus</i> 2 3
Large Pied Wagtail <i>Motacilla maderaspatensis</i> 1	Spot-winged Crested Tit <i>Parus melanolophus</i> 3
Scarlet Minivet <i>Pericrocotus flammeus</i> 1	Great Tit <i>Parus major</i> 1
Himalayan Bulbul <i>Pycnonotus leucogenys</i> 1 2 3	Green-backed Tit <i>Parus monticolus</i> 2 3
Redvented Bulbul <i>Pycnonotus cafer</i> 1 2	Black-lored Yellow Tit <i>Parus xanthogenys</i> 1 3
Black Bulbul <i>Hypsipetes leucocephalus</i> 1 2	White-tailed Nuthatch <i>Sitta himalayensis</i> 1 2
Common Iora <i>Aegithina tiphia</i> 1 2 3	Eurasian Tree Creeper <i>Certhia familiaris</i> 3
Blue-headed Rock Thrush <i>Monticola cinclorhynchus</i> 2	Thick-billed Flowerpecker <i>Dicaeum agile</i> 3
Blue Whistling Thrush <i>Myiophonus caeruleus</i> 1 2 3	Fire-breasted Flowerpecker <i>Dicaeum ignipictus</i> 3
Oriental Magpie Robin <i>Copsychus saularis</i> 1	Purple Sunbird <i>Nectarinia asiatica</i> 1
Plumbeous Redstart <i>Rhyacornis fuliginosus</i> 1	Crimson Sunbird <i>Aethopyga siparaja</i> 1
Pied Bushchat <i>Saxicola caprata</i> 1	Oriental White-eye <i>Zosterops palpebrosus</i> 1 2
Grey Bushchat <i>Saxicola ferrea</i> 1 2 3	Crested Bunting <i>Melophus lathamii</i> 1
White-throated Laughingthrush <i>Garrulax albogularis</i> 3	Yellow-breasted Greenfinch <i>Carduelis spinoides</i> 2 3
Striated Laughingthrush <i>Garrulax striatus</i> 3	White-browed Rosefinch <i>Carpodacus thura</i> 2
Streaked Laughingthrush <i>Garrulax lineatus</i> 1 2 3	White-rumped Munia <i>Lonchura striata</i> 1
Red-headed Laughingthrush <i>Garrulax erythrocephalus</i> 2	House Sparrow <i>Passer domesticus</i> 1 2
Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler <i>Pomatorhinus erythrogenys</i> 2 3	Cinnamon Tree Sparrow <i>Passer rutilans</i> 1 2 3
Black-chinned Babbler <i>Stachyris pyrrhops</i> 2	Grey-headed Sterling <i>Sturnus malabaricus</i> 1
Red-winged Shrike Babbler <i>Pteruthius flaviscapis</i> 3	Brahminy Sterling <i>Sturnus pagodarum</i> 1
Rufous Sibia <i>Heterophasia capistrata</i> 2 3	Common Myna <i>Acridotheres tristis</i> 1 2 3
Yellow-naped Yuhina <i>Yuhina flavicollis</i> 2	Jungle Myna <i>Acridotheres fuscus</i> 1 2 3
Brown Prinia <i>Prinia cryniger</i> 2 3	Eurasian Golden Oriole <i>Orilus orilus</i> 1
Franklin's Prinia <i>Prinia hodgsonii</i> 1	Black Drongo <i>Dicrurus macrocercus</i> 1 2 3
Common Tailor Bird <i>Orthotomus sutorius</i> 1 3	Ashy Drongo <i>Dicrurus leucophaeus</i> 2
Western Crowned Warbler <i>Phylloscopus occipitalis</i> 1 2	Bronzed Drongo <i>Dicrurus aeneus</i> 3
Grey-headed Flycatcher Warbler <i>Seicercus xanthoschistos</i> 1 2 3	Black-headed Jay <i>Garrulus lanceolatus</i> 2 3
Rufous-breasted Blue Flycatcher <i>Ficedula hyperythra</i> 3	Red-billed Blue Magpie <i>Urocissa erythrorhyncha</i> 1
Little Pied Flycatcher <i>Ficedula westermanni</i> 2	Grey Treepie <i>Dendrocitta formosae</i> 1 2
Verditer Flycatcher <i>Eumyias thalassina</i> 1 2 3	Jungle Crow <i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i> 1 2 3

Another pond

Shama Futehally¹

Surely one test of loyalty in a reader of the *Newsletter* is a willingness to read articles written by the Futehally family about Kihim. In my youth I have been guilty of producing an annual essay on the Kihim pond, and ensuring that it got into print. That pond has remained in my imagination as the archetypal Indian *jheel* – rich and life-sustaining, and commemorated in our collective memory by Rajasthani miniatures as much as by medieval poetry. It was covered with lotus-pads, and in the early morning sun it sparkled with white and pink; here and there you picked out long-necked white birds; a little temple gleamed in one corner. It was of course a scene of ecological co-existence – buffaloes waded peacefully,

carrying their Cattle Egrets about with them; washerwomen washed; kingfishers and cormorants fished. So undisturbed a setting was naturally a haven for birds. The lake was dotted with Common Coot and Little Grebe, jacanas and lapwings, with Common Redshanks, Common Greenshanks and Black-winged Stilts. It had its own private Lesser Pied Kingfisher, sitting atop its own private pole. In winter, a half-hour on the bank would show you Common and Cotton Teal in the middle of the lake; Whistling-Duck, both Lesser and Large, as I recall; sometimes Northern Pintail, and once a pair of Spot-billed Duck. Occasionally flocks of Little Stint swept across the surface in miraculous formation.

That pond, alas, has now been leased out by the panchayat for fishing, and all has ended. The lotus has been ripped away and the birds sent packing; and the surface

of the water is as empty as a blank television screen.

Given this loss, we were much consoled to find another bird-rich lake in the vicinity of Kihim this April. It is astoundingly located in the middle of Alibag town. A small, tarred road winds out behind the main cinema hall, and to one side of this, tall bulrushes screen a *jheel*. Here the lotus has been allowed to spread over the lake, and stout formations of Bhendi trees *Thespesia populnea* rise out of the water. As we first approached it we were greeted by the flapping and squawking of Purple Moorhens in different parts of the lake, making enormous purple splotches in the landscape. There were Common Moorhens in equal numbers, and we saw one sitting on a rough straw nest among the bulrushes very near the edge. We later saw another gliding away with straw in its beak,

¹Shama Futehally passed away on the 1st of December 2004. This previously unpublished piece, written in April 2004, was her last on birds.