

Editorial

New Ornithology Foundation

In the inaugural issue of *Newsletter for Ornithologists* (Vol. 1 Nos. 1&2, p. 1) I had written, "...ultimately it is the content of the newsletter that will make it popular among birdwatchers, not the title." Why then, this change of name? There are several reasons. One is that we are consolidating the way we manage our publication. You will be happy to learn that we have registered a trust, "New Ornithology Foundation", which owns *Indian Birds*. Indeed the main objective of the Foundation is to publish *Indian Birds*. This arrangement, of a Registered organisation controlling and owning the publication, rather than an individual or a group of individuals, we feel, will prove stable in the long run. New Ornithology Foundation will have seven Trustees who will ensure that *Indian Birds* reaches those who are interested in birds, regularly. So this is a good time to start afresh under a new banner.

The other reason that emboldens us to

take this step is that after just a year of publication, amateur and professional ornithologists now eagerly await the *Newsletter for Ornithologists* across India, and in several countries abroad. We are confident of their faith in our commitment and in the quality and content of future issues. Their support is strong and will not waver with the name change.

The third reason is that *Indian Birds* does not clash with the title of any other ornithological publication, as *Newsletter for Ornithologists* did. It also rests easy on the tongue.

In *Indian Birds* we will publish, like we did in *Newsletter for Ornithologists*, notes and articles on the birds of South Asia and Tibet. There could be an occasional piece from further afield, such as Ashish Kothari's in this issue, for the charm of feathered denizens spans continents. Articles of a popular nature, which make the science of ornithology and the art of birdwatching

interesting and easily comprehensible, are encouraged. We would like our readers to tell us what they want to see published in *Indian Birds*.

We believe that art enhances text and request readers to send line-drawings and/or colour paintings that can be used in the body of the publication and on its cover.

The Foundation will now have a permanent website. On this, besides some standard features, like subscription form, guidelines to authors, checklist of Indian birds, etc., we plan to upload photographs relevant to articles in *Indian Birds*. Issues of *Indian Birds* will be archived on the website.

I erred in vol. 1 no. 5 of *Newsletter for Ornithologists* (p. 65) when I credited Lavkumar Khacher as having started the Gujarati newsletter *Vihang*. It was actually started by Dr Bakul Trivedi and friends. Dr Trivedi has been its editor since its inception.

- Aasheesh Pittie

Nest re-use in White-bellied Shortwing *Brachypteryx major* in the Nilgiri hills, India

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White-bellied Shortwing *Brachypteryx major* (Jerdon, 1841) is one of the nine Western Ghats endemics (Stattersfield et al. 1998) recorded from Upper Nilgiris Plateau (Zarri et al. 2002). Of the five Shortwing species found in India, this is the only one distributed in the Western Ghats (Ali and Ripley 1987). It has two sub species: *Brachypteryx major major* (Jerdon, 1841) and *B. m. albiventris* (Blanford, 1867), the former being found in the hills of southern Mysore (Bababudan, Brahmagiri and Nilgiri hills) up to 2,100m, while the latter in western Tamil Nadu and southern Kerala from the Palni to the Ashambu hills (Ali and Ripley 1987). The White-bellied Shortwing is classified as 'Vulnerable' owing to habitat loss and a possible declining population (BirdLife International 2001). Its declining population could be the result of habitat loss and fragmentation (Robin and Sukumar 2002).

During the bird community study in the Nilgiri Upper Plateau between 2001-2004, we recorded an interesting behaviour of White-bellied Shortwing, perhaps undescribed before. Two nests were located in the bank

of a road passing through a Wattle *Acacia mearnsii* plantation at Avalanche (11°10'N, 76°26'E). Avalanche has recently been identified as a globally Important Bird Area (IBA) (Islam and Rahmani 2004) and is a Reserve Forest under the Nilgiris South Forest Division.

The first nest, recorded on 14.v.2002, was placed in a small cavity dug in the road bank. The second, recorded on 20.vii.2002, was placed under an over-arching roadside rock. Nests mainly comprised of green moss and some grass twigs. Both parents performed nesting duties like incubation / feeding nestlings (two each in both nests). Every time a vehicle crossed the road, the bird flew out of the nest and perched on trees on the other side of the road. The chicks from both the nests fledged successfully. The nest remained intact till the following year.

Interestingly on 13.vii.2003 we recorded that both the previous year's nests had been re-occupied by two White-bellied Shortwing pairs. There was very little rearrangement done to the older nests. Both nests contained two eggs each again and

were actively guarded by the respective pairs. It was not clear from our observation, whether the pairs occupying the nests were the same that bred successfully in them, in the previous year. Perhaps colour banding of pairs can answer such questions, but the observation is worth reporting, as this is perhaps the first record of nest-reuse in the White-bellied Shortwing.

Unlike hole-nesters, very few open nesters reuse their nests (Clark and Mason 1985). Some of the North American open nesters have been reported to reuse their nests. There is also considerable variation in the longevity of open nests built by passerines. Some nests deteriorate during and shortly after the breeding attempt (Briskie and Sealy 1988), whereas others may last for several years (Watts 1987).

Cavitt et al. (1999) suggested in the case of the Brown Thrasher *Toxostoma rufum* that an old nest might benefit a nesting population as a resource to reduce the time spent in nest construction. The accumulation of the old nest on the territories of breeding birds has led to the supposition that they may provide an

adaptive function. Three hypotheses proposed for the function of the old nest include: (1) reuse and thus saving in time and energy to breeding pairs, (2) protection from search-strategy predators (Watts 1987), and (3) their use as an indirect cue to the nest site selection (Erckmann et al. 1990).

We recorded eight nests in the Wattle plantations, a habitat apparently not scarce in Nilgiris. Apparently the nest material and nest site for White-bellied Shortwing is not at a premium. It would be interesting to test these hypotheses and understand the adaptive significance of such behavior.

Acknowledgements

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In the footsteps of T. J. Roberts

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As a family visit to Karachi was planned for November 2004, I decided to use the opportunity to observe raptors around Karachi. I remembered T. J. Roberts' article in the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* (2003) and requested him for more information via email. The area is semi-arid and I was interested in comparing the avifauna of Sindh with Saurashtra, Kutch and the desert areas of Rajasthan. Well in advance of leaving for Karachi I contacted Mr Babar Ali, Mr Ali Hasnain and Dr Ejaz Ahmed from WWF's Karachi office for details on good raptor watching areas. The first eight days were spent in Karachi as everything came to a standstill for the Eid holidays. Next week, at the WWF office, we shortlisted three days for raptor viewing. The first day would be spent at Kirthar National Park from the Karachi entrance. The second day we would follow in T. J. Roberts' footsteps, covering north-eastern areas of Sindh where he observed twenty-three species of raptors in one day during the 1970s. The third day we would explore the north-western area of Kirthar National Park. WWF kindly put their

Toyota 4-wheel drive at my disposal and deputed a knowledgeable Conservation Officer, Jahangeer Durrane, to accompany me.

Kirthar National Park lies in Sindh Province, north of Karachi and west of the Indus River. Its area comprises 1,192 square miles of dry, arid landscapes with sparse, hardy vegetation and imposing rocky outcrops. Most spectacular is the 3,000 feet high Kirthar range of rocky hills ranging into Baluchistan — home of the spectacular Urial *Ovis orientalis* and Sindh Ibex *Capra ibex*. In the plains of Kirthar, Chinkara *Gazella bennettii*, Striped Hyena *Hyaena hyaena*, Jackal *Canis aureus* and Desert Fox *Vulpes cana* can be observed. Kirthar National Park lies in the arid sub-tropical scrub forest zone with very hot, dry summers and frost-free winters.

On 19.xi.2004 we visited Kirthar National Park via the easily accessible Khar entrance, due north of Karachi. Raptors seen: Fifteen Tawny Eagles *Aquila rapax*, Short-toed Snake-Eagle *Circaetus gallicus*, many Black Kites *Milvus migrans* with a

few being the northern wintering subspecies *lineatus*, two Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*, one juvenile Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus* in fresh plumage, and two to three juvenile Steppe Eagles *Aquila nipalensis*. Some years ago Bill Clark (*pers. comm.*) had seen a juvenile Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* at Khar.

At Gadap village saw a Desert Fox chased by two dogs belonging to local herdsmen.

We were able to get very close to a rather confiding Barbary Falcon *Falco peregrinus babylonicus* in typical plumage: pale, buffy-pink underparts with sparse spotting on breast, barring restricted to lower belly and thighs and diagnostic reddish nape. Got as close as fifteen feet! In the morning papers we had read that over a hundred falcons had been confiscated and released in Kirthar National Park. The three Barbary Falcons we saw appeared to have been from among those.

20.xi.2004: Following Tom Roberts' route. The next day to Thatta and Hadiero via Haleji: Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus*,