

Sightings of Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius* in Rajasthan, excluding Bharatpur records

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The Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius* is a monotypic species of the sub-family Vanellinae (family Charadriidae) and a winter migrant to north-west India. The species is classified as Vulnerable because it has suffered a rapid decline and range contraction (BirdLife International 2000).

There are very few records of the species from Rajasthan, except from Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur. The prevailing dry conditions in the park facilitated by an unprecedented water shortage since last four-five years seem to have favoured Sociable Lapwing and other species. The Yellow-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus malabaricus* is commoner in the park than before and the Indian Courser *Cursorius coromandelicus* is breeding in the park this year (Bholu Khan, verbally). Regular sightings of Sociable Lapwing in recent years at Bharatpur suggest that today it is the most consistently visited site, by the species, in India. However, from other suitable areas in Rajasthan, like Tal Chhapar, records are few and far between. Unlike Keoladeo there is too much ground to cover there. Moreover, such sites have generally remained under-observed.

This paper reviews and supplements historical, published, data on this declining species. Keoladeo records have been deliberately excluded as these have been generally well documented (BirdLife International 2001).

The first record from Rajasthan is more than 135 years old (Adam 1873). Although Adam collected four specimens on 5.xii.1869, 5.xii.1872, 17.x.1873 and 6.xii.1873 from Sambhar, he found the species "not very common; during the cold weather it is to be met with sparingly about the plains," (Adam 1873). A January 1912 record is from Bikaner (specimen in BMNH) and A. E. Jones

Table 1: Records of Sociable Lapwing in Rajasthan (excluding Bharatpur)

No. of birds	Date	Site	Source
5	14.x.1995	Tal Chhapar, Churu	Sangha 2000
1	11.i.1998	Revasa, Sikar	Sangha 2000
15	28.i.1998	Tal Chhapar, Churu	Sangha 2000
11	1.ii.1998	Tal Chhapar, Churu	Sangha 2000
2	18.i.1999	Jaisalmer	Sangha 2002

collected a specimen on 30.xii.1937 from Nasirabad, Ajmer (BirdLife International 2001). Whistler (1938) merely described it as "a cold weather visitor and common according to Hume." Many of the references in Whistler's paper (1938) are "in very general terms", for he has not mentioned any date or site and his sources are R. M. Adam, Dr King (who collected birds at Mt. Abu and Jodhpur for nearly two years, but published no account of his observations, except for supplying specimens to Hume), and A. O. Hume. Of the fourteen specimens in the collection of the Bombay Natural History Society none is from Rajasthan (Abdulali 1970).

All other published records from Rajasthan are shown in Table 1.

Unpublished records of Sociable Lapwing in Rajasthan are from Jaisalmer, Bikaner and Hanumangarh districts. I observed a flock on 18.x.2003 comprising of six birds including one juvenile, foraging on a sward at Baramsar depression west of Jaisalmer. Shantanu Kumar (verbally) recorded an individual at Badopal, Hanumangarh district in December 2000 / January 2001. Manoj Kulshreshtha (verbally), Bryan Bland and members of a birding group observed seven birds on 26.xii.1998 at Ganga village on way to Sudasri, Desert National Park, Jaisalmer. R. G. Soni (verbally) observed / photographed one juvenile on 22.x.1991, foraging on the edge of Jor-Bir depression, Bikaner.

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Some vocalizations of the Jungle Prinia *Prinia sylvatica* during the breeding season in Maharashtra

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Introduction

Bird vocalizations are of interest for at least two reasons. First, in taxonomy and systematics, similarities and differences in the structure of vocalizations can help

resolve disputes about whether a taxon is a "good" species, and can provide information on the degree of relatedness between species and subspecies, Second, the study of vocalizations tells us about the

behaviour of birds: we can ask what information is being transmitted through these sounds, to whom, and under what circumstances. Much remains to be learnt about the structure of bird vocalizations and

the contexts in which these are made. I studied the songs and calls of the Jungle Prinia to elucidate these aspects of their vocalizations.

Study Area

Sagareshwar Wildlife Sanctuary (16°5'-17°9'N, 73°-74°22.5'E) is situated in Kadegaon taluka of Sangli district in southern Maharashtra, India. The 1,087.75ha sanctuary is devoid of human habitation and is covered by southern tropical thorn forest (type 6a; Champion and Seth 1967). The climate is hot and dry. The area lies at an average of about 500m above m.s.l. The highest point is at about 900m above m.s.l. Annual temperatures vary from a minimum of 8°C to a maximum of 41°C. The average rainfall is about 400mm, most of which falls from June to October. July and August are the wettest months.

I carried out an extensive study of bird life in Sagareshwar sanctuary from August 1997 to November 2000 (Unpublished). Total taxa, including subspecies, include 114 forms representing 50 families. Out of these 114, 47 are residents, 22 are winter migrants, 15 are breeding migrants and 30 are represented by stray records within the sanctuary, but are resident in neighbouring areas. During my study, I made a particular effort to investigate the nesting, vocalizations and behaviour of the Jungle Prinia *Prinia sylvatica*.

Study Species

Four geographical races of the Jungle Prinia occur in the Indian region: 1) *P. s. gangetica*, Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, and Northern Madhya Pradesh; 2) *P. s. sylvatica*, the Indian peninsula from Maharashtra and northern Madhya Pradesh south to Kanyakumari; 3) *P. s. valida* of Sri Lanka; 4) *P. s. insignis*, Kutch and Rajasthan; and 5) *P. s. mahendrae* of Mahendragiri, Orissa (Ali and Ripley 1973). All these five races are strictly resident (Whistler 1963).

The subspecies of concern here, *P. s. sylvatica*, is distributed in peninsular India (Ali and Ripley 1973). This bird breeds at very high density in Sagareshwar sanctuary. Except for deep ravines and hill tops, nests are spread all over the sanctuary, the highest densities occurring around the guest house and dormitory. *P. s. sylvatica* prefers arid, bushy, fallow land and bushy hills. Because such fallow lands are considered unproductive they are always under threat

of encroachment by humans for horticulture or construction of industrial estates, townships or housing colonies. The Banjar Bhoomi Vikas Yojana, a project of the central government, has brought thousands of acres of land under cultivation, destroying the breeding and feeding grounds of such species.

Materials and Methods

The sanctuary was visited fortnightly during the main study period (a total of 55 overnight stays). Thereafter, I made monthly visits in the breeding season until November 2002. The vocalizations of the Jungle Prinia were recorded. These were digitised and spectrographs were prepared in the sound analysis program Syrinx, version 2.4s.

Results and Discussion

The breeding season of the Jungle Prinia extended from March to November, with a peak from June to September. The material used in nest construction was grass and nests were always situated in a thorny bush or in an *Agave* plant. The nests seemed largely located alongside forest roads or footpaths well-traversed by humans. This may indicate that the birds get protection from predators from proximity to human activity. Two nests were found within 100m from each other along the main road of the sanctuary. Of eight nests found (Table 1), six were located near the rest house. On 28.viii.1998, a nest under construction was found and it was observed that a single individual (sex?) did all the construction work; its partner was nearby throughout. No distinctive vocalizations were heard during nest construction.

Table 1: Seasonal changes in number of Jungle Prinia nests found

Month	Number of active nests found
August	4
September	2
October	1
November	1

It appeared that only one bird (female?) of a pair feeds chicks, while the other (male?) guards the nest. While young, the chicks were fed with insect larvae. Older chicks were fed with adult insects as well. Food selection in relation to the age of the chicks needs further study.

Three distinct vocalizations were heard (Fig. 1).

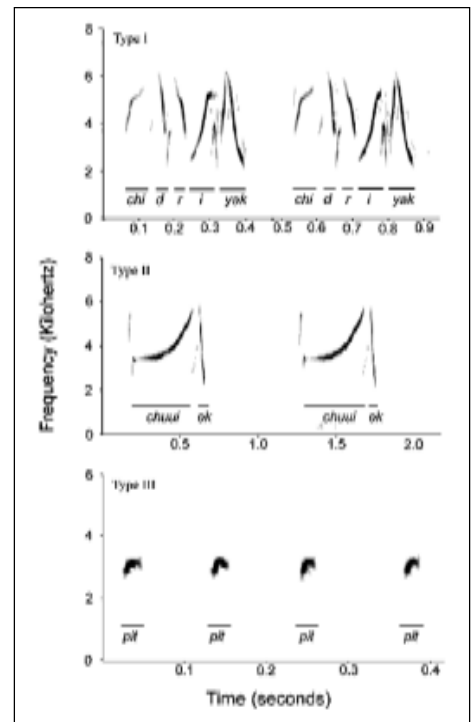


Figure 1: Spectrographs of the three vocalizations recorded. The frequency describes the pitch of the sound; darker pixels indicate louder sound. Note that the time scale (on the horizontal axis) is not the same for the three calls. Lines are drawn under each syllable, together with a verbal description.

Call type I: This call is described as *pit pretty*, a loud triple note with *pit* subdued, by Ali and Ripley (1973). I verbalise it in Marathi as “*chidriyak chidriyak chidriyak*”. Although the call sounds like a triple note, the spectrograph shows that there are at least five syllables in each phrase (Fig. 1).

This song starts to be heard in March, but remains sporadic until the end of May. Upon the arrival of the monsoon, singing activity becomes vigorous. This song is presumably given by males; these individuals select a high perch such as tall bush or sapling, or electric poles and wires to deliver the song. The song continues for 5 to 7 minutes with short pause of a few seconds. Every now and then the bird changes its perch; thus it sings from various parts of its territory. This song is presumably used to demarcate the boundaries of the territory and to attract females. Singing males are often seen driving intruders out of the territory.

When the pairs are formed, males show an elaborate courtship flight. The male rises some distance up in the air, nosedives and jerks up again. This up and down movement is repeated several times until male alights

in a bush. During this flight, a snapping sound is made either by wing or beak, but I was unable to record it. Most of these courtship flights were observed in July and August.

Call type II: This call is delivered when the nest has hatchlings. The male (?) selects a perch in the canopy or crown of a bush or tree to deliver this call. Exposed perches are avoided. As the observer approaches the nest, the bird becomes restless and increases the tempo of the call. I verbalise this call as a long-drawn *chuii-ek chuii-ek* (Fig. 1).

This vocalization seems to be an alarm call, but the precise function needs further study. This call allowed me to locate several nests (Table 2).

Call type III: I transcribe this as *pit pit pit* (Fig. 1). The male selects a high perch in the vicinity of the nest and delivers this call from an exposed branch. The bird appears restless while delivering the call. Like type II, this too appears to be an alarm call. On close observation, I noticed the following points.

1. When the female (?) approaches the nest with food, the male (?) starts calling.

2. When the female (?) is away and out of the male's (?) sight, the calling bird becomes silent.

3. The female (?) collects food from a certain area and uses a particular route to approach the nest. Male (?) select a high perch along this route.

Discussion

Several aspects of the ecology of these birds can be studied with the help of the calls they make. First, by basing censuses on the call type I, one can estimate the population size and density of territorial males. It should also be possible to measure the sizes of territories by mapping the singing locations of individual males. Second, one can use call types II and III to locate nests to estimate the density of active nests to study parental feeding behaviour, and to measure the success rate of broods.

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Table 2: Nests found by locating individuals giving call type II.

Date	Notes on nest
15.viii.1997	With two chicks
25.viii.1997	With two chicks
15.x.1997	With two chicks
01.xi.1998	Female seen carrying larvae but nest remained untraced
24.viii.2002	One chick; almost fledged
29.ix.2002	Nest with three chicks
22.ix.2002	Female seen carrying larvae but nest remained untraced

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[Editors' note: Sound files of the three calls (MP3 format) have been uploaded on our website (www.indianbirds.in).]

Melanism in Spotted Owlet *Athene brama*

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Melanism is the occurrence of abnormally black coloured individuals due to the excess presence of a pigment called melanin in their skin, hair, feathers, etc. Colours of feathers in birds depend on combinations of the bichrome pigments such as melanin, porphyrin and carotenoids. Genetic, hormonal and environmental ultimately dictate their expression. In contrast to melanism, albinism is the total absence of pigment melanin from the feathers, eyes, and skin. Detection of the absence of a particular pigment is often not possible, the generalized terms leucism or isabelline are preferred. Reports of melanism in birds are rare and in nocturnal species are sparse. Pande et al. (2003) report partial melanism in the following Indian birds: Brahminy Starling *Sturnus pagodarum* and Jungle Babbler *Turdoides striatus* near Pune and Chiplun, Maharashtra, respectively.

A study of the population, ecology and breeding biology of the Spotted Owlet

Athene brama was initiated near Pune, beginning from January 2002. During this study, the authors noticed a melanistic form of this owlet in the year 2003. The exact location of the nest hole where the melanistic owl was recorded was 18°20'64"N, 74°01'41"E at 800m near Saswad, Purandar taluk, Pune district, Maharashtra. The nest was in a 75-year old *Ficus bengalensis* tree, at a height of 8m, measuring 30x20cm with a depth of 45cm. In June 2003, four owlets were first seen near the nest, of which two were chicks and both were melanistic. One parent was of normal plumage and the other parent was partially melanistic. No photographs were taken at that time. The observations were however continued.

In February 2004, two adult spotted owlets of normal plumage occupied the same nest. Two chicks hatched from two eggs and both the chicks were of normal plumage. These chicks were ringed. Two, plastic, lemon yellow coloured rings with

numbers 261 and 262 were placed in right and left tarsus respectively. In April 2004, the chicks fledged and subsequently the nest site was unoccupied. In July 2004, three owlets were again seen to be occupying the same nest. Two were adults and one was juvenile. One adult was normal and the other was partially melanistic but the juvenile was melanistic. Photographs were taken this time (Uploaded on www.indianbirds.in), and it was assumed that the pair that was seen in June 2003 had returned. This was a conjecture since ringing was not done earlier. It was also assumed that the pair nesting and fledging normal owlets from February until April 2004 was different from the pair that fledged a melanistic owlet, even though both the pairs used the same nest.

The distribution of Southern Spotted Owlet *A. b. brama* is confined to peninsular India south of 20°N latitude and has not been reported from Sri Lanka. The Northern Spotted Owlet *A. b. indica* is seen north of this arbitrary line but overlap is seen around