

Alpine Swift *Tachymarptis melba*: New to the Thar Desert of Rajasthan, India

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On the afternoon of 9.ix.2004, while driving from Jaipur to Tal Chhapar (Churu district, Rajasthan), we noticed a flock of 'large' swifts (Apodidae) dashing about at great speed near Nechwa (27°58'N, 74°70'E) in Churu district. We immediately stopped to watch the birds and HSS identified them as Alpine Swifts *Tachymarptis melba*, a species he had seen at various birdwatching destinations in Himachal Pradesh, Punjab and eastern Rajasthan. Realising the importance of the sighting, in that it was probably the first record of the Alpine Swift in the Thar Desert of Rajasthan, we watched the flock of c.20 birds with binoculars for about 15 minutes until they disappeared from view.

While they were hawking insects over fields of pearl millet *Pennisetum typhoides*, we were easily able to observe their brown plumage with contrasting white lower breast and upper belly. Most of the time they were flying c. 7-30m above the undulating ground. However, a few times some individuals descended to c. 5m and fortunately GB 'grabbed' these birds with his digital camera. One or two of the pictures came out reasonably well to show not only the conspicuous white belly but also the white throat patch, which latter is usually hard to discern in distant birds especially in poor light.

The Alpine Swift is resident but subject to seasonal local migration (chiefly during

the monsoon) in addition to very extensive and wide-ranging daily foraging peregrinations (Ali and Ripley 1983). It is found "locally in north and west Pakistan east to Bhutan; from south Rajasthan east to Andhra Pradesh, south to Kerala and Sri Lanka, subject to seasonal and altitudinal movements and wanders erratically over long distances," (Grimmett et al. 1998). Although the situation within India is "particularly confused", the race *nubifuga* from Himalayas is thought to winter in central India (Chantler and Driessens 2000).

The earlier record of Alpine Swift in Rajasthan is from Mt. Abu (Ali and Ripley 1983). Kazmierczak (2000) gives its distribution for Rajasthan in Hadauti region comprising of four districts of Kota, Bundi, Jhalawar and Baran. Although we are not aware of any records from Hadauti region of Rajasthan the species could occur as a passage migrant.

There are several unpublished records of the species from eastern Rajasthan. HSS and Per Undeland saw c.10 birds flying at Siliserh near Alwar on 1.iii.1998. They appeared from nowhere and disappeared just as quickly after hawking insects over the hilltops for a few minutes. Martin and Claudia Kelsey (2003) recorded 14 birds at dawn over Samode Fort, Jaipur district on 8.iii.2003. DD saw a flock of c.120 birds from the terrace of his house in Krishna Nagar, a residential area, about three kilometers from

Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur on 9.x.2003. The noisy flock was observed between 08:00-09:00hrs, hawking insects, c. 80m above the ground. Startled by the sound of a gong, emanating from a school, they stopped calling and scattered in different directions for a minute or so before resuming their activity.

The few records of this roving species, from autumn (September and October) and spring (March), would indicate it is a scarce / erratic passage migrant in eastern Rajasthan. They might belong to the race *T. m. nubifuga*, originating from the Himalayas, and wintering in central India (Chantler and Driessens 2000).

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White-headed Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava leucocephala* Przevalski) near Delhi, India

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Jackson (1965) reported seeing a male White-headed Wagtail *Motacilla flava leucocephala* on 11.iv.1965, "alongside the Agra Canal, which takes off from Okhla near Delhi during a "large-scale" Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* migration. The only specimen of this race from the Indian Subcontinent is a bird that Hugh Whistler had obtained on 3.v.1913 in Jhelum district (Pakistan) (Ganguli 1975). Ali and Ripley (1987) state, that it may possibly be a winter visitor. Its occurrence in Pakistan "is distinctly rare and only occurs for a brief period on spring passage... Both H.

Whistler and H. Waite collected a good series of specimens from these districts [Potahar, Salt Range and around Jhelum, and Attock (Campbellpur) districts]," (Roberts 1992). Roberts (1992) himself reported seeing "several individuals in full breeding dress on the 4th of May... on the shores of Rawal lake." Historical records from the Indian region fall between 11 April and 10 May.

On 10.i.2003, while watching birds in a flooded stubble field near the western Yamuna Canal, between Tihara and Malhala villages in Sonipat district, I spotted a single

male White-headed Yellow Wagtail. The bird had a pure white fore-crown, head and nape, and greyish-white ear-coverts. It had almost moulted in to breeding plumage.

Alström and Mild (2003) state that "it probably winters mainly in India but the exact wintering grounds are not known." They also warn that, "the head pattern is highly variable... (and) individuals... are difficult to separate from the palest extremes of (*M. f.*) *beema*. Also beware of partly albinistic individuals of other subspecies."

Acknowledgement

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Frequency band usage in some bird species

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It has been suggested that different species of birds use different parts of the sound spectrum in the same way as different radio stations use different bands for communication without disrupting each other. The term ‘acoustic niche’ has been used to describe the partitioning of this ‘resource’.

Six common vocal species were recorded, some of them together, and their spectrograms examined in the light of this hypothesis

1. White-cheeked Barbet *Megalaima viridis*
2. Red-whiskered Bulbul *Pycnonotus jocosus*
3. Yellow-browed Bulbul *Iole indica*
4. Spotted Babbler *Pellorneum ruficeps*
5. Indian Scimitar Babbler *Pomatorhinus horsfieldii*
6. Quaker Tit-Babbler *Alcippe poioicephala*

The calls were recorded using a Nikon CoolPix 3700 digital camera. The sounds are recorded digitally as WAV files. The files were then analyzed using sound analysis software (CoolEdit 96). Spectrograms were captured from the screen and the images were cleaned up using image manipulation software to generate the illustrations included.

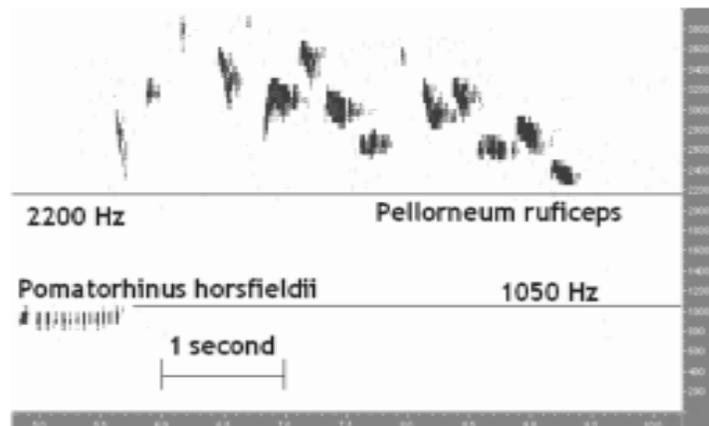
All the bird species were recorded close to the town of Thithimathi in the Kodagu district of Karnataka during early December of 2004. The calls were recorded without the use of parabolic reflectors or special microphones. Where calls overlapped they are shown in the spectrograms as they occurred in the actual recording and were not separated.

The frequency band usage for the chosen species was as follows.

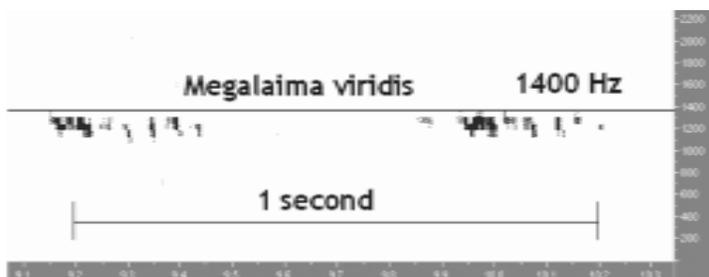
White-cheeked Barbet	1100 – 1400 Hz
Red-whiskered Bulbul	2500 – 4000 Hz
Yellow-browed Bulbul	1700 – 2400 Hz
Spotted Babbler	2400 – 3800 Hz
Indian Scimitar Babbler	800 – 1050 Hz
Quaker Tit-Babbler	2400 – 3700 Hz

There appears to be a fairly clear separation of the bands in which each of these species calls. The Red-whiskered Bulbul used the widest frequency band and it is interesting to note that the call notes are extremely short. Like traditional niches, it is perhaps possible that the communication medium can also be shared in the time dimension.

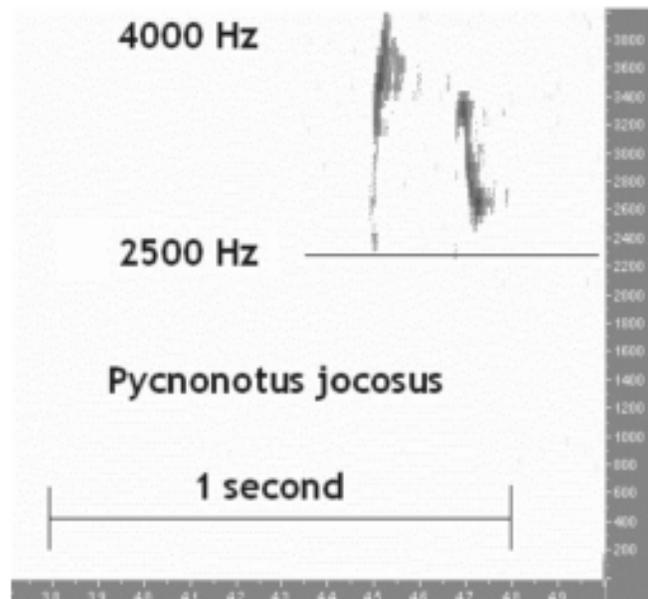
It should be noted that the recordings were not made with the purpose of this analysis and the equipment used was far from ideal for such an analysis. However it is hoped that these preliminary observations could suggest directions for detailed studies. These can also have implications for birds in urban settings where noise levels are increasing.



Duet call of Indian Scimitar Babbler followed by call of Spotted Babbler



Call of Small Green Barbet.



Two-note call of Red-whiskered Bulbul