

Nesting of Nilgiri Wood-Pigeon *Columba elphinstonii* at Nandi Hills, Karnataka, India

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Nandi Hills (13°21'45"N, 77°40'30"E; 1,400m asl), located about 60km north of Bangalore, is a popular holiday destination. The site has recently been declared an Important Bird Area (Islam and Rahmani 2004) owing to its importance in supporting populations of Yellow-throated Bulbul *Pycnonotus xantholaemus* and the Nilgiri Wood-Pigeon *Columba elphinstonii* (Subramanya et al. 1991, 1994) and that of the critically endangered Long-billed *Gyps indicus* and White-backed Vulture *Gyps bengalensis* in the past.

Occurrence of the Nilgiri Wood Pigeon (NWP) at Nandi Hills is significant. For a species that is otherwise partial to moist inter-belt and confined to the evergreen biotope of the Western Ghats, Anaimalais, Nilgiris, Palnis and hills of western Karnataka (Ali and Ripley 1987), Nandi Hills is well outside its known distributional range. In fact, the small population of the species at Nandi Hills appears to be relictual. There are no historical records that show when this site was colonized by Nilgiri Wood-Pigeons. On top of Nandi Hills, the species is usually confined to a crater-like depression supporting evergreen vegetation with a dense shrub layer dominated by *Coffea* spp.

Interestingly, earlier surveys of Nandi Hills by Salim Ali, during his survey of the "Birds of Mysore" on 19. xii.1939 (Ali and Whistler 1941), and Ghorpade et al. (1974), did not report the Nilgiri Wood-Pigeon. During his visit to Nandi Hills, Salim Ali did not seem to have visited the evergreen patch, as his notes do not include species like Black-naped Oriole *Oriolus chinensis*, Blue-headed Rock-Thrush *Monticola cinclorhynchus*, White-throated Ground Thrush *Zoothera citrina cyanotus*, Indian Blue Robin *Luscinia brunnea*, Pied Thrush *Zoothera wardii* and Blackbird *Turdus merula* which frequent it (Prasad et al. 1995). Also, during their three visits to Nandi Hills, Ghorpade et al. (1974) do not seem to have surveyed the patch carefully, for they have not mentioned the species in their article. The occurrence of the pigeon at Nandi Hills was first noticed in 1987 (Subramanya et al. 1991), and indications of its possible nesting were only reported very recently (Karthikeyan 2000). In this article, observation on the nesting of the species is being presented.

During a trip to Nandi Hills on 31.i.2005 a small group of us observed about 10 Nilgiri Wood-Pigeons in the evergreen patch. Loosely scattered groups of four and six birds were observed on two occasions in different areas, early in the morning and later the birds could only be seen singly or in pairs. While being observed, the birds showed themselves up openly; not unduly bothered by our presence and even allowing us to get as close as 5-7m while being perched on low branches - some as low as 3m high. One pair was observed for over 10 minutes while it remained on a low branch near a clearing. Another pair appeared to be courting, within a dense *Cinnamomum camphora* (Lauraceae) canopy. One of them called, "wooo-woook-woogugu, woogugugu, ..." continuously, while standing on an horizontal branch and facing the other bird. Later, a nest of the species, with an incubating bird, was discovered. However, once the inflow of holiday crowd started passing through the evergreen patch, the birds were observed to confine themselves to the dense canopies of trees and could not be seen so easily.

The nest was built on a stout branch of a *Celtis tetrandra* (Ulmaceae) tree completely overrun by broad-leaved creepers of *Thunbergia grandiflora* (Acanthaceae). The nest and the incubating bird were very well screened by a dense tangle of creeping branches and were completely hidden from a casual observer, with only a part of the bird's neck and eyes being visible. No efforts were made to examine the nest or its contents. After this, a local boy who noticed us watching the nest, led us to another abandoned nest of the species in a dense *Murraya paniculata* (Rutaceae) bush at the edge of the evergreen patch and placed about 3m from the ground. He told us that the birds incubated a single egg in this nest during the last week of December 2004 and the egg hatched a fluffy white nestling in the first week of January 2005. Unfortunately, the nestling and the parent disappeared a week after the former was seen. The nest was a flimsy platform of loosely placed sticks. The nest was still intact without any signs of damage. In both the cases, the nest platforms were very simple affairs, made up of thin dried sticks.

Although the species has been observed breeding between May-July

within the Western Ghats with most eggs laid in May and June (Morgan 1875, Hume and Oates 1889-1890, Baker 1932-1935, Goodwin 1967), the nesting season at Nandi appears to have a local variation and commences in November / December. By taking into consideration the observations of Karthikeyan (2000) on nest building in late March, the birds probably appear to continue nesting till April-May. The two flimsy nests observed at Nandi were typical of those built by the species in being the usual "slight platform" of sticks on branches of trees and bushes, placed usually 2.5-5m from the ground (Morgan 1875, Hume and Oates 1889-1890, Murray 1889). The birds at Nandi appear to lay a single egg, as was also observed by Morgan (1875), Terry (1887) and, Hume and Oates (1889-1890).

While the birds were being observed, a troop of c40 Bonnet Macaques *Macaca radiata* invaded the area around us, often approaching close and looking at us expectantly with the hope of being fed. The troop was seen at all heights of vegetation within the evergreen patch. On one instance a Nilgiri Wood-Pigeon was heard giving out a low and harsh note while bending down aggressively towards a young macaque that was moving up a branch from two feet below. The placement of its nest in a well-concealed condition may indicate that the nesting Nilgiri Wood-Pigeon at Nandi may suffer a possible predation pressure from the macaques.

As per the Department of Horticulture officials in charge at Nandi Hills, over 1,500 macaques are known to inhabit the hilltop and have been observed to live mostly off the remains of food discarded by visitors. Between 500-1,000 people visit the hilltop during weekdays. The crowd swells to 4,000-10,000 on Sundays and even up to 30,000 on certain government holidays. In fact, a record 2,00,000 people thronged the hilltop during the night of Maha Shivarathri festival in February 2004. There has been no in-depth assessment of the impact of the macaque population and human disturbance on the land-locked population of the Nilgiri Wood-Pigeon.

A week later, the nest was still active, although it was very difficult to make out the incubating bird within the dark interior created by the tangle of creepers. The bird remained motionless with only the tail tip

projecting out of the nest and did not give any indication of being affected by the people who were moving around, often close to the nesting tree.

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Occurrence of the Painted Stork *Mycteria leucocephala* in Assam

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The Painted Stork *Mycteria leucocephala* is a resident in the Indian Sub-continent from the Indus delta in Pakistan through most parts of India, Nepal and east through to Bangladesh, where it inhabits freshwater marshes, lakes and reservoirs, flooded fields and river banks (Grimmett et al. 1998). Surprisingly, it is entirely absent in northeastern India, despite adequate habitat being present in the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam, and in low-lying areas of Manipur.

On 16.xi.2004, one of us (PB) was leading a nature tour in the Central (Kaziranga) Range of Kaziranga National Park (26°34'-26°46'N and 92°55'-93°36'E). At 10:30 hrs, while watching birds at Kathpora, a single Painted Stork was seen amidst a flock of Black-necked Storks *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus*. He informed MB about the sighting that very afternoon, who immediately went to the area in order to corroborate the sighting.

At 14:35hrs, the bird was present, in more or less the same locality, at another end of Mihi Beel (Kathpora) – a perennial ox-bow lake, where it was seen amidst 11 Black-necked Storks. Notes were taken immediately, and they are summarized as follows: Size noticeably smaller than that of Black-necked Storks (which were present

nearby for comparison); head, neck, breast and rest of under parts off-white, but grey-brown on the feathers of mid-crown; black feathers of scapulars and coverts characteristically white-tipped, but lacking the barred appearance of adult birds as those of median and greater coverts were more diffused with grey-brown around the edges; tertiary feathers beginning to show pink, but bases retaining a dirty grey-brown; off-white secondaries and dark primaries; off-white nape downwards, but feathers of mantle and upper back dull grey-brown in colour; extended down-curved beak yellow in colour, with reddish towards the base and bare areas around the eye; legs dull yellow.

From the above description, we infer that the individual is presumably a first-winter bird, as it shows signs of a juvenile under going moult. The characteristic barring on the coverts of adult birds was in an intermediate state, with diffused grey-brown tips to the feathers. The tips of the tertiaries showed a dull pink colour, and had the grey-brown base of juveniles, rather than the white of the adult. A few feathers of the crown and mantle were also grey-brown. Moreover, the feathers of the breast were not completely black, and had not formed the barring reminiscent of the adult.

The bird remained in the area for a few

days, always in association with the group of Black-necked Storks, of which four birds were juveniles. We managed to photograph the bird at 16:10hrs on 19.xi.2004, with the help of a digital camera and a 20x telescope. B. Oldrey also captured the individual on film, and the first author holds a clip of the footage. The bird was last seen on 20.xi.2004, and a search in other areas of the park in the succeeding two weeks failed to locate the bird. A Painted Stork was later seen at Bahu Beel in the western range of Kaziranga in January 2005 (Rathin Barman *pers. com.*) and its description as “not a full adult” probably refers to the same individual.

There are very few records of the Painted Stork from Assam, but loners, and at times up to three birds, have turned up in various localities (Choudhury 2000), but none from Kaziranga (Barua and Sharma 1999). None of these observations have been published with specific plumage reference or photographs, and it is not known whether these were adult birds or juveniles. It would not be surprising if more juvenile or first-winter birds were seen in Assam over the next few years, as they are more likely to be ‘pushed out’ from their normal range by adult birds, or may stray outside their normal range.