

20°N latitude. The species is resident and affects ruins, old buildings, groves and ancient trees near human habitation and cropland. Southern race is about 21 cm. in length, is darker grey and slightly smaller than the northern race. The plumage differences between the normal (Ali and Ripley 1969, Grimmett et al. 1998) and melanistic plumages in the owl that we recorded are shown in Table 1.

The irides of both were golden-yellow; however, it appeared that the eyes of the melanistic form were smaller.

**Partially melanistic plumage of parent:** One parent with this plumage was darker overall than the other, which had a normal plumage. There were black to dark brown coloured patches on the pale colored chest and abdomen, instead of brown streaks. The facial disc was dark with smoky eyebrows. White spots on the crown, mantle and wing coverts and the tail bars, though visible, were not very prominent.

We observed an interesting behavior in the melanistic owl. When the nest tree was approached for observations and collecting pellets, the owl with normal plumage first took wing, followed after closer approach

by the partially melanistic parent, while the juvenile melanistic owl only reluctantly flew away on even closer approach. It was often difficult to locate the melanistic owl when it was perched and immobile. In our study of several nests of the spotted owlets with normal plumage in the same locality, the chicks and parents took wing almost simultaneously.

For obvious reasons, it is extremely difficult to identify melanism in nocturnal birds. True incidence of melanism in nocturnal birds is unknown. We report in this paper, probably the first instance of melanism, in wild population of any owl from India, in this case, in the Southern Spotted Owllet.

Table 1: Normal and melanistic plumage

Normal plumage	Melanistic plumage
Plumage: grey brown.	Dark brown to black.
Facial disc and hind collar: white.	Dark, collar not seen.
Eyebrows: white, distinct.	Indistinct.
Crown, mantle, wing coverts: white spotted.	Indistinct white spotting.
Chest and belly: pale white with brown streaks.	Uniformly dark with indistinct bars.
Beak, feet and claws: grey.	Dark black.
Tail: conspicuously barred.	Bars indistinct.
Cere: smoky green.	Dark.

## Recoveries from *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* – 7

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My pace has been too slow, and the Editor is right in suggesting that I write about the main happenings not on a monthly but on a yearly basis. My last contribution brought the story up to July 1961. This note covers the period up to December 1961.

The August 1961 issue carried extracts from a lecture by Salim Ali on “Birds and Plants”, to the Singapore Branch of the Malayan Nature Society. It is a fascinating piece and I quote one paragraph which will be of interest not merely to ornithologists but also to our sportsmen.

“On the credit side of the bird’s seed dispersal account, also, two significant entries may be cited. The flourishing sandalwood and oil industry of Southern India, which yields a substantial revenue to the State of Mysore, owes its existence largely to frugivorous birds like bulbuls and barbets which swallow the berries of the sandalwood tree (*Santalum album*) and disseminate the seeds far and wide, thus ensuring widespread natural regeneration

of the tree. And such are the complex chains of cause and effect in Nature that one feels almost tempted to give vicarious credit to our native birds, at least in part, for India’s supremacy in the sport of hockey. The links in this chain are as follows: The basis of the comparatively young but vigorous sports goods industry in the Punjab, which supplied all the championship-winning hockey sticks, is the mulberry tree (*Morus indica*). When the desert areas of the Punjab were first colonized by the introduction of the vast network of irrigation canals, the mulberry tree was planted along their banks as a fast-growing soil binder.

“The local birds took to the fruit with such zest that within a very short period the mulberry tree became abundant and paved the way for the flourishing plantations which furnish the raw materials for badminton and tennis rackets, cricket bats, hockey sticks and numerous sports requisites. The bird-assisted industry now not only caters for practically the entire needs of the country, but also earns a

## References

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sizeable amount of much-needed foreign exchange by exports abroad.”

“Some birds around Badrinath”, in two parts, (Aug. 1961 and Oct. 1961, by K. S. Lavkumar) describes many of the common birds which visitors are certain to come across – white-capped redstarts, Plumbeous restarts, Himalayan whistling thrush, little Forktail, and the extraordinary brown dipper, which procures its meal by “plunging into the eddying water straight to the bottom; then if the water is clear it can be seen walking on the floor against the current... This suicidal feat of the little bird has always been rather alarming to watch...”

Among the land birds described is the wall creeper, “about the size of a large sparrow, with round full wings like a hoopoe and the same uncertain flight of a butterfly... but it is the habit of alighting and running up sheer walls that is diagnostic of the wall creeper, and it lives its perpendicular life on cliff faces above 14,000 ft... descending to the foothills in winter...”

No one can fail to be impressed by the

antics of the two species of choughs, one with its coral red bill and legs, (*Pyrrhonorax pyrrhonorax*), and the other with a yellow bill and red legs (*P. graculus*). "...A chough is a bird of the unfettered Himalayan elements, forever circling and tossing, rising and falling, and as free as the winds that breathe across these magnificent mountains."

In July 1961, I accompanied Salim Ali to Rudrapur, in Uttar Pradesh, from where there was news about the recently re-discovered large-billed weaver bird (Finn's Baya). Our host was Mr C. M. Chaudhri, a retired Chief Conservator of Forests from Orissa. His farm of 350 acres, covered with grass and reeds, typical of "Bhabar" country, was an especially good habitat for warblers, and from elephant-back we listed 85 species within the confines of the farm. Among these was the yellow-headed fantail warbler (*Cisticola exilis*) recorded for the first time in Kumaon a few years ago. Three species of bayas were nesting on the farm, the common, the striated and the black-throated, and it was instructive to see the differing architecture of each species. My only disappointment was that we had not seen a tiger. These beasts are frequent visitors to the farm and our host showed us a few damp and shady spots where they occasionally have their afternoon siesta. However, not having come across tigers on the premises also has its advantages.

One of the keenest and most reliable birders of this period was Mrs Usha Ganguli. On 28.v.1961, she waded through knee-deep water at Najafgarh Jheel to find live nests of black-winged stilts, and she gave a very useful account of birds present there in May

– where she had "never seen as much water", and again on 23.vii.1961, when "the waters had been drained to a very great extent". In spite of this she was able to say that the place was "not only a paradise for water birds but the greatest variety of raptors is to be found here. I have seen 7 kinds of eagles, apart from buzzards, harriers, falcons."

Capt. N. S. Tyabji (October 1961) expressed his surprise at Mrs Ganguli not mentioning the little Indian pratincole (*Glareola lactea*), seen by him in large flocks of 3,000-5,000 birds. Among the several other birds reported by Tyabji was a flock of about 200 pheasant-tailed jacanas, 20 sarus cranes and 50 black-necked storks.

Salim Ali followed up Tyabji's note in the November 1961 issue, questioning some of the identifications. Rain Quail: "Is it not more likely that the 'small flock (about 12 birds) observed in a newly ploughed field' were in fact bush quails? The place and habit certainly suggest that latter. For the benefit of future observers it seems desirable to straighten out these doubts."

In the September 1961 issue Salim Ali produced a useful note on "Field Identifications of some Migratory Song Birds". In this "a beginning (was) made with a group of wagtails in whose plumage yellow is predominant." This should be of great interest to birders even today, for in spite of several illustrated books which are now available, the different races of migratory wagtails are difficult to separate one from the other. With his characteristic caution he wrote "Subspecies of individual examples of wagtails are often impossible to determine with certainty even from

museum skins in breeding plumage; in the field it would be rash and of doubtful scientific value to attempt to do so..." If any wagtail-ophile is interested in a copy I will be glad to forward it.

In 1961 the *Newsletter* was sent free to all "subscribers". When we wrote to the Postmaster General for a concessional postal rate because the publication was of "educational value", his reply was that since the *Newsletter* was being sent free, there can be no question of concession. From January 1961, the subscription was Rs. 5/- per annum for 12 issues. In spite of its not being "free" all subsequent attempts to get the concession failed. I hope we have better luck with *Indian Birds*.

Many of the persons who encouraged the *Newsletter* during its initial year by letters / articles have fallen by the way or are out of sight, but I mention them here as a mark of gratitude. I am listing only those who have not featured in Recoveries. So far Prof. K. K. Neelakantan, Y. S. Shivraj Kumar, M. K. Fatehsinhji, M. Sasikumar, C. Nandini, George P. V., S. Thomas Satyamurti, Lalsinh M. Raol, R. A. Stewart Melliush, R. N. Chatterjee, P. V. Bole, M. M. Mistry, Anwar Khan, Naresh Singh (WLW UP), Ahi Rudra (DFO Darjeeling), P. K. Rajagopalan (Virus Research Centre, Shimoga), J. T. M. Gibson, K. Janaskuraman, P. W. Soman, Amir J. Ali, M. Sasaikumar, R. S. Prasad (Haffkine Institute, Bombay), Mrs Desiree Proud (Kathmandu), Dr W. Rydzewski (Editor, *The Ring*), H. G. Acharya, Dr J. P. Joshua (Liberia, West Africa), A. S. Tyabji (Jamshedpur), Mrs Jamal Ara (Ranchi), B. A. Palkhiwala and, B. G. Ghate.

## International Conference on Bird and Environment, Haridwar, India

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A four-day international conference on 'Bird and Environment' was held in Gurukula Kangri University, Haridwar from 21-24.xi.2004. Over 160 ornithologists, conservation biologists, government representatives and naturalists, including 31 from 17 countries, participated in the meeting. There were 9 plenary lectures, 25 invited talks, 60 oral and, 51 poster presentations during the sessions.

In the first and second sessions namely, "The biology of avian vocal behaviour" and "Advances in avian

bioacoustics", speakers examined numerous biological aspects of vocal behaviour such as diversity of acoustic communication, sexual selection and neurobiology of bird song, discrimination of temporal fine structures of songs by birds, etc.

In his Plenary, in the first session, entitled, "The science of bird songs: nature's music", Peter Marler (University of California, Davis, USA), the father of 'avian communication system', said, "Environmental factors influence the

communicative efficiency of acoustic signals and thus their evolution with consequences for their use by conservationists in monitoring population of endangered species." In the first session, presentations were made on various aspects of the uses of songs and calls in the social life of birds by Dietmar Todt (Free University, Berlin Germany), J. E. Viellard (University Estadual de Campins, Brazil), Ole Neasbye Larsen (University of Southern Denmark, Denmark), Nicolas Mathevon (University Jean Monnet-Saint-Etienne, France, Anil