

dawn for a week, for roosting during the day. The third chick fledged on 24.xii.2003 and the last on 29.xii.2003. The fledging age was 45 to 47 days.

Conclusions

Threats to owls: Noisy behavior of the chicks is a cause of annoyance to persons in whose dwellings the nests are found. We are aware of three recent instances (2003) when people have harassed nesting Barn Owls. At Belgaum, Karnataka, people ruthlessly burned five live Barn Owl chicks to death. The reasons given were 'bad omen' and noise. At Pune, two Barn Owl nests were located in buildings in urban areas. The residents did not tolerate the noisy chicks that screeched at night. Crackers were exploded and kerosene bombs were hurled at one nest. This caused chicks to fall, leading to premature interruption of nesting activity. Transfer of such chicks to an orphanage is a popular method of rescue. However this deprives the chicks of parental care and they do not learn the art of survival in the wild. The alternative methods of *people education* and making them tolerant towards the nesting owls or *relocation of the chicks* to adjacent sites where the noise is minimized should always be tried, prior to the option of orphanage care.

Authors have succeeded in the past in both the options in respect of barn owls. Education: We persuaded a family at Kothrud, Pune, in whose building noisy Barn Owl chicks were found in 1999. They initially wanted the owls to be killed or shifted. They however tolerated the noise till the chicks fledged. They were then shown photographs of the nesting owls. People were not even aware that chicks and not adult owls call at night, and that it is their way of telling parents that they want food (Pande 2000).

Nest relocation: We would like to stress that nest relocation, a systematic and step-by-step transfer of chicks to another safer place using a nest-box, should be tried before taking them to an orphanage. This ensures continued parental care to the growing chicks. It gives them an opportunity to learn from the parents and later survive in the wild. If people remain un-cooperative and deny any of the above rescue alternatives to the nesting Barn Owls, the provisions of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, should be utilized, with the active participation the Forest Department, to make them see reason. Owls face another danger, from superstition. Man-made alternative of an orphanage should be exploited as a last resort, only when parents of the truly orphaned birds are not traceable. It should not be used in the presence of live, active parents, just to quickly overcome a man-made contingency. Nothing is more worthwhile than giving the chance of complete freedom to a bird in jeopardy than merely allowing it to survive in confinement. Though difficult to implement, alternatives do exist.

Acknowledgements

We thank the Khatavkar family and Mr Patil of Satara for helping the Barn Owls on their terrace and paving a way of tolerant co-existence with owls. We thank the Dole family of Kothrud, Pune that had helped the owls in 1999 by tolerating the presence of noisy chicks till they fledged. Anand Abhyankar of Soft Lab, Pune and Prashant Deshpande, both of ELA Foundation, deserve grateful mention for editing video footage and for providing video camera with night vision facility, respectively. We thank Dr Chandrakant Shete, Banda Pednekar, Avinash Nagare, Dr Anil Mahabal and Dr Radhesham Sharma, the latter two of the

Zoological Survey of India, for active help and participation in the project. SAP and AP, two of the authors made night visits to Satara from Pune, a to-and-fro journey of 240km on several occasions. Mr Prashant Deshpande and Avinash Nagare assisted them. They received local hospitality from several friends in Satara, especially Dr Chandrakant Shete and Mr Suryakant Shirke.

References

- Ali, Salim and S. Dillon Ripley. 1969. *Handbook of the birds of India and Pakistan together with those of Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka*. Vol. 3. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Duncan, James. 2003. *Owls of the world*. Canada: Key Porter Books.
- Kahila, G., S. Aviel and E. Tchernov. 1994. Reproductive cycle of the Barn Owls (*Tyto alba*) in nesting boxes. *Israel J. Zool.* 40: 100.
- Marti, C. D., P. W. Wagner and K. W. Denne. 1979. Nest-boxes for the management of Barn Owls. *Wildlife. Soc. Bull.* 7: 145-148.
- Pande, S. 2000. *Pakshihi Susware* (in Marathi). Pune: Padmagandha Prakashan.
- Pande, S., S. Tambe, C. Francis and N. Sant. 2003. *Birds of Western Ghats, Kokan and Malabar, including Birds of Goa*. Mumbai: Oxford University Press and Bombay Natural History Society.
- Nagarajan, R., P. Neelanarayanan, and R. Kanakasabai. 1998. Breeding biology of Barn Owl *Tyto alba stertens* in Nagapattinam, Quaid-e-Milleth District, Tamil Nadu. Chap. 23. In: *Birds in agricultural ecosystem*. (Editors: Dhindsa, M. S., P. Syamsunder Rao, and B. M. Parasharya) Society for Applied Ornithology, Hyderabad. Pp. 149-152.

Stoliczka's Bushchat *Saxicola macrorhyncha* in Hissar District, Haryana

Suresh C. Sharma¹ and P. S. Sangwan²

¹Gokul Nagar, Rohtak Road, Sonipat 131001, Haryana, India. Email: sureshcsharma@rediffmail.com

²Sangwan Hospital, Uklana, Hissar, Haryana, India. Email: pssangwan@rediffmail.com

Introduction

Stoliczka's Bushchat *Saxicola macrorhyncha* has been recorded from Haryana at Ambala, November 1866 (Whistler 1915, specimen in BMNH); Rori in Sirsa (erstwhile Hissar, then in Punjab), March 1915 (Whistler 1915, specimen in

BMNH); Sahuwala (=Sohuwala) in Sirsa (erstwhile Hissar), winter 1914 (Whistler 1915); 4) Bhutto (=Bhattu), December 1867 (specimen in BMNH); Sirsa c1850 and 1878 (Hume 1878, specimen in BMNH); Lumbee (=Lumba), Sirsa, November 1876 (specimen in BMNH); Raniya in Sirsa (erstwhile

Hissar), November 1914 (Whistler 1915, specimen in BMNH); Hansi, Hissar, c1878 (Hume 1878a); Sultanpur National Park, Gurgaon, 5.ii.2001-2.iv.2001 (Harvey).

We saw two of the mysterious Stoliczka's Bushchats near Berwala in the Hissar area on 25.i.2003. 500ha of un-

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