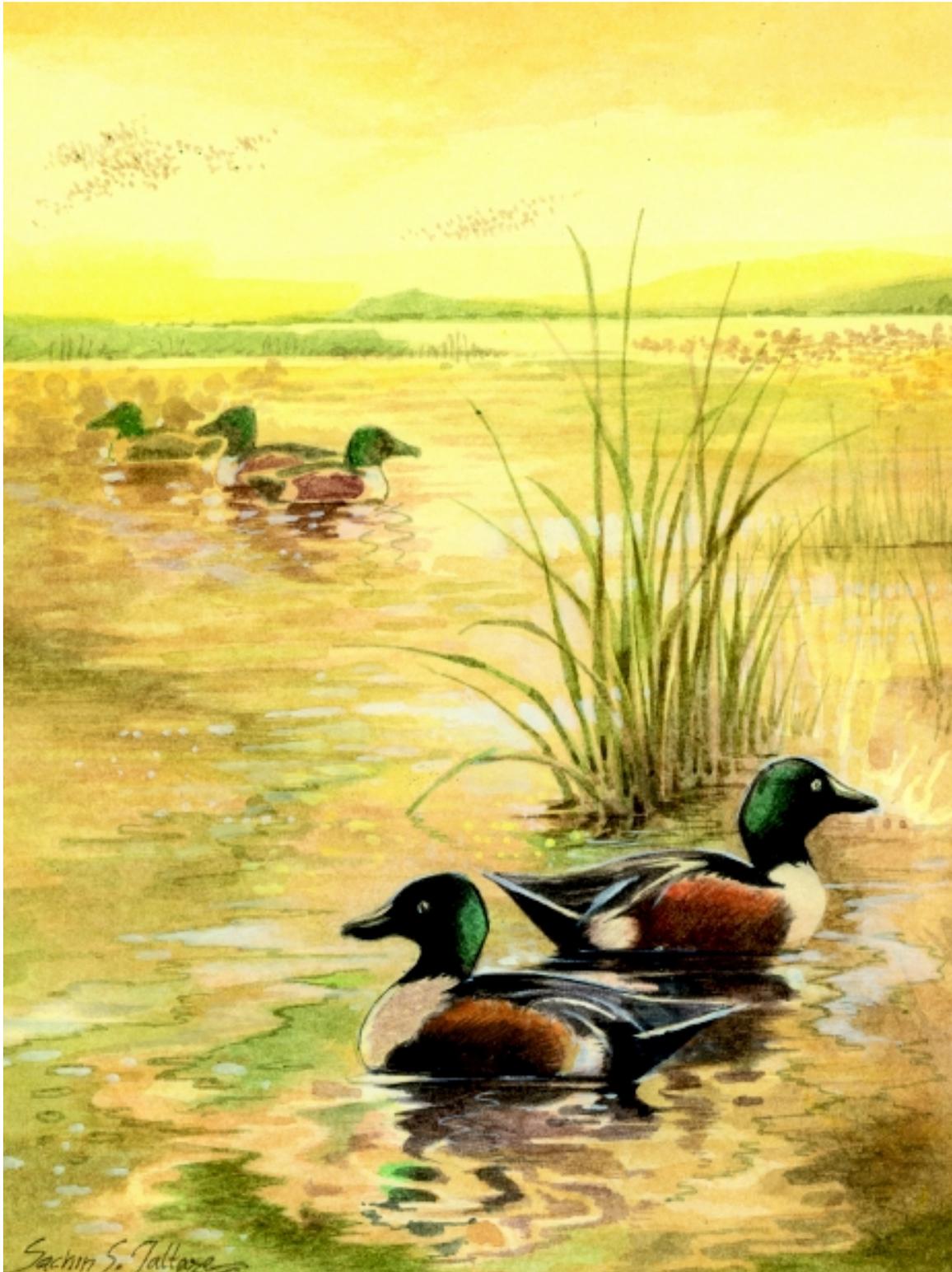


Indian Birds

Vol. 1 No. 2

March - April 2005



Newsletter for Ornithologists now re-launched as *Indian Birds*

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BIRDWATCHERS' SOCIETY OF ANDHRA PRADESH: Honorary Secretary, P.O. Box 45, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500034, India. Website: www.bsaponline.org. Email: aasheesh@vsnl.in. **Publish:** *Mayura; Pitta*.

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Ali, Salim, 2002. *The book of Indian birds*. 13th revised edition. Mumbai: Bombay Natural History Society.

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Indian Birds publishes original articles and notes about birds and birdwatching with an emphasis on South Asian birds (South Asia: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka). We welcome articles on behaviour, ecology and conservation, counts and censuses (particularly those covering multiple years), annotated checklists, trip reports, book reviews, reviews of audio recordings, letters, announcements, notices, news from the birding world, etc. Authors proposing reviews of published material should first discuss this with the editor. All manuscripts should be easy to read and understand. Manuscripts will be edited for length, content and style, and will be sent to referees when appropriate. The Editor will discuss contributions with authors and advise on modifications. Some basic guidelines are given below:

General When a bird species is first mentioned, both the English and scientific name must be given, thereafter the English name only. English and scientific names should follow Manakadan, R., and Pittie, A. 2001. Standardised common and scientific names of the birds of the Indian Subcontinent. *Buceros* 6 (1): i-ix, 1-38. Metric units and their international symbols must be used; dates and times should be of the form 1.i.2005 and 13:45hrs respectively. Numbers one to ten should be written in full, except when used with a measurement abbreviation or higher number, thus: five birds, but 5km and 5-15 birds. Numerals are used for all numbers greater than ten: 12, 120, 1,200 and 12,000.

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Contents

Winter birds of the Gya-Miru Wildlife Sanctuary, Ladakh, Jammu and Kashmir, India. <i>Tsewang Namgail</i>	26
Birds seen on a trek in the Chanshal Pass, Himachal Pradesh. <i>V. Santharam</i>	28
Birds seen on a short trip to Peechi, Kerala, India. <i>V. Santharam</i>	32
New and significant records from the Great Himalayan National Park, Himachal Pradesh, India. <i>Harkirat Singh Sangha</i>	33
Greater Spotted Eagle, Grasshopper Warbler and Broad-tailed Grassbird near Pune, Maharashtra, India. <i>Anand Prasad</i>	34
Nesting of Nilgiri Wood-Pigeon <i>Columba elphinstonii</i> at Nandi Hills, Karnataka, India. <i>S. Subramanya</i>	36
Occurrence of the Painted Stork <i>Mycteria leucocephala</i> in Assam. <i>Maan Barua & Polasz Bora</i>	37
Record of a Rufous-tailed Wheatear <i>Oenanthe xanthopyrmyna</i> from Chandigarh, India. <i>Lt. General Baljit Singh</i>	38
Extracts from the <i>Akhbaar</i> book at Kihim. <i>Zafar Futehally</i>	38
Recoveries from Newsletter for Birdwatchers – 6. <i>Zafar Futehally</i>	39
Reviews. Birds: beyond watching.	40
A review and a critique. Pictorial handbook - Shorebirds of Kerala (including gulls and terns).	41
Recent ornithological literature on South Asia and Tibet. <i>Aasheesh Pittie</i>	42
Building bridges for migratory waterbird conservation in the Central Asian Flyway. <i>Taej Mundkur</i>	46
Correspondence. Pesticides and birds – Arunayan Sharma. A crow and its cache. – Jyoti Narang. Bouquets. – William Selover; Raju Kasambe; Dipankar Ghose.	48

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Aims & Objectives

- To publish a newsletter that will provide a platform to birdwatchers for publishing notes and observations primarily on birds of South Asia.
- To promote awareness of bird watching amongst the general public.
- To establish and maintain links/liaison with other associations or organized bodies in India or abroad whose objectives are in keeping with the objectives of the Trust (i.e. to support amateur birdwatchers with cash / kind for projects in ornithology).

Cover Picture: Shovellers at sunset. 2005. Watercolour on paper (15x20cm).

Artist: Sachin S. Jaltare, Hyderabad.

Winter birds of the Gya-Miru Wildlife Sanctuary, Ladakh, Jammu and Kashmir, India

Tsewang Namgail

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Abstract

A survey of the winter birds of the Gya-Miru Wildlife Sanctuary in the Trans-Himalayan region of Ladakh, India was carried out between December 2002 and March 2003. 30 species were recorded, constituting 60% of the total resident species in Ladakh excluding Nubra Valley, and 10% of the total birds recorded in Ladakh (11% of the post-1960 records). 29 species (97%) of the birds recorded breed in Ladakh, while one, Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* is a passage migrant. The most noteworthy sightings were four species of pheasants (Phasianidae) and two of owls (Strigidae). A preliminary assessment of the potential threats to the birds in the reserve was made. This is the first avifaunal survey of the reserve, and has implications for assessing the importance of the area for bird protection.

Introduction

Ladakh is located in the western Himalaya and harbours a unique diversity of avian species. A total of 276 bird species have been reported from the area (310 species prior to 1960; Pfister 2004). The Indus Valley in Ladakh has been identified as an important migratory route for birds that migrate between central Asia in the Palaearctic region and the Indian sub-continent (Ali and Ripley 1983; Williams and Delany 1986). The vast marshlands around lakes and along the shores of the mighty Indus River in eastern Ladakh provide critical habitat for breeding migrant species such as the highly endangered Black-necked Crane *Grus nigricollis* (Pfister 2004). Besides, there are myriad resident species that are adapted to the cold and harsh environment of the region (Mallon 1987).

Although, the summer-visiting and migratory birds of Ladakh are relatively well known (Williams and Delany 1985, 1986; Hussain 1986; Holmes 1986; Pfister 2004), the breeding birds that are resident year-round have received less attention (Mallon 1987). Recognising this fact, I conducted a survey of the resident winter birds of the Gya-Miru Wildlife Sanctuary. Almost nothing is known about the faunal status of this reserve.

Study area

The proposed Gya-Miru Wildlife Sanctuary (GMWS; 33°N, 78°E) is located at the western fringe of the Tibetan Plateau, and

has close ecological affinities with Tibet. The area receives low annual precipitation of about 150mm (Hartmann 1983). The proposed reserve is located c.60km from Leh, the capital city of Ladakh, and encompasses an area of c.340km². Altitude within the reserve ranges from 3,900–5,700m. The area is bounded on the south by Tso Kar, a brackish lake, which has been identified as an important breeding area for rare bird species such as the Black-necked Crane (Gujja et al. 2003; Pfister 2004).

Besides the diverse assemblage of birds, the reserve harbours mammals such as the Tibetan Argali *Ovis ammon*, Ladakh Urial *Ovis vignei*, Blue Sheep *Pseudois nayaur*, Snow Leopard *Uncia uncia*, Tibetan Wolf *Canis lupus*, Wild Dog *Cuon alpinus*, Eurasian Lynx *Lynx lynx*, Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* and myriad small mammals (Namgail 2003). Trees such as poplar *Populus* spp. and willow *Salix* spp. are confined to the river valleys, and the most common vegetation includes *Caragana*, *Artemisia* and *Eurotia* spp. The proposed reserve has a human population of about 1,000, and is grazed by their domestic livestock such as yak, horse, donkey, cow, sheep and goat (Namgail et al. 2004).

Methods

The survey was carried out in conjunction with an ecological study of the Tibetan argali between December 2002 and March 2003. Birds were observed while walking on permanent trails on the mountain slopes and along the valleys. Most of the observations were made in the Tsabra and Khemer catchments to the south of Gya Village, although a special 3-day effort was made to cover the northern parts of the reserve in late February 2003. In addition, all the birds within the limits of the reserve were recorded while driving to and from Leh.

Results

Thirty bird species were recorded at the peak of winter (see list below). The most frequently sighted species were Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*, Bearded Vulture *Gypaetus barbatus*, Red-billed Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*, Yellow-billed Chough *P. graculus*, Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris* and Robin Accentor *Prunella rubeculoides*. Horned Larks were found in exaltations of up to 30 birds on stony slopes, while Robin Accentors

occurred in smaller flocks (1-5 birds) usually amongst the shrubs along the Tsabra Stream and near livestock corrals.

The most noteworthy sightings however were those of pheasants (Phasianidae) and owls (Strigidae). Four species of the former were recorded: Tibetan Snowcock *Tetraogallus tibetanus*, Himalayan Snowcock *T. himalayensis*, Chukor *Alectoris chukar* and Tibetan Partridge *Perdix hodgsoniae*. Tibetan Partridges were found in small flocks of up to ten birds, usually feeding amongst *Caragana* sp. bushes along the streambed of Tsabra, but all above 4,300m. During the study, I came across ten dried-up corpses of this species, perhaps having died in the summer or the previous winter, but I could not determine the cause of death. The two snowcocks were rare in the area, while the Chukar Partridges were abundant near villages, often feeding on fallow agricultural fields.

Two species of owl, Little Owl *Athene noctua* and Eurasian Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo* were recorded during the survey. The latter was seen roosting on a sandy cliff near our camp at an altitude of 4,600m. I recovered partially eaten parts of the Tibetan woolly hare *Lepus oiostolus* from the base of this roosting site. Little Owl was observed often perched on jutting stone slabs on mountain slopes during the day. The observations also included a non-resident species: Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*. A pair was seen in the icy-stream close to Lato Village.

Discussion

The 30 bird species recorded in the GMWS constitute about 10% of the total birds recorded in Ladakh (11% of the post-1960 records; Pfister 2004), and about 60% of the total resident species (Mallon 1987). Nevertheless, Mallon (1987) could not survey certain areas such as the Nubra Valley. Although migrants pass through Ladakh almost throughout the year (Williams and Delany 1985), all the species, except one, recorded in the area are known to breed in Ladakh (Pfister, 2004). The Mallard in general is a passage migrant (Pfister *in litt.* 2005). Most of the resident species in Ladakh are altitudinal migrants. Within GMWS, species like the Chukar, Tibetan Snowfinch and Great Rosefinch begin descending to lower valleys and villages from early October. They were

observed in the villages during the winter survey, but were not seen near these settlements during a summer visit. According to a popular belief, the Tibetan Snowfinch descending early is a harbinger of a severe winter.

Gya-Miru, being a transition zone between the rugged mountains of central Ladakh in the west and the vast plains of the Tibetan Plateau in the east, perhaps harbours a relatively high diversity of birds. A comprehensive survey in the area, encompassing different seasons will shed light on this aspect. In any case, it is one of the few places in Ladakh, where both Himalayan and Tibetan snowcocks co-exist. The former is mostly restricted to western Ladakh and the latter to the eastern part (Pfister 2004). Furthermore, Tibetan Partridges were observed only in the Tsubra Catchment just to the south of the Gya Village. Within Indian limits, the species is known to be restricted to eastern Ladakh (Ali and Ripley 1974), and GMWS perhaps marks the western boundary of its distribution in Ladakh, as it was not seen further west and below 4,000m (Mallon 1987).

Apart from the winter birds, the Gya-Miru may also be important for migratory birds, as it has marshlands especially along the streams. Local people mentioned about an area in the northern part of the GMWS where they see Black-necked Crane. If true, this might add a new location to the list of areas, which the species visits in Ladakh. Nevertheless, one cannot rule out the possibility that the local people were mistakenly referring to the Black Stork *Ciconia nigra*, which migrates through Ladakh (Pfister *in litt.* 2005).

Potential threats to the birds: The death of the Tibetan Partridges could be attributed to two potential factors: severe winter and/or avian disease. According to the locals, the previous winter was mild, which leaves disease as a plausible cause for the deaths. Avian disease may be an important source of mortality of birds in Ladakh (during an ecological survey in the summer of 2004 in the Hanle River Basin, I came upon about 50 corpses of Horned Lark; Namgail, unpubl. data). Such high mortality of birds in summer, when resources are abundant suggests of disease as an important cause of mortality. Such issues must be investigated immediately, as there is a high chance of any disease spreading wide because of Ladakh being an important area

for migratory birds.

Secondly, the local people collect *Caragana* and *Artemisia* bushes for firewood during winter (Pers. obs.). The impact of such extractions on the area's avian community is however not known. But it is possible that such activities affect the population of birds such as the Tibetan Partridge that forage amongst the bushes along the streambed. Furthermore, the reserve is grazed by c.8,000 domestic livestock, and the effect of livestock grazing, on birds, especially ground-nesting birds needs to be researched.

Apart from these, the livestock herders despise the Golden Eagle as it occasionally lifts lambs and kids; seven such incidences were reported during the study period. However, no incidence of retaliation or persecution was reported from the area, unlike in the case of depredation by mammalian predators. Furthermore, the Golden Eagle's feathers are used to fletch traditional arrows. Since archery is a prominent sport amongst the Ladakhis, there might be unreported incidences of killing the bird for its feathers. For example, as per anecdotal information, the bird is occasionally killed for the purpose elsewhere in Ladakh, but no such incidences occurred in Gya-Miru (Tashi Gyatso, verbally, 2003). Finally, catching birds such as Chukar to supplement the family larder was common in the past, but is currently discouraged due to the implementation of conservation laws.

Acknowledgements

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- Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* Lato, PM*.
Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*: Khemer, R.
Himalayan Griffon *Gyps himalayensis*: Puyul, R*.
Bearded Vulture *Gypaetus barbatus* Khemer, R.
Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*: Nilung, SV*.
Tibetan Snowcock *Tetraogallus tibetanus* Fidpo, R*.
Himalayan Snowcock *Tetraogallus himalayensis* Paktse, R*.
Chukor *Alectoris chukar* Gya, R.
Tibetan Partridge *Perdix hodgsoniae* Paktse, R.
Rock Pigeon *Columba livia* Gya, R.
Hill Pigeon *Columba rupestris* Gya, R.
Snow Pigeon *Columba leuconota* Miru, R*.
Eurasian Eagle-Owl *Bubo bubo* Paktse, R.
Little Owl *Athene noctua* Fidpo, R*.
Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris*: Tsubra, R.
Robin Accentor *Prunella rubeculoides* Paktse, R.
Brown Accentor *Prunella fulvescens* Miru, R*.
White-throated Dipper *Cinclus cinclus* Lato, R*.

Guldenstadt's Redstart *Phoenicurus erythrogaster* Miru, R*.
 Fire-fronted Serin *Serinus pusillus* Puyul, R*.
 Black-headed Mountain-Finch *Leucosticte brandti* Ngayul, R*.
 Mongolian Finch *Bucanetes mongolicus* Miru, R.
 Common Great Rosefinch *Carpodacus rubicilla* Nilung, R.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* Gya, R.
 Tibetan Snowfinch *Montifringilla adamsi* Kotsang, R.
 Black-billed Magpie *Pica pica*: Miru, R.
 Red-billed Chough *Pyrhocorax pyrrhocorax*: Khemer, R.
 Yellow-billed Chough *Pyrhocorax graculus*: Tsabra, R.

Carrion Crow *Corvus corone*: Miru, R*.
 Common Raven *Corvus corax*: Khemer, R*.

R=resident.

SV=summer visitor.

PM=passage migrant.

* Seen on less than five occasions.

^aLocation of the first sighting.

Birds seen on a trek in the Chanshal Pass, Himachal Pradesh

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Trekking has never been my cup of tea and I was in two minds when I agreed to accompany the Rishi Valley School team, which ran short of an escort to go with the students on a trek to the Pabbar Valley in Himachal Pradesh. In two minds because I always felt that I may not be able to actively pursue my interest in birds while on a trek where one was expected to walk a pre-determined distance each day and also as I was not sure if I would be able to keep pace with the more energetic children. But on the other hand, I had the whole vacation ahead of me with nothing planned out and the prospect of baking in the summer heat of Chennai loomed large. The trek promised a lot of snow and freezing temperatures. So why not take a chance? Better to freeze than bake, I thought. Now, in retrospect, I feel my choice was a wise one as I came back from the trek refreshed with a lot of wonderful memories and experiences and also with a lot of interesting birds on my list. I also realized that I was not as bad a trekker as I had been rating myself!

Ok, why did I title this piece a trek to Chanshal Pass whereas I am writing about Pabbar Valley trek? The answer is simple. The trek was to Chanshal Pass (4,220m) and beyond and the base camp was at Larot. To reach this, one had to take the road from Shimla going to Chirgaon via Kufri, Karapathar, Jubbal, Hatkoti, and Rohru, a distance of over 150km, due east of Shimla. The last 30km or so of the bus journey passes through the Pabbar Valley and in fact the road goes all along the Pabbar River. So we did pass through the Pabbar Valley but we went trekking up along the higher reaches. Our trek took us to the Uttaranchal border.

The journey commenced in Delhi on the hot afternoon of 18.iv.2004. We, a group of 22 students and two teachers, took a chartered bus from ISBT area and proceeded to Larot. The 17-hour journey

was uneventful and somewhat tiring. But by dawn the next morning, I began my vigil for birds and managed to see quite a few before reaching our destination. The bus was traversing through a mixed habitat of tall forest – mostly coniferous – and scattered settlements with orchards of apple and other fruit trees along a steep hillside. As the bus passed along the Pabbar River, more birds could be noticed. Several Brown Dippers *Cinclus pallasii* were noticed perched or flying over the waters below us. At regular interval there were White-capped Chaimarrornis *leucocephalus* and Plumbeous Redstarts *Rhyacornis fuliginosus*, also on the riverside rocks.

The last leg took us across the river and up a hill, a good climb of some 1,500m or so. The vegetation changed to a more temperate type with conifer trees, and it became cooler. There were orchards and scattered houses. The road was bumpy and dusty. The road we had travelled all along the river now showed as a ribbon far below us and the denuded hillside bore marks of a couple major landslides in the not too distant past. Above us, the skies were clear and blue and there were hilltops with traces of snow on their tops. Eventually we reached the base camp, a three-storey building made of wood atop the hill offering good views all around. As we climbed down, we felt refreshed by the views and the clear mountain air.

The day was meant for acclimatization as we were already at 2,500m and over the next week we were to touch 4,200m. After a wash and breakfast I went around familiarizing myself with the birds. Immediately around the camp, I could see a few birds and also heard several – some of which I was able to identify based on my earlier experiences. Grey Bushchat *Saxicola ferrea* was the most conspicuous bird in the vicinity. The Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* was heard calling and on occasions the male was

seen perched on an exposed perch with wings drooped as it sang. A lovely bird that caught my attention was the Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia*. That evening we had a taste of what the trek was going to be as we panted uphill on an uneven, rock-strewn track through the tiny village.

On 20th morning, we set off after breakfast on the first leg of the trek. We could clearly witness the rampant clearing of the forest – tree felling by burning of trees at the base to weaken them and later claiming them as fallen wood all along. We noticed flocks of sheep herded uphill for grazing in the alpine pastures. We climbed over 800m that morning, the trail being steep in places and gradual in certain stretches. We took about 4½ hours to cover the 5km distance. Towards the end, we were passing through a continuous forest stretch. The campsite at Maduie was in a forest clearing. The forest was open, comprising mostly Deodar trees and occasional maple or other hardwood trees. There was no undergrowth except along streams that carried snowmelt. *Rhododendron* clumps were now common in open meadows and they were coming into bloom with their purplish pink/blue flowers. That evening there was snowfall and rains in the neighbourhood and the night temperatures plummeted.

I was a free the next day and so while others went exploring the hill behind the camp, I went around looking for birds. The bird life was not very rich either in terms of number or variety but nevertheless proved interesting for me as I saw several 'lifers'.

On the morning of the 22nd we trekked to the highest point of the trek – the Chanshal Pass. This involved an initial steep climb along stony streambeds till we crossed the treeline and reached the open meadows. A few flowers were beginning to appear in the otherwise seemingly sterile landscape. At the end of the open meadow overlooking the deep valley over 1500m in depth stood a

cairn made of stone slabs. A few metres down the slope of the valley were trees, interspersed with *bugyals* or alpine meadows.

Beyond this, the path narrowed to about a metre in width hugging the steep slope that fell abruptly. It went just below the ridge. To the east of this ridge was Uttaranchal. A little later we could spot our destination – the next camp at Simrala in a clearing bordered by *Rhododendron* bushes and Birch trees, some three kilometres away and some 600m below the path. We climbed the steep hillside to have a view of the eastern side of the ridge, passing hard blocks of ice. The view was worth it – there were several snow-capped peaks, partly covered with clouds, stretching beyond the horizon.

As the clouds were beginning to gather, we hastened towards camp. The going was not too easy as it was slippery in places and a wrong footing could get you down the slope and end in a nasty accident. There were no habitations in sight, though we did see occasional villagers going past on their routine work or occasional shepherds with their flocks. Very soon it began snowing and luckily we were close to the camp. A little confusion led to some delay as we lost our bearings in the clump of *Rhododendron*. We reached our camp finally at 15.00 hrs.

The snowing intensified and all through the night we had snow. It was also getting freezing cold. We were afraid that the accumulated snow on the roof of the tent might bring down the tent and so in turns we kept removing snow through the night, braving the bitter cold. Early next morning, I was out and could not believe my eyes. The whole landscape was covered with snow; we had several inches of it outside on the ground. We had planned to stay here that day exploring the surrounding areas before moving out to the next site. But we had only brief sunshine for less than an hour that day and snowing continued throughout the day. The sight of snow initially thrilled all of us but as the day wore on, all our interest in snow waned and it looked as though the next day's plans were likely to be upset. The snowing ceased towards late night and next morning we woke to a bright sunny morning. We noticed the water in buckets had frozen overnight and fortunately since we were all huddled together in two tents, we did not find it too cold.

Trekking in snow proved quite tricky as we had no snow boots and other high altitude gear. Besides, we were asked to carry

our sleeping bags in addition to our usual luggage. As the sun was out, the snow began to melt and one had to move cautiously. We were to walk just six kilometers but due to the slippery conditions and extra snow en route, we had to take detours and finally ended up trekking for seven hours instead of the usual three! The entire trek was through snow. We could get a view of the magnificent landscape around us when it cleared for a while: there were breathtaking views of the greater Himalayan range, all giant peaks, covered with snow almost for 210° running NW to NE, for over a distance of 700km. The next campsite was located beside the tiny Saru Lake at the base of a hillock at an altitude of nearly 3800m. The campsite was above the treeline but just beyond the ridge into the valley were trees – mostly birch with their thin, flaky paper-like barks. There was a little bit of snow that night and the cold was intense. It was an unanimous decision the next morning that we move on to the last camp site, at a more comfortable altitude of 2300m the same day instead of staying on that night at Saru Lake camp.

After lunch, we set off this time passing through some of the most scenic forest and clearings, initially birch and *Rhododendron* and later through open conifer forests. We did the 8 km trek in five hours. We had, by now trekked in a horseshoe shaped path and we could see the base camp on the hill opposite to ours. The Kaiwala campsite was next to some fields near the village and there were welcome sounds of people, dogs and an occasional jeep. Birds were commoner now. We had a restful night, warmer than last few nights and we were fresh next morning. We explored a temple nearby and the villages that had a quaint look with cobbled alleys, wooden houses, cows, goats and other animals occupying the basement and the owners living on the first floor. We learnt that this was one of the best apple-growing belts in the Himachal and the villagers were happy to have the rains and snow after a long unusual dry spell. I spent the afternoon observing birds, especially the bar-tailed tree-creeper *Certhia himalayana* that nested next to our camp.

The last leg of the trek was downhill and then a steep climb to the base camp. My knees had given way and I decided to stick to the road that would take an extra four kilometres. I had hoped we would be able to hitch a ride on a jeep or bus going our way. Two students also thought likewise and we

walked along the road, realizing for the first time the harsh sun. No vehicles came in our direction and just as we were giving up hope we got a lift in a jeep for the last 1½kms. We reached in time for lunch.

A hot bath and shave after over nine days revived me and I felt fresh once again. That night there was a hailstorm and thunder, accompanied by strong winds. The hills, next morning, had a fresh coat of snow. It was raining in the valley below us. We left after lunch and reached Delhi the next morning to find the temperatures in Delhi and surroundings too were far more pleasant thanks to the rains.

Overall, the bird life on the trek route did not seem too rich. Perhaps it was due to the bad weather as well as the dates we had chosen – too early in the spring? A few birds were just turning up at the lower altitudes on our return journey.

An annotated list of birds seen on the trek 19-28th April, 2004

1. Bearded Vulture *Gypaetus barbatus*. Single birds seen; 1-2 at Simrala and 2-3 at Saru Lake including a juvenile bird.
2. Himalayan Griffon *Gyps himalayensis*. Common. Several birds in small flocks were seen skirting overhead in thermals.
3. Bonelli's Eagle *Hieraetus fasciatus*. Two single birds seen at Larot and Maduie, chased by crows.
4. Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*. One at Saru Lake and 1-2 at Kaiwala.
5. Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo*. Appeared to be fairly common at Larot, Kaiwala and Maduie. Active and conspicuous through the day. Heard them call from tall conifer trees especially in the early mornings "tewn...tewn...tewn". Two (once three) birds in flight, diving and chasing. Heard the wind passing through their primaries as they flew past. Seen near habitations.
6. Falcon *Falco* sp. [Peregrine?]. One in flight at Maduie.
7. Black Francolin *Francolinus francolinus*. Calls heard at Larot, Kaiwala and also from valleys at other sites.
8. [Cheer Pheasant? *Catreus wallichii*. Calls heard at Simrala (from *Rhododendron* and wooded areas), somewhat as described in Kazmierczak's *Field guide to the birds of India* (2000). Not certain.]
9. Snow Pigeon *Columba leuconota*. 32 birds flying in the valley below the head

- of the Chanshal Pass on 22.iv.2004. Also at Saru Lake – 3 in flight.
10. Oriental Turtle Dove *Streptopelia orientalis*. Commonly seen at lower altitudes, especially around Larot and Kaiwala. A couple seen at Maduie.
 11. Slaty-headed Parakeet *Psittacula himalayana*. Seen at Kaiwala (4 birds) and at Larot (heard).
 12. Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*. Common. Heard calling at several localities except at Simrala and Saru Lake. Also noticed perched atop tallest trees with drooped wings. Bubbling calls somewhat like a female Koel.
 13. Tawny Wood-owl *Strix aluco*. Heard the two-noted calls “hoo-hoo” during early morning and late night at Simrala. Calls coming from the wooded valley below.
 14. Collared Owlet *Glaucidium brodiei*. Heard calls on the morning of 28.iv at Larot. Calls distinct, a 4-noted “poop-poop-poop-poop”, repeated every few seconds, well after sunrise, though on an overcast day.
 15. Indian Jungle Nightjar *Caprimulgus indicus*. Heard the familiar call-notes “chuckoo-chuckoo-chuckoo” at Simrala, from the wooded valley.
 16. White-throated Needletail-swift *Hirundapus caudacutus*. Three birds overhead at Kaiwala on 27.iv morning.
 17. White-breasted Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis*. A single bird between Hatkoti and Rohru on 19.iv.
 18. Greater Pied Kingfisher *Megaceryle lugubris*. 3-4 birds on wires above the Pabbar River on 19.iv morning, from the bus. None seen on the return journey.
 19. Great Barbet *Megalaima virens*. A single bird at Maduie. Seen at Kaiwala and at Larot and surrounds on 27-28.iv though not on 19-20.iv.
 20. Himalayan Pied Woodpecker *Dendrocopos himalayensis*. Regularly heard and seen at Maduie. Vocal and seen associating with other bird species. Heard weak drumming on a couple of occasions. Seen feeding by flaking and prying under the bark than by pecking.
 21. Large Scaly-bellied Green Woodpecker *Picus squamatus*. One heard at Larot and a couple or so at Kaiwala.
 22. Common Swallow *Hirundo rustica*. A few in flight at Larot.
 23. White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*. 2 birds – one at Larot on 20.iv and one at Saru Lake on 25.iv.
 24. Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*. Not too often seen, at Larot and at lower altitudes.
 25. Oriental Tree Pipit *Anthus hodgsoni*. Commonly seen at Larot, Maduie and Kaiwala – in pairs, vocal.
 26. Rosy Pipit *Anthus roseatus*. Seen at higher altitudes, above treeline in grassy open areas and also on snow-covered clearings at Simrala and around Saru Lake. Appeared to be in non-breeding plumage, occasionally heard singing.
 27. Long-tailed Minivet *Pericrocotus ethologus*. Common in forested areas. Seen in small flocks, often with mixed foraging parties. Actively feeding in the mid and top canopy-levels.
 28. Himalayan Bulbul *Pycnonotus leucogenys*. Seen at Pabbar Valley and at lower altitudes, below 1,500m. Fairly common.
 29. Black Bulbul *Hypsipetes leucocephalus*. Seen in fairly good numbers, especially at Kaiwala and just above it.
 30. Rufous-backed Shrike *Lanius schah*. Common around Larot and at lower altitudes; up to three birds seen together. Noisy and active.
 31. Brown Dipper *Cinclus pallasii*. Several birds seen from bus, in the Pabbar River, when we travelled alongside. Seen flying over the water or perched on rocks or diving into water.
 32. Rufous-breasted Accentor *Prunella strophiatea*. Several seen in the *Rhododendron* thickets around Simrala campsite. Call somewhat like a flycatcher’s, but it was difficult locating the bird amongst the thickets. Finally located a bird as it came out into the open to sun itself on the ground in the snow.
 33. Blue Whistling-Thrush *Myophonus caeruleus*. Seen en-route, ahead of Hatkoti. Later saw 3-4 birds, hopping on the banks by the stream, below Kaiwala on 27.iv.
 34. White-collared Blackbird *Turdus albocinctus*. 2 at Maduie on 22.iv and on 25.iv between Saru Lake and Kaiwala in wooded country.
 35. Eurasian Blackbird *Turdus merula*. 1-2 birds heard in the vicinity of Simrala camp, from trees near the *Rhododendron* bushes.
 36. Orange-flanked Bush-Robin *Tarsiger cyanurus*. Several birds, quite tame and confiding, seen especially at Maduie in open areas and by the stream and also while trekking to Kaiwala from Saru Lake at higher altitude. Conspicuous blue tail, more yellowish than orange flanks noticed. Kept flicking the tail and flying down to the ground to forage, assuming an upright stance. Calls: two-noted, frog-like croaks! Also heard singing. Saw a pair carrying fibres and roots to a hole under a rock along our trek-path.
 37. Blue-capped Redstart *Phoenicurus caeruleocephalus*. 1-2 birds at the Chanshal Pass.
 38. White-capped Redstart *Chaimarrornis leucocephalus*. 3-4 birds at lower altitudes in the Pabbar Valley, from the bus.
 39. Plumbeous Redstart *Rhyacornis fuliginosus*. Below Kaiwala village and along Pabbar River.
 40. Common Stonechat *Saxicola torquata*. 3-4 birds on 27.iv on the trek from Kaiwala to Larot. Seen in dry, grass-scrub area with scattered trees and cultivation.
 41. Grey Bushchat *Saxicola ferrea*. Common at Larot and Kaiwala, close to habitations and along roadsides, sitting on conspicuous perches on treetops or on bushes. Vocal, warbling notes heard.
 42. Streaked Laughingthrush *Garrulax lineatus*. At lower altitudes, especially at Larot, Kaiwala and during trek. Confiding if not disturbed. Often seen from close, foraging in the undergrowth and sometimes in open areas and clearings.
 43. Variegated Laughingthrush *Garrulax variegatus*. Noticed 3-4 birds at Kaiwala. Silent.
 44. Yellow-naped Yuhina *Yuhina flavicollis*. A single bird in a mixed foraging flock at Maduie. Silent.
 45. Brown Prinia *Prinia criniger*. Present in the open scrub-covered hillsides, actively moving about and calling from trees and bushes, below Larot.
 46. Brown-flanked Bush-Warbler *Cettia fortipes*. Common and vocal but rather difficult to spot. Distinct calls. Seen / heard at Larot and Kaiwala, in partly open areas.
 47. Blyth’s Reed-Warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum?* A couple in *Rhododendron* clumps at Maduie.
 48. Lemon-rumped Warbler *Phylloscopus chloronotus*. Commonly seen at Larot,

- in the forested area above Kaiwala and at Simrala. Yellow rump seen as it hovered to catch insects.
49. Greenish Leaf-Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides*. In song especially at Larot and Kaiwala. Suspected 1-2 other *Phylloscopus* species were around, but never got around to identifying them.
 50. Gold-spectacled Flycatcher-Warbler *Seicercus burkii*. A single bird at Maduie.
 51. Grey-headed Flycatcher-Warbler *Seicercus xanthoschistos*. A couple of birds at Larot on 28.iv (and never noticed one earlier here or elsewhere on the trek!). Active and getting into song.
 52. Sooty Flycatcher *Muscicapa sibirica*. Noticed in forests of tall conifers while trekking between Larot and Maduie and again between Saru Lake and Kaiwala.
 53. Rusty-tailed Flycatcher *Muscicapa ruficauda*. One bird at Kaiwala on 26.iv.
 54. Ultramarine Flycatcher *Ficedula superciliaris*. Common at Maduie and Kaiwala. 1-2 at Larot.
 55. Slaty-blue Flycatcher *Ficedula tricolor*. A hen seen on 23.iv afternoon at the stream next to *Rhododendron* clumps behind the tents at Simrala. The bird was brown above, with white eye-ring, paler under parts and some red on the tail. Fed on the ground, remaining still for a long time, not particularly shy. But when it felt threatened, it dived into the bushes. [Identified with the help of T. J. Roberts' *Birds of Pakistan* Vol II (1992).]
 56. Asian Paradise-Flycatcher *Terpsiphone paradisi*. A lovely male seen along the hillside near the path outside Hatkoti temple on 28.iv afternoon.
 57. Red-headed Tit *Aegithalos concinnus*. Several birds in a flock, foraging at the mid-canopy level at Kaiwala on 26-27.iv. Quite tame.
 58. White-throated Tit *Aegithalos niveogularis*. Single birds or pairs in the wooded areas at Maduie and Simrala (and also possibly en-route, while trekking). Associated with other small passerines, especially Spot-winged Tit at Maduie. Not very shy and gave good views. Did not appear uncommon in these sites. White throat (with greyish bib) contrasted well with brownish under parts and the dark eye-band. However the colour of upper parts was considerably paler than illustrated in field guides (especially Kazmierczak 2000). Roberts' book has a better and more accurate illustration.
 59. Simla Crested Tit *Parus rufonuchalis*. 3-4 birds at Simrala on trees behind our tents.
 60. Spot-winged Crested Tit *Parus melanolophus*. Common, tame and regularly noticed at Maduie.
 61. Green-backed Tit *Parus monticolus*. 2 or 3 pairs at Kaiwala, carrying food in beak. Perhaps had nestlings.
 62. White-cheeked Nuthatch *Sitta leucopsis*. A single bird in a loose mixed foraging flock on 21.iv at Maduie.
 63. Bar-tailed Tree-Creeper *Certhia himalayana*. 3-4 birds seen at Maduie and later at Kaiwala, where two pairs were present. One nest seen at Kaiwala on a dead Deodar trunk, inside a deep crack, just 2.5m above the ground. Birds seen foraging assiduously on nearby trees, collecting 5-6 insects per foray and returning to feed young at nest. Saw, from 6m, one of the birds entering the hole and feeding the young. After feeding, the bird collected the faecal sac and flew out. Seen actively foraging even around 18:00hrs. Heard feeble call-notes.
 64. Oriental White-eye *Zosterops palpebrosus*. A few birds at Kaiwala. Possibly nesting as a bird was observed carrying food in its beak.
 65. Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia*. A pair seen around the guest house at Larot on 20.iv and 28.iv. Male appeared lovely in grey and chestnut brown attire. Often flicked tail and occasionally called. Part of courtship display?
 66. Yellow-breasted Greenfinch *Carduelis spinoides*. Five birds in flight from a field near Rohru on 19.iv morning, seen from bus. Distinct colours and pattern helped identify the birds.
 67. Eurasian Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*. Single bird in a field at lower elevation during trek to Larot on 27.iv.
 68. Spectacled Finch *Callacanthis burtoni*. A pair foraging on the ground at Maduie on 21.iv morning. Not too shy, allowed good views. Later a hen was seen on a tree in a mixed foraging flock. The 'spectacles' and white wing spots quite distinct.
 69. Dark-breasted Rosefinch *Carpodacus nipalensis*. Couple of birds on 23.iv morning at Simrala. Lighting was not too good and could not make out much detail except the dark breast band.
 70. Common Rosefinch *Carpodacus erythrinus*? A single bird seen briefly on a treetop at Kaiwala.
 71. Black-and-Yellow Grosbeak *Mycerobas icteroides*. About four birds seen atop trees on 22.iv above Maduie, close to treeline. The "priu-priu" calls were often heard on two days before this at Maduie and en route while trekking.
 72. Spotted-winged Grosbeak *Mycerobas melanozanthos*. Single bird on 27.iv while trekking to Larot, on a tall bare tree close to orchards.
 73. House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*. Appears common at Rohru, Hatkoti, etc.
 74. Cinnamon Tree Sparrow *Passer rutilans*. Common at Larot and Kaiwala. Nest seen constructed in a tree-hole of a tall conifer at Larot. Birds seen carrying nest materials. Also nesting at Kaiwala. Commonly seen at the villages on trek route.
 75. Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*. Seen at the valley and villages below Kaiwala.
 76. Jungle Myna *Acridotheres fuscus*. Seen around Rohru on morning of 19.iv.
 77. Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*. Saw 2-3 birds at Chirgaon (near Rohru) and at Hatkoti.
 78. Ashy Drongo *Dicrurus leucophaeus*. 2-3 birds at Larot and Kaiwala.
 79. Yellow-billed Blue Magpie *Urocissa flavirostris*. A bird at Jubbal in flight on 19.iv; 4 in flight at Kaiwala on 25.iv; 2 near Rohru on 28.iv.
 80. Spotted Nutcracker *Nucifraga caryocatactes*. 3 birds at Maduie on 20.iv. Heard their nasal "kraa- kraa" calls a couple of times here and elsewhere. At Larot on 28.iv morning.
 81. Red-billed Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*. 3 birds at Chanshal in flight on 22.iv noon. At Saru Lake on 25.iv, two birds landed on the rocks on the hillside. Appeared wary. Calls also heard.
 82. Jungle Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos*. Ubiquitous near habitations and campsites, looking for scraps of food.

Birds seen on a short trip to Peechi, Kerala, India

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Along with ten students and a colleague from Rishi Valley School, I spent three days (2-4.i.2004) in Peechi at the Kerala Forest Research Institute and we took off into the forest area (actually the overgrown "Botanical Garden") when we were free. Returning to Peechi after a gap of over ten years was almost like homecoming for me. Having spent two years here between 1991 and 1993 studying the ecology of woodpeckers, I had been fascinated by the rich bird life of this forest, generally considered degraded, and poor in large mammals. I was apprehensive at the kind of changes that could have taken place over the intervening years (there had been rumours that the Zoological Gardens were shifted here from Thrissur town) and had anticipated the worst.

What a pleasant surprise it was to see the "Botanical garden" area that is just adjacent to the Dam, a major tourist attraction, still in excellent condition! In fact I felt the place had become more overgrown and wild since my last visit and this was borne out by the subtle changes in the still rich bird life. Tall, moist deciduous trees towered up to 25m or so and there was impenetrable undergrowth in some areas. It appears that there is also a considerable reduction in the movement of people and vehicles over the years. The plantation areas of *Eucalyptus* sp., showed signs of regeneration of native vegetation.

The vegetation was still lush and the trees had not yet shed their leaves although it was the beginning of the dry season. The Silk Cotton *Bombax ceiba* trees were in bloom while *Melia dubia* and *Sterculia guttata* were in fruit. The weather was pleasant with clear skies, cool nights and warm days.

In the seven and a half hours (two mornings and one late afternoon) spent out in the forest area and the reservoir, we recorded 103 species of birds. This is a sizeable figure as I had recorded a total of 219 species in the Sanctuary during my stay here (Santharam, *in press*).

Of the eight woodpecker species I had studied here, I now recorded only six Brown-capped Pygmy *Dendrocopos nanus*, Rufous *Celeus brachyurus*, Small Yellow-naped *Picus chlorolophus*, Little Scaly-bellied Green *Picus xanthopygaeus*, Lesser Golden-backed *Dinopium benghalense* and Greater

Golden-backed Woodpecker *Chrysocolaptes lucidus*. Only three of them (first and the last two) were common as in those days and three others were only heard once or twice. The Heart-spotted Woodpecker *Hemicircus canente*, a favourite of mine, which used to nest in the area, was missing, as was the Yellow-fronted Pied Woodpecker *Dendrocopos mahrattensis*. Both barbets, White-cheeked *Megalaima viridis* and Coppersmith *M. haemacephala*, were both common.

15-20 Green Imperial-Pigeons *Ducula aenea* were noticed sunning atop trees and flew when we approached too close. Yellow-legged Green-Pigeons *Treron phoenicoptera* were also regularly seen, as was the Emerald Dove *Chalcophaps indica*, often noticed in its dashing low flight across the paths.

A male Malabar Trogon *Harpactes fasciatus* was spotted, quietly perched on a tree, and was the star attraction. We followed it as it flew to another tree. I do not remember seeing the bird here earlier, though it was recorded from other sites in the sanctuary fairly often. Another bird that captivated the students' attention (even the least interested ones yearned to catch a glimpse of it) was the Fairy Bluebird *Irena puella*. There were at least two pairs moving about rather rapidly amongst the dense foliage and there was a scramble for binoculars. Although everyone got a good look, they were willing to spend more time, well past the breakfast, to watch it longer.

Greater Racket-tailed Drongo *Dicrurus paradiseus* was another attractive bird that was often sighted with the mixed flocks of foraging forest birds. Just as the birds followed the drongo (or was it the other way around?) we followed the drongo and got to see other birds that included the Bronzed *D. aeneus* and Grey Drongos *D. leucophaeus*, Small *Pericrocotus cinnamomeus* and Scarlet Minivets *P. flammeus*, the occasional Large *Coracina macei* and Black-headed Cuckoo-Shrikes *C. melanoptera*, Large *Tephrodornis gularis* and Common Woodshrikes *T. pondicerianus* and Great Tits *Parus major*, apart from woodpeckers. I missed the Velvet-fronted Nuthatches *Sitta frontalis* – perhaps they were overlooked in the crowd!

Three species of orioles – the Eurasian Golden *Oriolus oriolus*, Black-headed *O.*

xanthornus and the rare, migratory Black-naped *O. chinensis* were all there. Two Spangled Drongos *Dicrurus hottentottus* were seen at a *Bombax* tree. I was eager to renew my contacts with the Black-crested (Ruby-throated) Bulbul *Pycnonotus melanicterus* that was, ten years ago, the commonest bulbul in the area and was, after some efforts, able to locate a pair in the *Eucalyptus* plantation. This was hardly surprising, as there were several endemic Grey-headed Bulebuls *P. priocephalus*, a species that was rarely seen earlier. Ali [*Birds of Kerala*, Oxford University Press, 1983 (reprint)] notes that while both these species occur in similar habitats, the latter prefers more humid areas with denser (forest) growth. How true! In the last ten years the vegetation has grown much denser, especially the undergrowth, to the extent that I could not locate some of the paths I used to take during my fieldwork. I do hope other parts of the sanctuary too are getting back the vegetation. Another bird that appears to have established itself here is the Yellow-browed Bulbul *Iole indica*. It was not too common earlier.

Black-naped Monarch *Hypothymis azurea*, Asian Paradise *Terpsiphona paradisi*, Asian Brown *Muscicapa dauurica*, a lone Brown-breasted *M. muttui*, Verditer *Eumyias thalassina* and Tickell's Blue *Cyornis tickelliae* represented flycatchers. The thrush family too was well represented with Malabar Whistling-thrush *Myophonus horsfieldii*, which enthralled briefly with its school-boy whistles (that our boys tried mimicking rather unsuccessfully!), the White-throated subspecies of the Orange-headed Ground Thrush *Zoothera citrina*, Black-capped subspecies of the Eurasian Blackbirds *Turdus merula*, Oriental Magpie-Robin *Copsychus saularis* and White-rumped Shama *C. malabaricus*. I was glad to see the Shama, as there had been only one pair here ten years ago.

Indian Hanging-Parrots *Loriculus vernalis* were as common as earlier, as were the Plum-headed Parakeets *Psittacula cyanocephala*. Banded Bay Cuckoos' *Cacomantis sonneratii* calls were frequently heard. A Stork-billed Kingfisher *Halcyon capensis* seen next to a White-breasted *H. smyrnensis* cousin provided good comparison for the novice birdwatchers.

Crested Tree-Swifts *Hemiprocne coronata* were commonly seen in the *Eucalyptus* plantation where I had known them to roost and nest. Only once did I hear the calls of the Grey Junglefowl *Gallus sonneratii* and the Red Spurfowl *Galloperdix spadicea*. Both the Jungle *Turdoides striatus* and White-headed Babblers *T. affinis* were seen, the latter in more open areas. The Spotted Babbler's *Pellorneum ruficeps* melodious calls were heard once. Thick-billed *Dicaeum agile*, Tickell's *D. erythrorhynchos* and perhaps the Plain Flowerpeckers *D. concolor*, Purple *Nectarinia asiatica*, Purple-rumped *N. zeylonica* and Loten's Sunbirds *N. lotenia* were noticed often.

Grey-headed Starlings *Sturnus malabaricus* were seen in good numbers on the *Bombax* trees. These birds were also noticed in flight one evening towards dusk in Thrissur, right in the busiest localities in the centre of the town. I remember seeing several Rosy Starlings *S. roseus* here in the dry season when the *Bombax ceiba* trees in the vicinity of the temple were in bloom.

Raptors present include the Changeable Hawk-Eagle *Spizaetus cirrhatus* - which in this case did not change its old haunts and was perhaps nesting on the same *Terminalia paniculata* tree, Oriental Honey-Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus*, Crested

Serpent-Eagle *Spilornis cheela*, Shikra *Accipiter badius* and Black Kite *Milvus migrans*. The birds seen in the vicinity of the reservoir from the dam include Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*, River Tern *Sterna aurantia*, Indian Shag *Phalacrocorax fuscicollis* - (2-3 birds), Little Egretta *garzetta* and Cattle egrets *Bubulcus ibis*, Indian Pond-Ardeola *grayii* and Black-crowned Night Herons *Nycticorax nycticorax*. Two Franklin's Nightjars *Caprimulgus affinis* were heard at dusk across the dam along the scrub-covered slope. Several Indian Edible-nest Swiftlets *Collocalia unicolor*, House *Apus affinis* and Asian Palm-Swifts *Cypsiurus balasienis*, Red-rumped Swallows *Hirundo daurica* and Ashy Woodswallow *Artamus leucorhynchus* were seen in flight, hawking insects.

It was wonderful to be back at Peechi and it was interesting to notice the subtle but significant changes in the bird life following the changes in the vegetation. We need to monitor such changes over long time periods to see how the wildlife responds to changes in the vegetation. Peechi appears ideal given its easy access and rich and diverse bird life. Perhaps Nameer or someone else from nearby areas would take the initiative to re-survey the birds of this sanctuary.

Other species seen on the visit: Common Hoopoe *Upupa epos*, Chestnut-headed Bee-eater *Merops leschenaulti*, Asian Koel *Eudynamis scolopacea*, Greater Coucal *Centropus sinensis*, Blue Rock Pigeon *Columba livia*, Spotted Dove *Streptopelia chinensis*, Indian Robin *Saxicoloides fulicata*, Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus*, Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus*, Common Iora *Aegithina tiphia*, Indian Treepie *Dendrocitta vagabunda*, Indian Pitta *Pitta brachyura*, Gold-fronted Chloropsis *Chloropsis aurifrons*, House *Corvus splendens* and Jungle crows *C. macrorhynchus*, Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*, Red-whiskered *Pycnonotus jocosus*, Red-vented *P. cafer* and White-browed Bulbuls *P. luteolus*, Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius*, Blyth's Reed- *Acrocephalus dumetorum* and Greenish Leaf-Warblers *Phylloscopus trochiloides*, Yellow-throated Sparrow *Petronia xanthocollis*, White-rumped Munia *Lonchura striata* and Large Pied Wagtail *Motacilla maderaspatensis*.

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New and significant records from the Great Himalayan National Park, Himachal Pradesh, India

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The Great Himalayan National Park (GHNP; Himachal Pradesh, India), represents the best example of undisturbed west Himalayan temperate forest and falls within one of the globally Endemic Bird Areas (DO2: Western Himalayas) identified by the ICBP Biodiversity Project (Gaston et al. 1994). But the birds of GHNP have not been exhaustively surveyed. Both Babault (1920) and Whistler (1926) visited Parbati Valley, a day's walk from the park boundary and Wynter-Blyth (1952) passed through Tirthan Valley, not far from the park. There is no published account reporting birds from the actual park area, except by Gaston et al. (1994). The purpose of this note is to update published information on the avifauna of the park with additional records from birdwatching trips to the Tirthan Valley during 16-20.vi.2002 and 13-24.iv.2003.

New records

1. Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus*: Four birds were observed on 13.iv.2003 near

Sai Ropa (c.1440m). Later five birds were seen outside the park in the afternoon on 24.iv.2003 at the Rohtang Pass (3,978m). Both the groups were migrating northwards.

2. Shikra *Accipiter badius*: A male was observed calling in the afternoon on 23.iv.2003 and again in the morning on 24.iv.2003 at Sai Ropa. It is possible that the species moves to the higher areas during summer.

3. Plum-headed Parakeet *Psittacula cyanocephala*: A small flock of five birds was observed near Sai Ropa at c1600m on 18.vi.2002, considerably higher than the known altitudinal range of 600m for the species (Kazmierczak 2000).

4. House Swift *Apus affinis*: More than 200 were seen in the afternoon near Sai Ropa on 24.iv.2003. For fifteen minutes or so they hunted in the valley before flying away.

Significant records

1. Western Tragopan *Tragopan melanocephalus*: This 'Vulnerable'

pheasant was heard late in the evening of 15.iv.2003 at 17:50hrs while camping at Shilt (c.3100m). The wailing call was heard nine times. On 16.iv.2003, early in the morning, it started calling at 05:30hrs and continued up to 07:00hrs with an odd-call at 09:00hrs also. While walking on the slippery track from Shilt to Chhoa Dar, one was flushed near the camp. Unlike Koklass Pheasant *Pucrasia macrolopha* and Impeyan Monal *Lophophorus impejanus* it did not call when flushed. However, its wings made a curious, rattling sound, very different from the other pheasants. Around 07:55hrs one male flew down the slope and landed on the track barely 5m from us! For five seconds we were treated to an eye-filling view of his spiky black crest, scarlet face and nape and flame-red breast. Seeing us so close the startled bird walked 2m or so up the slope before turning and wheeling down the steep mountainside, twisting between the trees. Another male flew behind that one, but kept

going down slope, giving good views in flight. We also flushed a female before returning to the camp.

On 17.iv.2003 a bird called at 05:15hrs for about four minutes. Another bird started calling soon after from a different direction. A third bird called around 06:15hrs.

We trekked up to Khorli Poi (c.3000m) on the opposing north face of the valley where we camped for two days. In the inclement weather, with heavy snowfall, we did not see tragopans, but two males were heard. A male roosting some distance from our tents, started calling at night (03:45hrs). Two more birds from different directions called from the first light of pre-dawn on 21.iv.2003. On

22.iv.2003 one bird called sporadically during the night (02:45 hrs).

2. Cheer Pheasant *Catreus wallichi*: The only time we heard this 'Vulnerable' species was from the top of the south-facing slope near Rolla. The birds called at 17:45hrs for a minute or two on 18.iv.2004.

3. Orange Bullfinch *Pyrrhula aurantiaca*: Previously reported only by Ben King (Gaston et al. 1994) who visited the park from 27.ix-2.x.1984. One female was observed near Shilt on 16.iv.2003. Kazmierczak (2000) gives only three isolated records from Himachal Pradesh and one from Uttaranchal outside Jammu and Kashmir, of this 'Near-threatened' species.

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Greater Spotted Eagle, Grasshopper Warbler and Broad-tailed Grassbird near Pune, Maharashtra, India

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Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga* is considered Vulnerable by BirdLife International (2001). It is an uncommon winter visitor to western Maharashtra but difficulty in separation from Indian Spotted Eagle *Aquila hastata* makes records uncertain but Greater / Indian Spotted Eagles are not uncommonly sighted in the Deccan, often near water.

I observed an adult for half an hour beside the Mula-Mutha about 4km east of Koregaon Park, Pune on 4.ii.2005 and managed to take many photographs clearly showing the short gape extending only to the middle of the eye, the dark brown iris and circular nostril, which separates this species from Indian Spotted Eagle, Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis* and Tawny Eagle *Aquila rapax*.

The following unconfirmed records are claimed from the Pune District: **Ujani**, between 11-12.i.1997, SS (SS in litt. 2002); **Ujani** 1 on 5.ii.1994 (AP pers. obs.); **Bhimashankar** undated (Kalpavriksh 2001); **Bhimashankar** Pune District, undated (Islam & Rahmani 2004); **Khamgaon** 1 adult on 22.xii.2002, RP (RP in litt. 2.i.2003); **Varvand** 1 adult on 22.xii.2002, RP (RP in litt. 2.i.2003); **Pashan** Pune, 'a few records,' undated, RP (RP in litt. 2002).

There are also the following unconfirmed records from the Bombay area: **Near Bombay** Monga (2001) lists it as occasional and there have been 12 reports from around Bombay between 2000-2002 on <birdsofbombay@yahoo.com>, and raptor expert Clark (1994) recorded it once in October 1990 and again in February 1996

(MD 18.xii.2000 <birdsofbombay@yahoo.com>). In the Bombay area up to and including the Ghats, Abdulali (1981) lists it as uncommon; Ali & Abdulali (1938) had only two records from Bombay and Salsette and considered it a straggler. The quote from Abdulali (1981) in BirdLife International (2001) 'uncommon' has been misinterpreted, as the species is unbracketed and therefore refers only to the Bombay area up to and including the Ghats and not the whole of Maharashtra. Further records claimed from near Bombay: Mahul, 1+ on 12.xii.2001 (Verma 2004); SGNP, one in January 1987 (BirdLife International 2001); Mahul-Sewri, Bombay, undated (Islam & Rahmani 2004); SGNP, Bombay, undated (Islam & Rahmani 2004); Thane Creek, Bombay / Thane District, undated (Islam & Rahmani 2004); Bombay, the record of a male specimen from January 1939 at FMNH in BirdLife International (2001) is incorrect, there is no such specimen (Field Museum 2004).

Further unconfirmed records from: **Taloda** and **Toranmal** Dhule District, undated (Islam & Rahmani 2004).

There are two confirmed records from: **Lake Beale**, Nasik District, the two specimens in the BNHS collection (Abdulali 1969) are presumably the same specimens given as Lake Beale (December 1949) and Ghoti (December 1957) in BirdLife International (2001).

In the 19th century Davidson and Wenden (1878), observed it several times in the Deccan and 'believed (it) to breed near the Ekroot tank,' Sholapur District and Butler

(1881) found it to be not common and very local. The breeding mentioned in Khandesh by Ali & Ripley (1983) is discounted by BirdLife International (2001).

In Goa, Lainer (2004) records it as a locally, fairly common winter visitor and cites various sources.

Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella naevia* is another rarely recorded winter visitor to western Maharashtra but is probably under-recorded due to its skulking nature. It is more common in the Bombay neighbourhood including the Ghats (Monga 2001, Ali & Abdulali 1945, Abdulali 1981). I was sitting under the shade of the hillside at Bopdeo Ghat in the spot where the photograph was taken, about 4-5km west of the crest of the ghat on 6.ii.2005. I had sat for about 45 minutes and had heard some rustling close behind me, which I had presumed to be of mice or lizards. When I got up to stretch and move off a bird flew from the grass right behind me. Luckily it was as surprised as me and had to alight nearby low down near a bush in order to check me out. This gave me time to see the clear fairly strong brown stripes on the pale long under-tail coverts and the clearly but finely striped markings on the side of the upper-breast (possibly right across but not seen fully) and the strongly marked dark centred greater coverts. The upper-parts were an overall pale sandy yellowy brown with brown stripes and the ground colour of the under-parts was off white. There was a fairly faint pale supercilium and a dark eye-stripe and the alarm call was a tongue clicking 'tsuk'. The bird then dived into cover and could

not be lured out again. The pale upper-parts is typical of some individuals of the race *straminea* the only known race occurring in India, which are either grey-brown or sandy-olive above (Baker 1997). Lanceolated Warbler *Locustella lanceolata*, which is a very similar species, typically shows more streaking on the upper-tail coverts and breast and usually less extensive streaking on the lower under-tail coverts than Grasshopper Warbler.

Recorded by others around Bombay: **Bombay area** 'Small numbers' (Monga 2001); **Bombay and neighbouring area**, occasional, migrant (Abdulali 1981); **Bombay** (Additions to their original paper), 'first noticed in tall grass on border of a swamp near Mumbra (11.i.1943). We have subsequently met it on several occasions across the Harbour at Powai and also at Lake Beale (Ghoti) Nasik District. Bird shot on 15th November was in general moult. It is apparently a fairly common winter visitor,' (Ali & Abdulali 1945).

Further records from: **Pune** 'met with in rice fields and bushes of reeds in wet patches around Pune,' (Mahabal & Lamba 1987); **Ghoti** Nasik District (1), **Kalyan** Thane District (1), **Thana** Thane District (2), **Panvel** Raigad District (1), specimens in BNHS collection (Abdulali 1986); **Alibag-Roha** Raigad District, two on 10.xi.2002, SD (Prasad 2003).

There is an unusual record of a migrating individual at an unspecified location at sea **between the Bombay High Oilfield and the Gulf of Kambay** Gujarat on 31.x.1983 (Simpson 1984).

The species was unrecorded and possibly overlooked in 19th century in western Maharashtra although further south at Belgaum Butler (1881) found it 'not uncommon' in 'standing crops, rice fields, sugarcane and tall reed-beds' and there are the following records from Goa: **Tivim-Damedem** one on 31.xii.2000, GF, one on 27.i.2002, GF (Lainer 2004); **Candolim Salt Pans** one in xi.1994, AR (Willoughby 1996); **Tambdi Surla** one between 29.xi-19.xii.1999, although there were errors in this list (Dennis & Dennis 1999).

Broad-tailed Grassbird *Schoenicola platyura* is categorised as Vulnerable by BirdLife International (2001). There have been a number of recent records from western Maharashtra, where it was previously unrecorded and the species may be more common than previously supposed on the unexplored grassy hills of the Ghats.

I flushed one individual on 6.ii.2005 from just in front of me on the small path about 3-4km west of the temple at the top of Bopdeo Ghat, Pune District. The bird landed nearby low down in a bush and allowed me to see the broad tail, uniform earth brown upper-parts and fairly short stout bill, which was reminiscent of a Rufous-tailed Finch-Lark *Ammomanes phoenicurus*. The habitat was a steep grassy hillside with scattered bushes (see photograph).

Previous records from Maharashtra include: **Ramshej Ghat** Nasik District, 'is again displaying this time at a place 3kms away from last year,' (BR in litt. 19.viii.2004); **Ramshej Ghat** 'Displaying at about 1000m elevation,' in 'half of August 2003. Uncommon,' video footage taken (BR in litt. 12.x.2003, *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* in prep., BR in litt. 9.ix.2003, ZI in litt. 30.viii.2003); **INS Shivaji, Lonavla** Pune District, one on 10.xi.2002, 'hillsides interspersed with low bushes. The coarse grasses have grown to 2-3 feet high,' KS (KS in Islam & Rahmani 2004, Prasad 2003); **Pune** no details give, possibly referring to previous record (Pande *et al.* 2003); **Amba valley** Pune District, two in about October-November 2001. 'They were in a thicket with clumps of Carissa and plenty of undergrowth. There were a couple of large Mango trees and the thicket was bounded by agricultural land on one side and open scrub interspersed with open grassy meadows with 3 foot high grass on the other sides,' VB (Prasad 2003); **Rajgurunagar** Sahyadri School, Pune District, two between 29.i-4.ii.2001 VS (Prasad 2003); **Dhule District** untraced isolated record (Grimmett *et al.* 1998, BirdLife International 2001).

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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.

Acknowledgements

I thank Dr Eric and Christine Lott for inviting me on the trip to Nandi Hills and Lloyd Nehemiah, Drecie Ch. Marak, Oscar Prabhakar, Sandeep, Kitty Ch. Marak, Chea Amelia Ch. Marak, Nishil Mark D. Mathew and Milind Yohann Mathew for helping in sighting different individuals of Nilgiri Wood Pigeons and locating the nest. Thanks are also due to Dr. George Ommen, Lloyd Nehemiah, and Joel George Mathew for having taken me to Nandi Hills a week later. Assistance of the local boy and the local staff on top of Nandi is gratefully acknowledged.

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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.

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Record of a Rufous-tailed Wheatear *Oenanthe xanthopyrmyna* from Chandigarh, India

Lt. General Baljit Singh

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This is a record of the sighting of a solitary Rufous-tailed Wheatear *Oenanthe xanthopyrmyna* in Chandigarh city (north India) at 08:15hrs on 6.x.2003.

Location: Chandigarh city lies at the junction of the Shivalik Ranges (the lowest and the first southern out-crop of the Himalaya) and the plains of North India. In the northern half of Chandigarh city, an open space of about 800m width, astride a seasonal stream running NNE-SW had been landscaped and developed as a "green-belt" in the 1960s and named 'The Leisure Valley.' One segment of this space measuring about 20ha in the NE quadrant of the city is laid out as 'The Zakir Rose Garden,' with about 600 varieties of roses in perhaps 1,000 beds amidst vast lawns dotted with over 100 flowering and fruiting trees of various species. At this time of the year all rose bushes are pruned leaving stumps about two feet tall.

The solitary bird was sighted on the stump of a rose bush (30°44'55"N, 76°47'10"E, 350m a.s.l.). This is c.1,000km NNE from its known wintering range in India and at least 600km E from its range in Pakistan.

Circumstances of Sighting: On 6.x.2003 at 08:15hrs I was surprised by a solitary bird, as it was new to me here. It was a bright sunny morning and I observed the bird through binoculars, uninterrupted, for about ten minutes. It looked like a chat but none that I had seen / known before. Having made a mental note of all those aspects of the bird that would later help in identification.

I rushed home for a camera and was delighted on returning to see the bird still there. I made seven frames and walked away hoping to see him again the next day. Over the next ten days all efforts at re-locating the bird were unsuccessful.

Description: I quote from my diary of 6.x.2003, written about 50 minutes after I had first sighted the bird. "Saw what might be the Rufous-tailed Wheatear on the stump of a pruned rose bush. Solitary and trusting to within about 15 feet. Tail black above and rufous below, rufous extending up to the vent region, fading out at the lower belly. Terminal tip of tail above also rufous, which may prove the best diagnostic clue. Rump rufous, more so towards the tail-base, lighter towards the back. Chin, throat, sides of neck silvery grey, crown, mantle and upper parts silvery grey-brown, ear coverts dark (light dark), tips and edges of primaries and secondaries buffish-grey and median coverts silverfish-grey. Beak and eyes black, legs glossy black.

In my library, only two books had texts on this bird. My description comes fairly close to Grimmett et al. (1998) but the illustration neither matches his own text nor mine except for the tail-rump region. The distribution map suggests that the bird is a vagrant here. Ali and Ripley (2001) state emphatically "the only Chat or Wheatear with rufous rump and base of tail." And again, "Migration occurs on winter grounds from the beginning of October till the end of March...Passage mostly in October and March..."

Distribution Status: All evidence points that the Rufous-tailed Wheatear is a vagrant at Chandigarh and as far as I am able to ascertain, this may be the first such record. There is just one other record way outside its wintering ground by Jones (1919) at Sairee in the Simla hills on 29.ix.1912.

Miscellaneous Vagrants: Between 2001 and 2003, in the Zakir Rose Garden and again during my morning walks, I have seen the Blue Whistling-Thrush *Myophonus caeruleus* thrice and heard it, in addition, 6-7 times. The Dark-throated Thrush *Turdus ruficollis* was seen once in April 2002. I have photographic proof of the former from March 2004. A friend has positively seen one solitary White-capped Redstart *Chaimarrornis leucocephalus* once in 2000 about 1km NE of the Rose Garden.

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Extracts from the Akhbaar book at Kihim

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"One of the major ills from which we suffer while fighting this war for our freedom and justice is paper shortage. Hence this Akhbar book, unlike the Akhbar books of the good old days is emaciated and does not wear the traditional look of prosperous Accountancy. The family appraises N. B. that it has cost 5 good rupees nevertheless.

Under the circs. (= circumstances) I guess that a long-winded thesis, however intellectual or elevating, will be unwelcome. The social doings of this year's Kihim season – the innumerable meals we have eaten, the hands we have shaken and the cheeks we have kissed many times per day, and the other events intelligent and

otherwise, have been or will be (no doubt) chronicled by our special Society, Three Arts and other departmental correspondents. I shall confine myself merely to certain happenings in the sphere of local ornithology. There is nothing unusual in the happenings, but [they] will be interesting records after 50 years. The generation now

in the bud, of whom I have high hopes, will find them so (- I hope). It is rather early as yet to say how many, and which, of the youngsters who are so enthusiastic at the moment will stay the course and grow old with the same interestness for birds. I feel certain, however that even if most of them fall by the wayside they will at least be able to bequeath to their children and grandchildren the correct prescription for telling a woodpecker from a duck! This in itself will be a definite advance. Among the more promising of my 'chelas' today I would name: Shamoon (son of Najmuddin), Jamila (daughter of Abu), Sadiq (s/o Adnan), Shums (s/o Mukhlis), Iqbal (s/o Mamoon), Ameeruddin (s/o Jabir), Nafisa (d/o Asaf), and last and smallest though not least Wasim (s/o Ilyas). Humayun who has also been under my wing, is past the fledgling stage and is already on the way to establishing himself as a bird man.

"A pair of Honey Buzzards has been nesting between Yali 'Retreat' for the last 12 yrs., to my knowledge – but never more than one pair. On 10th May a 14 day old chick from this year's nest in 'Retreat' compound was ringed. If it grows up, it may furnish some clue as regards the nesting pair next year. Does the same pair nest here year after year? Is its place taken in part or wholly by the new born youngsters? Or do altogether new birds occupy the place? And what happens to the yearly progeny? The same

problem needs solving re the 'Yali' pair of White-bellied Sea-Eagles. Raja, the emeritus Yali mali, tells me he has seen "this pair nesting every year in the same place since he was a boy – over 50 yrs., ago – Never has he seen more than the one pair about, and never have they succeeded in raising a family!" "Let the credit rest with the relator" as Babur would have said, but the matter is not without strangeness and certainly worthy of investigation. This season (ie., Decr. 1942) the Eagles had shifted to a Casuarina in the S-W corner of Shahinda's land. There were 2 eggs in the nest – abt., 100ft., up, which vanished after a week or so – rather unaccountably. Thereafter the birds lost interest in this nest, but they are still in the same neighbourhood. The desertion by the Eagles of their age-long nest site – the beehive Casuarina above the well N of Yali bungalow – was undoubtedly due to the large influx of White-backed Vultures that suddenly took a fancy to Yali compound and cluttered all the fine Casuarinas with their large and filthy [nests?]. The ire of the 'Squire' was justly aroused.

*He loaded his gun
And slew a dozen
Which sent the rest a-packing.*

It is hoped that the Sea-Eagles will now return.

All this is getting too long – so here a few items in brief:

2 flocks Flamingoes (50 & 26) flying N – 23 April.

2 prs. (=pairs) Green Bee-eaters and 1 White-breasted Kingfisher nesting in 'Al Murad' compound.

1 Fulvous Fruit Bat (*Rousettus leschenaulti*) ringed by me in April ('43) in an old cave on Elephanta Is., was found struggling with black ants by Shamoon in 'Yali' compound on 13 May! Believe it or not.

Pitta: Blue-cheeked (or Blue-tailed?) Bee-eaters appeared overnight 24th and 19th May respectively, after, rainy and stormy nights.

Last Blyth's Reed-Warbler at Bhonbar 25 May.

1 pair Quaker Babblers – for 1st time ever near 'Latifia' – 12-19 May.

[Sálim Ali, 27 May 1943]

* * * *

"The first attempt to catch birds with a mist net ended disappointingly. Between all yesterday (15 Nov.) and up to 2 p.m. today (16 Nov.) only 3 birds were caught – 1 Spotted Babler, 1 Grey Drongo, 1 Blyth's Reed Warbler. 1st & 3rd were ringed. No. 2 got away after much fighting & drawing blood. With a number of nets & enthusiastic netters, I am sure some very useful work could be done here in the intervals between eating and sleeping." [Salim Ali, 16.xi.1960.]

Recoveries from Newsletter for Birdwatchers – 6

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Seven months after the *Newsletter* was started, letters still came welcoming its existence. J. H. H. Peppe of Birdpur Estate, Basti, U. P. wrote, "I have much appreciated receiving the *Newsletter*...and would willingly pay a subscription...I have resigned my membership to the BNHS as I am only interested in the birding side..."

M. C. A. Jackson, Malajamullay Estate, Kerala, said, "I have found them (NLBW) very interesting and I strongly support the idea of an Ornithological Society."

Dr R. M. Naik, Faculty of Science, Zoology Department, Baroda, like the *Newsletter*, "I am glad you are developing it along the right lines."

B. V. Ramanjulu, Superintendent Zoological Park, "found that the *Newsletter* was performing a great service in the field of natural history."

Joseph George (well-known to our readers), then of New Forest, Dehra Dun, suggested that, "a very useful service which the *Newsletter* can do is publication of abstracts and papers on birds appearing in various journals."

Artificial nest box for Green Barbets

The July 1961 issue was a little better organised than the previous ones in having definite sections, articles, reviews, notes and comments, and correspondence. An interesting piece by Joseph George related to an experiment attempting to create an artificial nest for the Green Barbet. He noticed "A Green Barbet...near the entrance hole of one of the nest boxes put up in New Forest, Dehra Dun. The bird did not enter the box but it gave the impression that it would accept a suitably designed nest box." Taking the hint from this situation, he

designed a nest box from the internode of a giant bamboo. He learnt from books that the Green Barbet usually excavates a new nest hole every season. "A nest box that would require some tunneling seemed therefore to have the best chance of being acceptable to the bird."

He put up the box on 2.iv.1960, and three weeks later a small hole was visible in the wooden plug and wood chips were seen scattered on the ground. Matters seemed to be progressing well, but unfortunately a pair of Black-headed Mynas finally drove away the barbets and nested in the box!

Family parties of birds

I remember having read in *Bird Study* that a birdwatcher kept a close watch on the goings-on across the hedge in his garden. He found that there was always a flock of a dozen of the same species, which spent a

great deal of time in that area. He was not sure whether the party consisted of the same 12 individuals or whether different individuals made up the number.

But Salim Ali, about the same time, received a letter from his friend Lt. Col. R. S. P. Bates, the well-known photographer of Indian birds, and joint author of *Breeding birds of Kashmir*, which threw some light on this problem. I quote portions of the letter: "Between May and December 31st Peter Davis (an enthusiastic ringer) ringed no less than 400 Blue and Great Tits in his garden (in Surrey) of less than 1 acre. In other words there is a continuous stream, and when people talk about having the same 'dear little birds' at the bird table day in and day out they are more often than not seeing different birds every time. Two months or so ago I had a ringed Blue Tit and a ringed Great Tit on our bird tray at the same time. I put up my trap and failed to catch either; but 10 days later, and about another 10 days later, I again saw a ringed Blue Tit and a ringed Great Tit in the garden. Eventually on February 20th I caught the ? Blue Tit. (? Because I didn't see the Great Tit that day, so it could have been a different Blue Tit.) It turned out to have been ringed by Davis near Marley Common (just below his house) on November 21st. Do these feeding bands have their own pet beats I wonder, and how much ground do they cover? The direct distance in this case is 7 or 8 miles. The other point was about a family party of Longtailed Tits. In this case a party of 12 was often in his garden and eventually he ringed the lot. In doing so he noticed that once ringed they would come to an adjacent table but the ringed ones would not enter the trap. One day he saw an unringed one amongst the 12 (the total still being 12!).

That one went quite happily into the trap and was duly ringed. On next visit there were no less than 6 unringed ones. Eventually, out of that party which has never exceeded 14 birds and now seems to be 13, he has ringed no less than 25!! Strange, to say the least of it! In other words an interchange among these so-called family parties must occur. Perhaps two parties meet and one or two birds get lost from one to the other. If they are really family parties in the first place, such gains and losses would at least ensure against too much inbreeding."

Economic value of birds

On my 40th birthday my mother-in-law (Salim Ali's sister) presented me with: *An introduction to ornithology* by George Wallace, published by Macmillan & Co., New York, 1959. It is a book worth possessing. In those early days when conservation and ornithology were making some headway, it was important to highlight the material advantages which human beings received from birds. We were then far away from the period when birdwatching had become such a passionate hobby worldwide. I quote a few lines from the review I carried: "From the earliest times birds have always been a valuable item of food for man, but it is not realised what a staggering number of birds were shot in early days when new settlements were established on virgin soil. Chapman speaks of an 1864 shipment of 20 tons of prairie chickens, of 14 billion 850 thousand passenger pigeons shipped from a Michigan site in 1861, and of 5¼ million game birds from the New Orleans market in 1909. It is said that the recently re-discovered Cahow of Bermuda Petrel is known to have saved some of the early

colonists from starvation during the famine of 1614-18...But one of the most valuable products for which birds are responsible is guano the droppings of fish-eating birds, which is perhaps the finest fertilizer known to man. The most productive region is off the rain-locked coast of Peru among colonies of the Guanay Cormorant *Phalacrocorax bougainvillei*. The volume of guano accumulated over centuries is quite unbelievable and this fertilizer was the mainstay of the economy of Peru. In a fascinating talk on sea birds given in Bombay a couple of years back, Dr Cushman Murphy of the American Museum of Natural History, stated that cormorants did not defecate over the ocean but only on the guano islands thus ensuring the maximum accumulation of these deposits. It was suggested by him that this 'civic mindedness' of the cormorants was due to the necessity of keeping the waters clean so that the birds could see the fish for a long distance below the water."

Bird wing of the Indian Board for Wildlife

This organisation had just taken shape with Salim Ali as Chairman and Dr Biswamoy Biswas as the Technical Secretary. The non-officials were: R. S. Dharmakumarsinhji, Dr S. C. Law, Humayun Abdulali, and E. P. Gee. This body, among other things, kept in close touch with the International Council for Bird Preservation (ICBP), formed in 1922. One of the important achievements of this Bird Wing at that time was to persuade foreign countries to stop the import of Junglefowl feathers, which were being used as flies by fishermen. An American firm was fined \$10,000 for the import of this banned item. Humayun Abdulali played an important part in this decision.

Reviews

Birds: beyond watching by Abdul Jamil Urfi – Universities Press, Hyderabad, 2004. ISBN 81-7371-485-1 pp. 214 + X + 30 plates (29 colour photographs and 1 map). Price: Rs 285.00 (Soft cover).

Contents: Preface vii; Introduction –1; Birdwatching and observation –13; Bird Habitats – 32; Bird Names and Classification – 65; Bird Census – 82; Nesting and Breeding – 110; Understanding Migration – 132; Conservation and Action – 152; Glossary – 180; Appendices – 185; Index – 212.

The author of this book, Dr Abdul Jamil Urfi, is a scientist with long research

experience in ecology, biodiversity conservation and education. He is also known to birdwatchers for he frequently writes in both popular and scientific journals. Urfi is currently with the Department of Environmental Biology, Delhi University.

This book is aimed at the students of avian biology and serious amateur birdwatchers. It has come at an opportune time when various Internet discussion groups and web sites related to birds are active and when a spate of bird books with good illustrations and high production

quality have started hitting the market, arousing interest in birds among people all across the country. This book urges birdwatchers to take more serious note of the birds they observe rather than ending-up as tickers and non-serious birders on the lookout for "new" birds. It will, hopefully, encourage and motivate people to do more serious work that will help in enhancing scientific knowledge about birds and the habitats they live in.

Each chapter has concisely-written information on relevant topics and basic ecological concepts using a simple and clear

style. Line drawings, graphs and tables, and subtle humour make the book readable and sustain the reader's interest. By giving personalised accounts and observations, the author has given the book a strong regional flavour – something we miss while reading similar books currently in the market, usually written in American or European context. Each chapter also has a suggested list of activities that serve as useful practical follow-up work and a list of references. A few boxed items give interesting snippets. The book is attractively brought-out with few typographical errors.

Six appendices at the end of the book provide information on: ENVIS Centres (bird-related); List and particulars of important bird organisations, publications and websites; hints on choosing and using binoculars and telescopes; environmental legislations pertaining biodiversity and habitat conservation; a list of threatened birds of India and a list of suggested reading, organised thematically.

I, however, have a few suggestions and minor criticisms:

One of the most crucial aspects of bird watching and bird study is taking notes and maintaining records of observations. This also is often the most neglected or overlooked one. A more detailed discussion stressing the importance of written notes, preparation of databases and trip reports will greatly enhance the value of this book. Perhaps the various software and resources available could also be discussed. The author mentions at the very outset that he had chosen topics somewhat arbitrarily for this book. However, I feel future editions could carry a more detailed treatment on topics like bird behaviour, foraging and feeding behaviour, recording bird calls, long-term monitoring of bird populations, remote sensing and its application in habitat evaluation and bird photography.

The book has not given adequate details of the resources currently available for students of avian biology – audio recordings, CD-ROMs pertaining to Bird identification (esp. Prof Madhav Gadgil's wonderful efforts in the Project LifeScape) and Bibliographies (eg Aasheesh Pittie's), etc. The photographs at the end of the book do not serve any useful purpose and perhaps could be dispensed with in future edition as this could bring down production costs and make the book cheaper.

Despite these minor shortcomings, I feel this is a wonderful effort. This book will

prove to be a valuable resource to all the serious birdwatchers and teachers and students of biology and environmental sciences at the high school and college levels. To the latter it may serve as a useful guide in designing projects to complement classroom lectures that give a better insight to the ecology and behaviour of birds in nature and their role in our environment.

–V. Santharam

A review and a critique.

Pictorial handbook - Shorebirds of Kerala (including gulls and terns). By: Sashikumar, C., Muhamed Jafer Palot, Sathyan Meppayur, and C. Radhakrishnan. 2004. 1st ed. Kolkata: Zoological Survey of India. Paperback. (18.5 x 24.0cm, with illus. cover, by; Sathyan Meppayur), pp. i-x, 1-165+2, endpapers (illus.), 71 pll. (col., by Sathyan Meppayur), 8 photos (col.), 73 maps, 4 line-drawings. ISBN 81-8171-047-9. Price: Rs700/-, \$50/-, £30.

Contents: Tit. (p. i); imprint (p. ii); Foreword (pp. iii-iv, dated vii.2004, by; Dr S. Balachandran); Preface (p. v); Acknowledgements (p. vii); Contents (pp. ix-x); Introduction (pp. 1-8); Systematic list (pp. 9-11); Kerala (p. 12, map); Topography of a bird (p. 13); Wing of a shorebird (p. 13); species texts (pp. 14-155); Selected bibliography (pp. 156-158); Glossary (pp. 159-161); Table 1: Identification of snipes - some hints (p. 162); Table 2: Identification of non-breeding terns (p. 163); Index to scientific names (p. 164); Index to common names (p. 165).

This is the second taxon-specific work published by the Zoological Survey of India in this new Century. The first was Alfred et al's '*Waterbirds of northern India*' (2001). It heralds, I hope, the renewal of a century-old 'tradition' when such taxon-specific works were published by Jerdon, '*Games birds and wildfowl of India*' (1864); Hume and Marshall, '*Game birds*' (1879-1881); and E. C. Stuart Baker, '*Indian ducks and their allies*' (1908, 2nd ed.), '*Indian pigeons and doves*' (1913) and '*Game-birds*' (1921-1930). In the early 1980s Sudhin Sengupta published a monograph, '*Common Myna*' (1982) and Suresh Kumar, '*Life history of the Spotted Owllet*' (1985). More recently S. M. Osman published his booklet on falconry, '*Hunters of the air*' (1991) and Prakash Gole his guide to the '*Cranes of India*' (1996). But these latter were almost anecdotal in character and content when compared with the detail and sweep of

information that the century-old works contained. Only Gole's book was embellished with the atmospheric and evocative art of David Rankin, comparable to the lithographs that enlivened the period volumes. The exception, of course, was Sonobe and Usui's '*A field guide to the waterbirds of Asia*' (1993), which covered more than the geographical area of Kerala or India and was well illustrated. What is more, it was distributed free to all participants of the Asian Waterfowl Census (up to that point in time), and still eagerly sought even now!

Sathyan Meppayur illustrates, in colour, the book under review. He has tried to render his subjects faithfully, but the spontaneous and confident brushwork of a birdwatcher-artist, who paints in the field, is lacking. To compete in the international marketplace, upcoming Indian artists need to go into the field and paint the bird in the flesh. If nature is to become the subject of a painter's career then all the tools necessary for the trade become essential, include good optics and situations that bring the artist and the bird as close together as possible, e.g., bird-ringing, museum skins and mounted specimens, and captive birds in zoo aviaries. He has to soak in the atmosphere that belongs to the avian world, study feather texture, anatomy, behaviour, master perspective and light, among several other things. Unless the subject turns his heart, the art will remain a mere proficiency in the use of its tools. The artist should portray the jizz of a bird more than any words can.

Shorebirds of Kerala describes and illustrates 71 species belonging to the order Charadriiformes, hitherto recorded within the political boundaries of Kerala. Through it, the authors "...hope that this group of birds will get the attention they deserve" (p. v). Each species is depicted on a plate with a map giving its wintering, resident and breeding range. This faces a page with text about that species. Points covered in the text include: Field characters; adult non-breeding [plumage]; adult breeding [plumage]; juvenile [plumage]; voice; habitat; habits; status; and, distribution. The useful endpapers have small pictures of all taxa, with numbers that lead a reader to the plate / chapter that deals with the taxon. Most of the textual information is available in the several field-guides, handbooks and specialist books available to the contemporary birdwatcher. The uniqueness of this book lies in the text under the sub-

title, 'status'. Herein the authors give the data for each species from Kerala. Alas, in almost all the cases, this is restricted to a few lines. This reviewer would have revelled in flocks of data for each taxon. Arrival and departure dates, census figures from the various wetlands where such an exercise was carried out, e.g. Kole and Vembanad, breeding areas of the resident waders, etc., are some of the points that come to mind. A map should have been produced for each

species – with details of distribution, of published breeding localities, etc. It is surprising and an eye-opener that “there is no ringing data at all on our shorebirds” (p. 1).

To popularise wader watching, we require a publication that lots of birdwatchers can buy (even if only in Kerala), study and use in the field. The '*Shorebirds of Kerala*' costs Rs700/-, which is a bit heavy on the pocket for the content that one gets in return,

especially with cheaper alternatives of superior quality and content easily available in the market. The publishers should realise that specialist books should necessarily contain a lot more about the subject than general works, especially so if the quality of the latter is excellent and the content wide-ranging.

– Aasheesh Pittie

Recent ornithological literature on South Asia and Tibet

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Building bridges for migratory waterbird conservation in the Central Asian Flyway

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The Central Asian Flyway (CAF) covers the large continental area of Eurasia between the Arctic and Indian Oceans. This Flyway comprises several important and overlapping migration routes for the different species of waterbirds, most of which extend from the northern breeding grounds in Siberia to South and Southwest Asia. Geographically the flyway includes an area from the frigid arctic coastline and offshore islands of Siberia to the southernmost non-breeding (wintering) grounds in the Maldives and the British Indian Ocean Territory of Dio Garcia, thus incorporating about 30 countries of Central, East and South Asia and the Trans-Caucasus.

The CAF covers at least 274 migratory waterbird populations of 175 species, including 26 globally threatened and near-threatened species that breed, migrate and spend the non-breeding (winter) period within the region. Species such as the critically threatened Sociable Plover *Vanellus gregarious*, vulnerable Black-necked Crane *Grus nigricollis* and Indian Skimmer *Rynchops albicollis*, Bar-headed Goose *Anser indicus*, Ibisbill *Ibidorhyncha struthersii*, and Brownheaded Gull *Larus brunnicephalus* are completely (or largely) restricted to the CAF region.

In addition, the breeding ranges of some species, including the critically threatened Siberian Crane *Grus leucogeranus*, Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris*,

endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Eurynorhynchus pygmaeus*, vulnerable Spot-billed Pelican *Pelecanus philippensis* and Relict Gull *Larus relictus*, and Black-winged Pratincole *Glareola nordmanni*, Caspian Plover *Charadrius asiaticus* and Asian Dowitcher *Limnodromus semipalmatus* are largely restricted to the region although their non-breeding ranges overlap with adjoining flyways.

Other migratory waterbird species pass through this region on their annual migrations within flyways that connect the northern Central Asian countries with South East Asia and Australasia (the East Asian-Australasian Flyway), Africa and Europe (the East African Flyway), and the Indian Ocean to the south.

The CAF comprises large semi-arid habitats with a limited number of wetlands, particularly in the staging areas of Central Asia and different groups of migratory waterbirds appear to overlap considerably in the usage of important sites. While recent work on satellite telemetry and years of ringing of birds has yielded some information, very little is known about the precise migration routes and staging areas of most species.

Rapid human population growth and development across the region has dramatically increased pressure on intertidal and freshwater wetlands, grasslands and other habitats, which has resulted in their degradation, pollution, and loss. The habitat

pressures coupled with legal and illegal hunting of birds have resulted in the decline and local extinction of many waterbird populations.

Management and conservation of waterbird populations requires precise and up-to-date information on their populations and trends. Information on the status and trends of most waterbird populations in the CAF area is limited and outdated. Actions to promote collection of data and their analysis at the flyway and national level are urgently needed to provide the basis for improving the knowledge base.

As the birds cross international borders of several countries and provide a link between the peoples of CAF region, the responsibility for the well-being and conservation of these species and for the sustainable use of their habitats rests with all countries. Management of waterbird habitats requires coordinated multi-sectoral planning and implementation to realise the needs of biodiversity conservation and local people.

Many countries in the CAF have developing economies with inadequate allocation of resources for research and conservation and for involvement of local stakeholders in sustainable management of wetlands, grasslands, and other habitats. In addition, changes in political systems and instabilities in some countries, language and other barriers have not enabled strong cooperation to be developed between

agencies in all the flyway countries to cooperate in information sharing, research and conservation activities.

The first meeting of the governments of the CAF was organized in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in August 2001. The meeting was very successful in recognising the importance of cooperation and the need for an International Action Plan that outlines regional priorities for action to conserve migratory waterbirds and their habitats.

Over the last few years, various efforts have been made to bring the main players together again to culminate this planning work. The breakthrough was the kind invitation of the Ministry of Environment and Forests, India to host a meeting that would be held under the auspices of the Convention on Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS).

Between 10 and 13 June 2005, representatives of the 30 CAF countries, international agencies, non-government organisations and technical experts will converge at the prestigious India Habitat Centre in New Delhi for a three-day meeting. The Wildlife Institute of India and Wetlands International are providing logistic support for the event.

One of the main outputs of the Meeting will be to have endorsed a *Central Asian Flyway Action Plan to Conserve Migratory Waterbirds and their Habitats* and to agree on the international framework under which it will be promoted. Wetlands International on behalf of CMS has prepared the Action Plan.

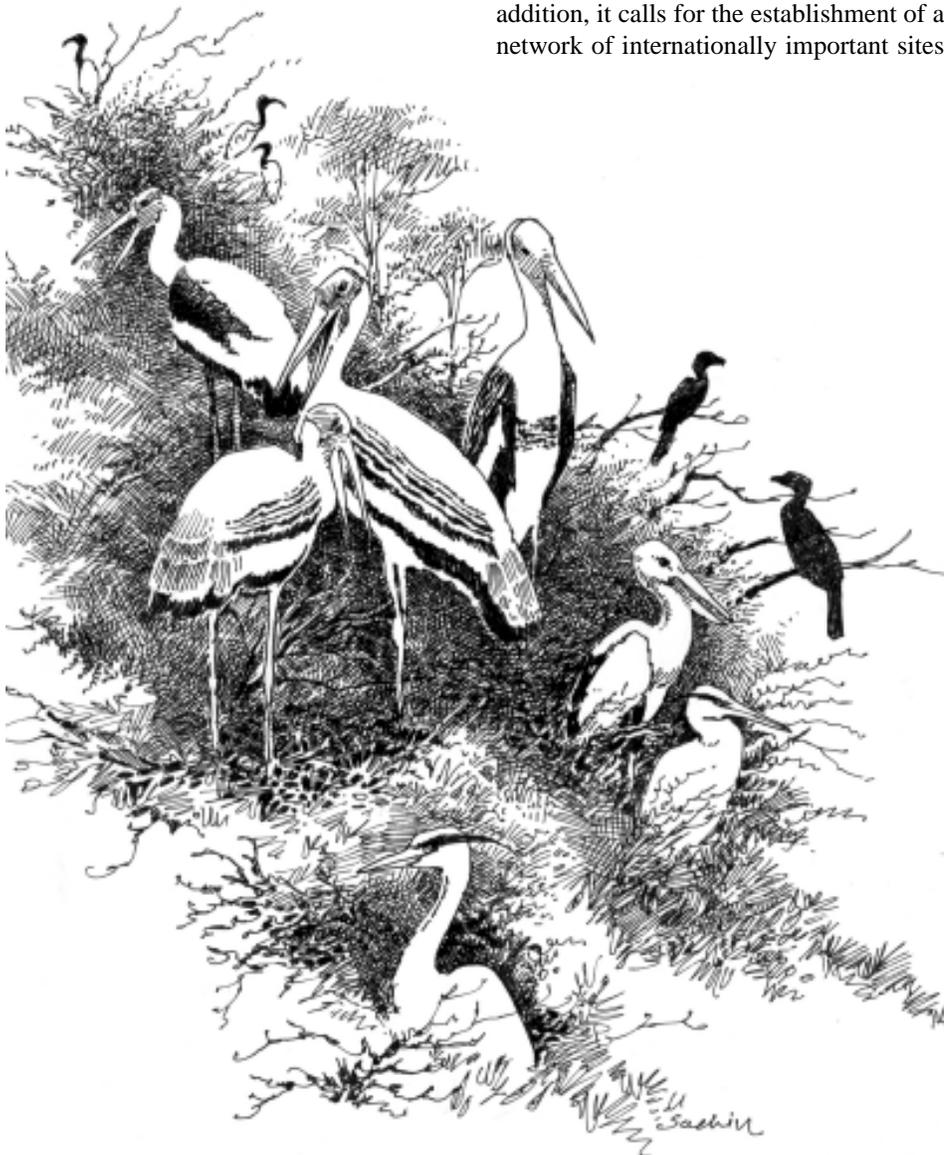
The proposed Action Plan calls for a wide range of actions at the flyway and national levels, including improved legislation for species, regulations on hunting, habitat management, training, education and awareness, and species monitoring. In addition, it calls for the establishment of a network of internationally important sites

to promote conservation of migratory waterbirds in the Central Asian Flyway.

Besides this, it is anticipated that the meeting will result in increased interaction and cooperation between governments, conventions, technical experts and conservationists from countries in the flyway as a basis for promoting concrete actions to ensure the conservation of migratory waterbirds and their habitats.

In addition to this, a side meeting on 12 June of range states is being held to discuss and endorse the *Proposed Western / Central Asian Site Network for Siberian Cranes (and other waterbirds)*, with logistic support from the International Crane Foundation. The meeting is being held under the auspices of the CMS Memorandum of Agreement for the Conservation of the Siberian Crane, which provides a framework for the conservation of this threatened species. It is proposed that the Siberian Crane Site Network will be a forerunner for a larger migratory waterbird network that will be established under the proposed Central Asian Flyway Action Plan.

For those interested in more detailed information on the two meetings, all documentation will be available on the CMS websites: http://www.cms.int/bodies/meetings/regional/caf/caf_meeting.htm and http://www.cms.int/bodies/meetings/regional/site_network/asian_meeting.htm. The real success of these initiatives will be fully realised through the active participation of people in all countries of the CAF. We are hopeful that the New Delhi meetings will be a landmark event in building new international bridges of hope for the conservation of our migratory waterbirds and their habitats.



Errata: Indian Birds (Vol. 1 No. 1).

1. Page 9, column 1, line 8: Change '*leuconogenys*' to *leucogenys*.
2. Page 9, column 1, line 13: Change '*Myiophonus*' to *Myophonus*.
3. Page 9, column 1, line 27: Change '*cryniger*' to *crinigera*.
4. Page 9, column 2, line 27: Change '*Orilus orilus*' to *Oriolus oriolus*.
5. Page 16, column 1, paragraph 3: Delete.
6. Page 16, column 1, paragraph 4: Treat as caption for sketch on same page.
7. The sketches on pages 4, 14 and 23 are by Sachin Jaltaré.

Correspondence

Pesticides and birds

"I have been studying the relationship between birds, pests, insects and pesticides in Malda district, West Bengal, for a few years now. It is evident that the use of pesticides and insecticides reduces the role of our insectivorous avian friends. What is less studied in India is the role pesticides play in directly or indirectly killing pollinator and insectivorous bird species. My studies in Malda have led me to conclude that there is a direct link between increased use of pesticides and increased incidence of bird deaths.

Mango trade is one of the most important businesses in Malda. The district is famous for the quality and taste of its many varieties of mangoes — "*Gopalbhog*, *Amrapali*, *Khirsapati*, *Langra*, and *Fazli*." Mango production depends on temperature, seasonal rainfall and proper maintenance of flowering trees. In Malda, the flowering season begins in November–December, and goes on until June–July. In these seven to nine months, traders at every level need to maximise their profits. The health of these trees, therefore, becomes a secondary concern. The only aim is short-term gain: to sell the fruits at the highest possible profit. The fact that a large number of birds die during these months, especially during the mango-harvesting season, goes virtually unnoticed.

Insects and small birds that feed on the sap of mango blossoms either die instantly or become drowsy during the spraying of pesticides. I witnessed many such instances in the mango orchards in Malda. There were also a number of instances where small and medium-sized birds fed on dead insects covered in a film of pesticides. They died within a few hours after the spraying operation was complete. If these birds consume even a few insects, they become drowsy and cannot fly, falling an easy prey to stray dogs and cats.

Year after year, I recorded the recurrence of this phenomenon during the pesticide-spraying season. The indiscriminate use of pesticides has also caused the quality of mangoes to decline over a period. The popular Malda mangoes are today smaller in size, and don't quite taste the same. There is a hypothesis that this could be the long-term effect of sustained use of pesticides. Over the last few years, the production of mangoes has declined, and traders are

beginning to explore other areas of business.

I have recorded about 21 bird species that have fallen prey to pesticides in this area. These include: Small Bee-eater *Merops orientalis*, Small Minivet *Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*, Red-whiskered Bulbul *Pycnonotus jocosus*, Red-vented Bulbul *P. cafer*, Common Iora *Aegithina tiphia*, Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius*, and Dusky Warbler *Phylloscopus fuscatus*.

Immediate action is required to save these birds of Malda. The effect of pesticides on birds also gets one wondering about what effect it could have on other animals, and the human population, of the area. Meanwhile, as we concern ourselves with saving birds from poaching, habitat loss and illegal trade, what are we doing about these silent killers?

Arunayan Sharma

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A crow and its cache

I would like to share a small incident about my bond with nature. My childhood was spent in a farm with cows, dogs, birds and even a python, which had got into our cowshed. Luckily for me even today though I live in a city, my house is full of old trees, dogs, cows and birds which come to feed on our fruit trees.

One afternoon while I was taking my dogs for a walk, a crow with an egg-like object in his beak hopped in front of me and hid it in a flowerpot. Carefully covering it with dry leaves, he hopped back to me. I had a biscuit in my hand. I offered it and he readily ate it. I was a bit curious so I asked my servant boy to see what the crow had concealed. It turned out to be a beautiful white stone with a marking on it that resembled a bird. I thought the servant boy, being a small kid, might be tempted to keep the stone himself and to avoid this, I was taking it into my house when the crow flew in front of me as if protesting against my taking it. So I put the stone atop my car, which was parked close by. Promptly the crow picked it up again and hid it as carefully in another flowerpot.

Since then, he has changed it to other locations. In the bargain, the crow and I have become great friends; he even hops and stands next to my dog and is around in the morning and evening when I go outside. This little friendship has brought me a great

deal of happiness and I wanted to share this with all people who are in touch with our natural world. Acts like these can bring so much happiness if only we have the time to just look and observe.

Jyoti Narang

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Bangalore.

Bouquets

I want to extend my warmest congratulations to you on the launch of *Indian Birds* and on the registration of "New Ornithology Foundation." It seems to me eminently logical to have such a trust responsible for this publication, thus allowing for collegial supervision of the publication, its direction and content. The magazine's name change makes it more user-friendly and attractive for those who do not hold advanced degrees in ornithology, but who are simply straightforward, amateur bird lovers like myself. I'm looking forward to seeing the magazine's content and subscriptions, the excellent bird-related artwork, the new website – and all its accompanying activities – grow and prosper over the years ahead. Again, congratulations!

William Selover

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I saw the new 'avatar' of our dear *Indian Birds*. No matter what the name is it is an excellent issue. The articles and the overall look is very good. Thanks.

Raju Kasambe

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Received *Indian Birds* 1 (1) Jan-Feb 2005 issue. Many thanks for this. Please also accept my heartiest congratulations on the launching of the new journal. This is wonderful. You got probably the best name for any happening journal on Indian birds. Congratulations. I also liked the lay-out and design of the journal (I would hate to call it a newsletter, it is far better than that). Keep it up.

Dr Dipankar Ghose

Email: dipankarghose@rediffmail.com



Rufous-tailed Wheatear *Oenanthe xanthopyrna*

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