

Northern Lapwings *Vanellus vanellus* in an agricultural field in Manipur, India.

Laishangbam Sanjit

Department of Zoology & Environmental Science, Gurukula Kangri University, Haridwar, Uttarakhand, India.

On 1.i.2000, I did a census of birds in the agricultural fields near Uyung Makhong village (24°28'N, 93°40'E), which lies on the periphery of the Thangjing Hill ranges in the east Himalayan state of Manipur (India). Some local boys, who were working in the field, had caught a bird with a crested head. They told me that the bird was called "Salangkhak". This is a Manipuri name for all species of the lapwing family. I took the bird from them and realised that the lapwing with the crested head was a

Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*. I then looked around for more birds of this species. I found ten more individuals sitting / standing on the raised paths (locally called "loubuk louri") in the agricultural field. The mild breeze made their crests very prominent.

Locals informed me that it was common in winter and quite numerous in the month of January, particularly in this area. The bird was observed during the winter of 2001-2003, in the same field or area. Grimmett et

al. (1998) mentioned it as an erratic visitor in the area. My rescued bird was nursed and set free after 5 days.

Reference

Grimmett, Richard, Carol Inskipp, and Tim Inskipp. 1998. *Birds of the Indian Subcontinent*. 1st ed. (With the collaboration of Sarath Kotagama and Shahid Ali.) (Helm Identification Guides.) London: Christopher Helm, A & C Black.

Egg cannibalism in Jungle Babbler *Turdoides striata*

Laishangbam Sanjit and Dinesh Bhatt

Avian Biodiversity and Bioacoustic Lab, Department of Zoology and Environmental Sciences, Gurukula Kangri University, Haridwar 249404.
Email: sanjitlai@yahoo.com

Jungle Babbler *Turdoides striata* is a resident bird, endemic to the Indian Subcontinent. Jungle Babblers are chiefly insectivorous, augmenting their diet with fruits, seeds and nectar. They feed chiefly on the ground, hopping about and busily turning over leaves (Grimmett et al. 1998). On 2.ix.2003, we found a cup-shaped nest of dry grass and twigs of *Turdoides striata* in Kankhal area of Haridwar (29° 57'N, 78°12'E). It was about 4m above ground, on top of a bush and seemed quite exposed to predators (birds of prey) which were aplenty

in the area. On 4.ix.2003 at 08:30hrs, we observed an unusual behavior. As soon as the female laid an egg, she broke the shell of the egg and ate its contents. (Egg-eating is apparently prevalent in poultry and is supposed to result from a calcium-deficient diet. In poultry, stress is also a cause for egg-eating.) She then picked up the lovely green-coloured shell with her beak and flew away with it. She leaves the egg-shell on the roof of a nearby house.

This entire sequence was recorded in a ten-minute video which has been deposited

with the Records of Avian Biodiversity and Bioacoustic Laboratory, Department of Zoology and Environmental Sciences, Gurukula Kangri University, Haridwar (India).

Reference

Grimmett, Richard, Carol Inskipp and Tim Inskipp. 1998. *Birds of the Indian Subcontinent*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Reviews

Birds of South Asia. The Ripley Guide. Field guide. Vol. 1; *Birds of South Asia. The Ripley Guide. Attributes and status*. Vol. 2. — By Pamela C. Rasmussen and John C. Anderton. 2005. Barcelona: Lynx Edicions. ISBN: Vol. 1: 84-87334-65-2; Vol. 2: 84-87334-66-0; Vols. 1&2: 84-87334-67-9. Copies can be ordered from: www.lynx.com. Price for the set: • 75/- [= c. Rs 4,000/-].

Vol. 1: Hardback (15.0 x 22.0cm, with illustrated cover), pp. 1-378+6, plates I-II (endpapers, front), III-IV (endpapers, rear), plates 1-180, 1,450+ maps (colour, distribution). Vol. 2: Hardback (15.0 x 22.0cm, with illustrated cover), pp. 1-683+5, endpapers [Maps (front: South Asia, physical; back: South Asia, main regional habitat zones)], 3 portraits [b&w: S. D. Ripley (p. 8), Pamela Rasmussen (p. 11), John

C. Anderton (p. 11)], text-figs. 1-5 (Fig. 1: Bird topology; fig. 2: Geographic and political names mentioned in text; fig. 3: Number of breeding species; fig. 4: Number of regional endemic species; fig. 5: sample sonagrams); 1,000+ sonagrams.

Pamela Rasmussen and John Anderton's long-awaited *Birds of South Asia* (2005) has finally arrived. This two-volume set magnificently caps a decade of high-quality ornithological publications on the avifauna of South Asia (Inskipp et al. 1996; Kazmierczak & Singh 1998; Grimmett et al. 1998, 1999; Kazmierczak 2000). The first volume comprises a field guide while the second, entitled "Attributes and status", detailed information about species. The authors include the following political areas

within the ambit of "South Asia": Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Chagos Archipelago. This is the first field guide to cover Afghanistan or Chagos Archipelago.

The field guide (vol. 1) contains over 3,400 illustrations in 180 colour plates painted especially for this book. These depict virtually all species and most distinctive subspecies and plumages, some of which appear in no other guide. The plates are largely of a very high standard and are placed on the right-hand-side (*recto*) of an open book while on facing pages (*verso*) are colour range maps, 1,450 in all, annotated as to geographic variation, status (breeding visitor, endemics, geographic variation, year-round resident, two-way migration,

spring migration, fall migration, winter visitor, isolated record, etc.), and habitat. On the verso too are concise texts giving the information necessary to identify each species. The endpapers have keys to the main plates for quick access.

Birdwatchers in India may have become familiar, by now, with the field guides of Grimmett et al. (1998) and Kazmierczak (2000). Let me assure you that the book under review is a march ahead of both. It has a convenient layout that includes plates, distribution maps, and texts, on facing pages. There is no need to flip pages to look at maps. Neither of the earlier books achieved this. On the text and map page, families are broken further into convenient sections, based either on genera and/or physical characters, with light blue bands, thereby reducing the searchable options in the field. The judicious use of space is astounding. The exquisite plates are by leading artists of the world, (none is from South Asia). But it is gratifying to note that there are several Asian ornithologists, e.g., Pratap Singh, Dhananjaya Katju and Deepal Warakagoda, who have made important contributions to the work. The acknowledgements (Vol. 2, pp. 36-38) brim with many more names of South Asian ornithologists. If I had to choose favourite plates from this volume, it would have to be the works of John Schmitt (birds of prey) and L. McQueen (owls), and those are not necessarily my favourite bird families! John Anderton's plates grow on you. Initially, I must confess, I did not take to them. Gradually I realised that he lends the illustrated bird a remarkable volume and life that imparts it a very realistic three-dimensional quality. However, some like plate 132 do not depict the true plumage colour of the *Turdoides* species, which tend generally towards a dirty brown rather than the grey shown. On some plates, plumages are depicted much darker than actual colours (e.g., plates 84 and 104), giving a wrong impression of some taxa (e.g. *Coracina melanoptera* on pl. 104). I daresay, given the fabulous jizz that Anderton has breathed into his birds, his colouring too would be scrupulous. This could well be a case where the printed plates do not do justice to the originals!

The distribution range maps may disappoint some users and may indeed be deemed inaccurate by others, which were the general verdicts for those in Grimmett (1998) and Kazmierczak (2000). In all fairness,

maps of the scale and size used in field guides, by their very nature, cannot be completely accurate nor to everyone's satisfaction. Frankly, more detailed ones would end up being cluttered and messy. The maps in the Ripley Guide are based largely on verified specimens, which fact might reduce the range of species when compared with those in the other books, but one could say they are more defensible in their accuracy. Too, they are usefully annotated and, for the first time (another first!), differentiate winter from spring and fall records. The authors are quite clear about what they have done. They categorically state, "Records routinely admitted elsewhere to checklists and maps are of various types and often of uncertain reliability and provenance. The backbone of our knowledge of distributions of birds in South Asia has always been based on museum specimens. Specimens form much of the most reliable source of distributional data because they are tangible evidence that (theoretically) may be re-evaluated by any researcher at any time. However, our knowledge of bird distributions has long been compromised by the fact that statements based on specimen data have been confounded by statements not based on such data but on surmise... as well as on mistaken identifications and localities, and confused taxonomies. In more recent years, specimen collecting has largely been replaced by observational data (sight records). We consider that sight reports have too often been taken as reliable without adequate documentation (for the entire region, only Sri Lanka has had a long-standing records committee). We have taken the conservative position of considering that important records warranting inclusion as definite here are those supported by extant specimens or clearly identifiable, extant photographs that may be re-examined as necessary, accompanied by published details that confirm the identity of the bird without question and provide additional corroborative data," (vol. 2, p. 27). They however clarify that, "...the absence of indication for a given region on a map cannot be taken as absolute proof that a species has never been recorded in a given area; original research is required to document each case history. We believe this book will facilitate such research and will provide the background for understanding problems in the historic record of bird

distributions within South Asia," (ibid.). In the present work, more details of distribution are provided in the second volume, including questionable records, frauds, etc.

The second volume contains detailed attributes and status of each taxon. It is arranged in the following order: Contents (p. 5); List of families (p. 6); Preface: An appreciation of S. Dillon Ripley (by Bruce Beehler, pp. 8-10); About the authors (p. 11); Introduction [pp. 12-35: Coverage of the book; Geography and avifauna; Moults and plumages; Measurements; Illustrations; Identification (ID); Vocalisations; Taxonomy; Names; Maps; Records; History of ornithology in South Asia; Conservation]; Acknowledgements (pp. 36-38); Species accounts and sonagrams (pp. 39-601); Appendix 1: Hypothetical species (pp. 603-604); Appendix 2: Rejected species (p. 605); Appendix 3: Taxonomic changes (pp. 606-613); Appendix 4: Glossary (pp. 614-616); Appendix 5: Gazetteer of localities mentioned in text (pp. 617-623); Appendix 6: Major birding localities (pp. 624-625); Appendix 7: Useful addresses and contacts (p. 626); Appendix 8: Brief regional histories (pp. 627-629); Appendix 9: Major regional specimen holdings by museum (p. 630); Appendix 10: Threatened species (p. 631); References (pp. 633-640); Main index (pp. 641-683).

Species accounts have sub-sections that deal with identification (including variation and size), occurrence, habits, voice, and taxonomy. They are cross-referenced to Ali and Ripley's *Handbook* (1983) by the serial numbers used by the latter, and to the plates in volume one.

Volume two, entitled "Attributes and status," is, according to this reviewer, what makes the two-volume set so special. The print is small, no doubt, but the wealth of information that is packed into it is phenomenal, making it an ideal lodestone to return to after a day of field-work. Splitting the work into two volumes is a brilliant idea for it provides the best of both worlds to a user – a highly portable classic field guide and a road-worthy, information-packed databank, for reference. Bruce Beehler's "Appreciation of S. Dillon Ripley" is a neat summation of the phenomenal ornithological work that Ripley has left behind. More than that, it gives tantalising views of the man behind the scientist.

Some of the important aspects of this volume are as follows: Taxonomy: The authors state that, "During preparation of

this book, we realised that it was counterproductive to retain many taxa as subspecies when it became obvious through comparisons of morphology and vocalisations that they would not continue to be thus treated in the future... Remembering that the decisions to lump species were made in the absence (or without consideration) of much of the data now available, we propose, in a number of instances, a different taxonomic arrangement from that currently accepted by most sources," (p. 25). This has resulted in 198 species-level differences from the taxonomic treatment of Ali and Ripley (1983) and 128 species-level differences from that of Inskipp et al. (1996)! These changes fall under five categories: those split from extralimital species, splits within region, new or overlooked taxon, reallocation of race(s), and those that have been deleted. An example is the polytypic Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*, treated in Ali and Ripley (1983) as *O. o. oriolus* and *O. o. kundoo*. The present work treats them as two separate species, the "European Golden Oriole *O. oriolus*" and "Indian Golden Oriole *O. kundoo*" and states that the latter "Does not appear to intergrade with *O. oriolus*, despite proximity of breeding ranges. Differences in morphology and (evidently) vocalisations are comparable or greater than those between certain other oriole species; hence *kundoo* treated here as full species," (p. 586). Brief justifications are provided for all such taxonomic decisions, and in most cases detailed vocal analyses and sonagrams are also provided as substantiation.

Vocalisations: The study of avian vocalisations has advanced considerably in the past decade and is being used increasingly in taxonomy and systematics the world over. The work under review presents, for the first time, over a thousand detailed sonagrams of bird vocalisations from South Asia. It might take a while before we get used to sonagrams and adept at using them as tools for study and identification. This is a good place to start, for the introduction gives samples of the main types of bird vocalisations (vol. 2, p. 24, figure 5), depicting whether a squiggle on the graph is a trill or a warble or indeed a buzz! Ideally, bird vocalisations are more useful in a field guide, for on-the-spot reference in the field. However, the elaboration meted vocalisations in volume two, wherein detailed analyses for most species are made directly from tape

recordings, would not have been possible there.

Names: The authors have taken pains to ensure that the genders of specific and subspecific names agree with generic names as suggested by David and Gosselin (2002a, b). In addition, "All specific and subspecific names used herein have been reviewed by N. David and M. Gosselin, whose additional unpublished suggestions for gender agreement have been enacted herein," (p. 26). It is heartening to read that the authors have prudently "chosen to follow the relatively familiar order used by the Bombay Natural History Society ENVIS list (Manakadan and Pittie 2001)," having "enacted a few minor well-corroborated modifications to the order indicated by present data... Where we have not introduced any taxonomic changes, common (English) names used mainly follow the ENVIS list..."

This volume also contains a list of 85 taxa that are "Hypothetical in [the] region", i.e. those that might occur or have actually been reported to occur within the region without adequate supportive evidence of the claim. This is the first time that such a list has been compiled for South Asia, where, unfortunately, records have been generally either accepted or rejected quite summarily in the past. This list sets a consistent standard for the acceptance of each species. Such records should ideally be vetted by national records committees, which are inexplicably lacking in all countries except Sri Lanka.

There are interesting sections on the innumerable serious frauds committed by Col. Richard Meinertzhagen and the lapses of Stuart Baker, one of the most prolific of writers on matters ornithological, and a very educative history of ornithology of South Asia as well as brief regional histories.

The one flame that illuminates this stupendous work is the amount of original research that has been assimilated into it. Almost every aspect of south Asian ornithology has been re-evaluated after studying original sources and nothing seems to have been accepted just because it was published earlier! The authors are to be commended for this rigorous scrutiny, which sets a remarkably high standard of scientific accuracy among publications on south Asian ornithology. A brief view of this laborious process was revealed by the lead author in the last issue of *Indian Birds* (Rasmussen 2005). All-in-all this is a

splendid set, and is highly recommended.

References

- Ali, Salim, and S. Dillon Ripley. 1983. *Handbook of the birds of India and Pakistan together with those of Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka*. Compact ed. (Sponsored by the Bombay Natural History Society.) Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- David, Normand, and Michel Gosselin. 2002a. Gender agreement of avian species names. *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club* 122 (1): 14-49.
- David, Normand, and Michel Gosselin. 2002b. The grammatical gender of avian genera. *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club* 122 (4): 257-282.
- Grimmett, Richard, Carol Inskipp, and Tim Inskipp. 1998. *Birds of the Indian Subcontinent*. 1st ed. London: Christopher Helm, A & C Black.
- Grimmett, Richard, Carol Inskipp, and Tim Inskipp. 1999. *Pocket guide to the birds of the Indian Subcontinent*. 1st Ed. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Inskipp, Tim, Nigel Lindsey, and William Duckworth. 1996. *An annotated checklist of the birds of the Oriental Region*. Bedfordshire, U.K.: Oriental Bird Club.
- Kazmierczak, Krys, and Raj Singh. 1998. *A birdwatchers' guide to India*. 1st ed. Sandy, U.K.: Prion Ltd.
- Kazmierczak, Krys. 2000. *A field guide to birds of the Indian Subcontinent*. 1st ed. London: Pica Press / Christopher Helm.
- Manakadan, Ranjit, and Aasheesh Pittie. 2001. Standardised common and scientific names of the birds of the Indian Subcontinent. *Buceros* 6 (1): i-ix, 1-37.
- Rasmussen, Pamela C. 2005. On producing *Birds of South Asia*. *Indian Birds* 1 (3): 50-56.

-Aasheesh Pittie

Handbook of Indian wetland birds and their conservation. By Arun Kumar, J. P. Sati, P. C. Tak, and J. R. B. Alfred. 2005. 1st ed. Kolkata: Director, Zoological Survey of India. Price: Rs 1,500; \$80; £60. 35% discount to students, scholars and amateur birders. Available from: <http://www.weblineinfo.com/zsi/hbiwb.pdf>.

Having participated every year in the Asian Waterbird Census, since its inception in 1987, I feel a surge of happiness within me whenever a publication on wetlands comes to hand. If it deals with birds it is a double-blessing. In those early days of coordinated effort (and yet so individual), it was difficult to come by a book with good illustrations of wetland birds. Gradually, better quality material got published, till we had the fabulously portable "Waterbirds of

Asia” [Sonobe & Usui (Eds.) 1993] and the subsequent general field guides of Grimmett et al. (1999) and Kazmierczak (2000). These invariably had brief texts containing identification notes, no more. The work under review has a great deal more to offer in the areas of status and conservation of wetland birds and comes at an opportune time when wetlands are under threat all over the country either from overuse, abuse or draining for agriculture.

This work can be divided into two distinct parts. The first part (comprising chapters one and two) is a field guide of 310 taxa of wetland birds (as defined by the authors), with species accounts that include information on diagnostics, voice, habitat, habits, food, status and distribution, remarks and threshold number. A distribution map is provided alongside each species. One or more colour photographs illustrate these accounts, interspersed with colour plates.

The second part, which is truly the strength of this book, is a compilation of original as well as previously published material ranging from the status of wetland birds (chapter 3), the socio-economics of wetlands (chapter 4), to the wide network of protected areas in India (chapter 5). The authors also provide the student of wetland birds with information on the framework for conservation that is present in the country. Various conventions on wetlands and migratory species and an overview of Indian Ramsar sites are listed in several appendices at the end, which might be eye-openers for many who do not realise the amount of work that goes into making countries agree on ways and means of protecting migrating species and their habitats. The entire section is replete with graphs, tables and maps used

to convey data graphically.

Some criticisms that surface are:

The following wetland-dependant taxa have not been included in this work: The families *Ploceidae* (Weavers) and *Estrildidae* (Munias), and the reed-loving warblers (*Locustella* and *Acrocephalus* spp.) of the *Sylviidae*. Inclusion of *Troglodytes troglodytes* seems unnecessary.

Page numbers of plates are not included in the species accounts, making them difficult to find, as they are not gathered together, but scattered throughout the book.

The distribution maps for Western Marsh-Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* and Eastern Marsh-Harrier *C. spilonotus* are the same (p. 251). This is wrong as the latter is reported from the extreme NE of the country. The map for Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* (sic) (=peregrinus) (p. 255), is also incorrect, in that it depicts the species to be a resident of most of the country. On the contrary, the race that not only frequents wetlands more but also spreads across the country (*F. p. calidus*, earlier treated erroneously under *F. p. japonicus*) is migratory. The map should have had a wash of blue colour (denoting a migrant) instead of green, or ideally, a mixture of both, for the resident Shaheen (*F. p. peregrinator*) though preferring hilly regions and foothills, uses wetlands opportunistically.

“Accentors (Family Prunellidae)” is wrongly given as the title of the Turdinae (Muscicapidae), on p. 284, even though it is correctly placed as that on p. 41. As a consequence, the description of the family Prunellidae (p. 284) becomes irrelevant.

Several of the photographs have been

taken outside India, and therefore may depict races that are not found within India. An example is the photograph of *Ceyx erithaca rufidorsa* (p. 263), which is often treated as a conspecific of the dark-backed nominate race. Now each is elevated to species status, *C. erithaca* and *C. rufidorsa*. *C. rufidorsa* is a vagrant in Sikkim, but is commoner in SE-Asia. *C. erithaca* is the one found widely in the Western Ghats and in NE India, whose picture would have been more relevant. At least *C. erithaca* is depicted on pl. 37 (p. 270). This does not however, dim the spotlight from several top-class photographs from within and outside the country sprinkled throughout the work. Gehan’s magnificent full-page portrait of the Large Egret (penultimate page) shows a bird in courting colours with flaming red legs and blue-black bill [not “nbr” (= non-breeding) as stated]. Vijay Cavale’s pair of Bar-headed Geese (p. 108) captures the graceful lines of this most delicate bird, even though the pair sits in grass.

The Glossary (p. xxi) contains several initial abbreviations, “R/LM” to “V Com”, that are repeated with some extra explanation, from the preceding “Terms and abbreviations used” (pp. xix-xx). Quite a few photos are also repeatedly used, which could have been avoided.

All these glitches can be easily overcome in a second edition. For all students of wetland birds this book is a must and for every budding ornithologist, all biodiversity-, irrigation- and tourism-related departments of various state and central government fora, this book contains vital information, conveniently compiled in one place.

-Aasheesh Pittie

Correspondence

Was this a 12-hour Tsunami warning?

On 25.xii.2004 I observed an unusual behavior of birds in Neelangarai, a coastal suburban locality of Chennai (Tamil Nadu). In a locality full of parakeets, treepie, grey shrike, crows, pariah kites, egrets, bulbuls, green bee-eater, kingfishers, the occasional hoopoe, the pet peacock next door and many more, this unusual activity caused alarm.

It all started with a murder of about 100 crows gathering on the electricity transmission wires. There was an unusual calm. I had initially reckoned it was a carcass in the vicinity that brought them together.

A dog fed in the dustbin, but none of the crows came down alongside it to feed. In a matter of minutes the number of birds began to grow as mynas, drongos, parakeets and several other species started to gather on the coconut trees nearby. Yet there was an unusual lull, but they were restless. There might have been at least 500 birds of various species. It was also seen that they continued to look around in an alert way.

This behavior was observed between 17:30—17:45hrs on 25.xii.2004. They then flew away towards the shore, grouping together again and again on top of

hoardings, buildings, etc., at every 200-300m intervals.

On the ill-fated day of 26.xii.2004, the chirping of birds, which starts early in the morning was absent. The familiar crow, with a hooked beak, which comes every morning for its mandatory rice, failed to turn up at 05:45hrs.

The earthquake occurred at 06:28hrs off the Sumatran coast (magnitude 9.0, one of the most powerful ever in the world). The Tsunami then struck the coast 2-3hrs later.

The birds did not resume their normal activity till late in the afternoon the same