blossoming and a beautiful purple colored *Primula* sp. at the higher reaches. Here, in the shrubbery, a Golden Bush-Robin *Tarsiger chrysaeus* pair was observed in courtship display. Amongst Rhododendron bushes, the male chased the female, running on the ground, with a fanned tail, displaying the black inverted 'T' on his golden tail. Besides, Orange-barred Leaf-Warblers *Phylloscopus pulcher*[1] were numerous (10+) in the bushes and on silver fir *Abies* sp. (probably nesting). The Rhododendron shrubs also held Variegated Laughingthrush *Garrulax variegatus*, Blue Whistling-Thrush *Myophonus caeruleus*, White-browed Bush-Robin *Tarsiger indicus* (singing from tree top), Blue-fronted Redstart *Phoenicurus frontalis* pair, three Striped-throated Yuhina, Oriental Tree Pipit *Anthus hodgsonii* and Rufous Sibia.

At Tunganath peak (near the temple), Jungle Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos* was common and a White-capped Redstart *Chaimarrornis leucocephalus* was seen along a small stream. Two Himalayan Griffons *Gyps himalayensis* sailed close by several times.

Further down, on way from Chopta Chatti towards Duggal Bitta village, in rocky alpine meadows of Kharsu oak *Quercus semecarpifolia* a pair of White-collard Blackbirds *Turdus albocinctus* was feeding on the ground and a Rufous-bellied Pied Woodpecker *Hypopicus hyperythrus* on a tree. Returning towards Mandal, near Chopta, a Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* flew along the rocky slopes.

Birds seen close to Mandal village, in lower cultivated areas along the forest's periphery were: Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*, Common Stonechat *Saxicola torquata*[1], Cinnamon Tree Sparrow *Passer rutilans*[1], Red-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer*, Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia*, Chestnut-bellied Rock-Thrush *Monticola rufiventris*, House Swift *Apus affinis*, etc.

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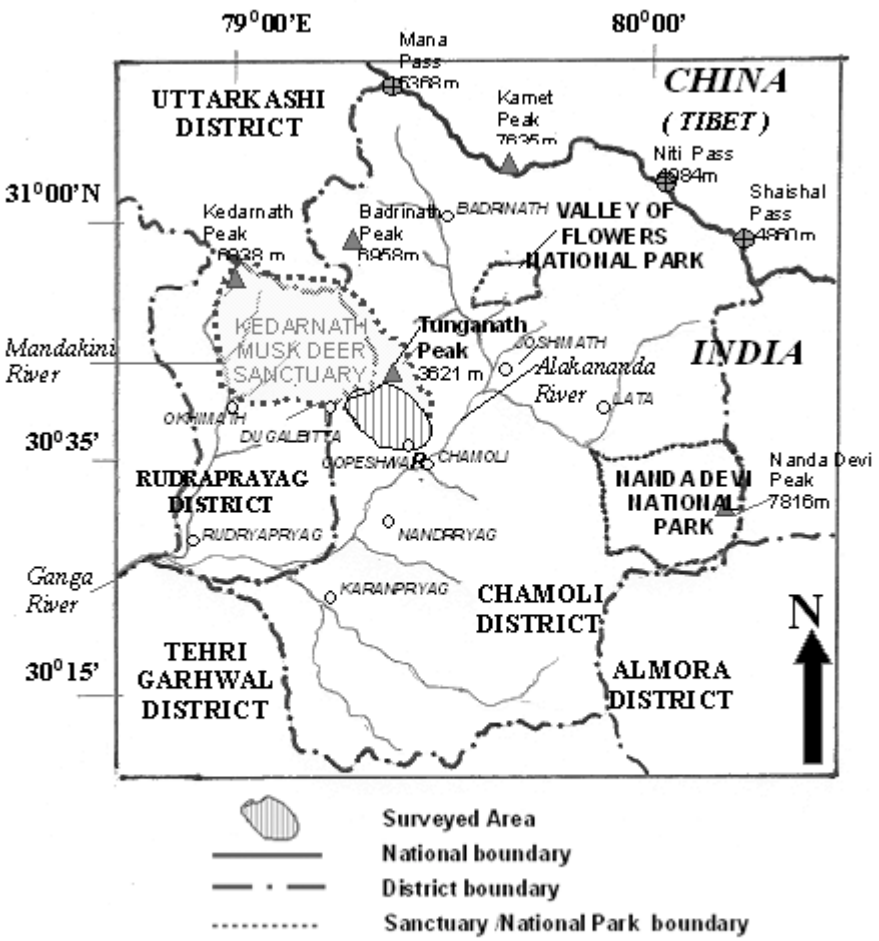

Fig.1 Map of Chamoli district in Uttaranchal state depicting the location of Kedarnath Musk Deer Sanctuary, surveyed area and sites as mentioned in the text.

Notes from a drought year in Rishi Valley

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This (2004-2005) is the fourth consecutive year that rains failed in Rishi Valley (Chittoor district) and the surrounding Rayalseema region of Andhra Pradesh (India). There has been no surface water anywhere on the campus; the last bit of water in the "Last Pond" had dried up long ago. Even in early December (2003), trees had begun shedding leaves and a few dry branches came crashing down. The mighty banyan *Ficus benghalensis*, the veteran of the campus, lost a couple of large branches.

There have been hardly any waterbirds on the campus for several years now. The ubiquitous White-breasted Waterhens *Amaurornis phoenicurus* that used to advertise their presence with loud calls were now conspicuously absent. So were the Little Grebe), Common Moorhens *Gallinula chloropus*, egrets *Egretta* spp., waders, and

Small Blue *Alcedo atthis* and Lesser Pied Kingfishers *Ceryle rudis*. The Indian Pond-Herons *Ardeola grayii* that had put up with the water shortage all these three years became scarce this season (December 2004 onwards). All these days they had eked out a living foraging on the dry ground close to the paths frequented by people, feeding on insects. Now even these became scarce and it was time to leave. Yet one or two individuals still frequent and occasionally flush out from quieter corners.

Raptorial birds too have become less conspicuous. Till recently, we had regular sightings of Short-toed Snake-Eagles *Circaetus gallicus*, Tawny Eagles *Aquila rapax*, Bonelli's Eagle *Hieraaetus fasciatus*, White-eyed Buzzards *Butastur teesa*, Oriental Honey-Buzzards *Pernis ptilorhynchus*, harriers (*Circus* spp.), Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*, Shikra *Accipiter badius* (that used to nest regularly in the campus), occasional Changeable Hawk-Eagles *Spizaetus cirrhatus* and Crested Serpent-Eagles *Spilornis cheela*, and the Black-shouldered Kites *Elanus caeruleus*. There were only irregular sightings now. The female kestrel that used to patrol the low hills was missing after the recent fires (January 2005) that raged on the scrub-covered hillsides in the valley, deliberately set by the shepherds. Earlier, I had seen it boldly attacking tawny eagles that I suspect had a nest in a tree up on this hill.

We had not undertaken the annual waterfowl counts for the second consecutive year around Rishi Valley as all the waterbodies in the neighbourhood had dried-up. So when I visited Ghattu village – *c*. 20km from where we had earlier reported seeing the Grey Herons *Ardea cinerea* nesting on a banyan tree by the road [NLBW 39 (1): 3-4, 1999] – on 22.i.2005, I was hardly surprised to see the bone-dry irrigation tank on whose bank the banyan tree stood. Yet I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw over 25-30 Grey Herons on the tree, building nests, mating or incubating! It was incredible that birds dependant on water for their food chose to nest even in a drought year. I had to wait for over three weeks to solve the mystery.

A colleague drew my attention to a news report in the vernacular newspapers in mid-February. It mentioned that several hundred waterbirds had converged at an irrigation tank, some 25km from our campus. A visit on 16.ii.2005 confirmed the report. There were over 1,200 ducks and another 200-300 waterbirds and waders. A second visit with student-birdwatchers gave a good idea of the birds of this little tank, which was rapidly drying up. It was, as the birds flew, less than two kilometers from Ghattu village and a few Grey Herons kept flying in and out.

On this tank were six species of ducks – Lesser Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna javanica*, Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*, Spot-billed Duck *Anas poecilorhyncha*, Northern Shoveller *Anas clypeata*, Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*, and Garganey *Anas querquedula* – Little *Egretta garzetta*, a single Large *Casmerodius albus* and Median Egrets *Mesophoyx intermedia*, several Pond Herons, about a hundred Little Grebes, Common Moorhen and Common Coots *Fulica atra*, Black Ibis *Pseudibis papillosa*, a Painted Stork *Mycteria leucocephala*, Little Cormorants *Phalacrocorax niger*, Black-winged Stilts *Himantopus himantopus*, snipe *Gallinago* sp., Green *Tringa ochropus*, Wood *T. glareola* and Common Sandpipers *Actitis hypoleucos*, Little *Calidris minuta* and Temminck's Stints *Calidris temminckii*, Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*, Little Ringed *Charadrius dubius* and Kentish Plovers *Charadrius alexandrinus*, besides Lesser Pied and Small Blue Kingfishers and Yellow Wagtails *Motacilla flava*. What a treat this was for eyes that have been seeing only dried, parched landscapes! We wondered how long the water would last and where these birds would go thereafter.

Even in early March, though the day temperatures were high, the nights were cool to cold and in the early mornings, it was very cold. On my morning walks, I could see several birds like the Sirkeer Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus leschenaultii* and the Small Bee-eaters *Merops orientalis* sunning themselves in the golden, slanting rays of the sun that turned the rocks pink and the hillsides into burnished gold. The landscape was enlivened by the *Pongamia* bushes that, despite the dry conditions, put up a new flush of tender leaves, which appeared translucent in the sunlight. *Capparis* sp., bushes and an occasional *Alangium* sp., in bloom added to the beauty of the arid countryside. *Ficus* trees along the road leading to the main road were in fruit near the Rural Health Centre. First two banyan trees came into fruit. A week later, the Pipal trees *Ficus religiosa* started fruiting – and what a profusion of fruits they produced – a veritable oasis in the desert! Hordes of Bonnet Macaques *Macaca radiata* and a variety of birds converged on to the tree to feast. Coppersmith Barbets *Megalaima haemacephala*, bulbuls (three species – *Pycnonotus cafer*, *P. luteolus* and *P. jocosus*), Asian Koels *Eudynamys scolopacea*, Common Mynas *Acridotheres tristis*, Indian Treepies *Dendrocitta vagabunda*, cuckoo-shrikes (*Coracina macei* and *C. melanoptera* and orioles (Oriolidae) were all there. Another bird that turned up was the Indian Grey Hornbill *Ocyceros birostris*.

One unforgettable sight was the presence of three species of orioles on the same tree, next to each other, facilitating comparison. The Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus* with its bright golden plumage contrasting strongly with the black of its wing and tail feathers; a lone Black-headed Oriole *Oriolus xanthornus* looking slightly smaller but with an orange tinge to its plumage with its thin, long pink beak and the give-away calls; and the Black-naped Oriole *Oriolus chinensis* with its greenish-yellow back rimmed with black wing feathers and the black mask that went around its nape. It seemed that one of the plates in the field guides came to life! (Incidentally, the Black-naped Orioles turned in again this year in bigger numbers, outnumbering the Eurasian Golden Orioles.)

The impact of drought on the smaller passerines was somewhat less apparent. With the loss of vegetative cover, they were easier to spot. Some birds (especially the hole-nesters) were going about on their business of breeding as though the drought did not bother them. Several Common Hoopoes *Upupa epops* nested in the campus and one afternoon I located the birds carrying food to the nest-hole, located in a *Peltophorum* sp., tree. Both birds came with morsels of food that they passed to the chick(s), spending less than a second at the entrance of the nest. A fledgling Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri* landed in a thorny hedge on its maiden flight, being pursued by crows (*Corvus* sp.). It became entangled and I had to intervene. With the help of a small twig, I released the wing feathers from the thorns and offered the twig as a perch to the bird. Fortunately, the young one caught hold of it and I lifted it clear. As soon as the bird realized that it was not likely to get further entangled, it took wing and flew straight to a low branch of a nearby tree.

I was surprised one evening to find myself staring at a Collared Scops Owl *Otus bakkamoena* that peeped from a tree-hole. I had never seen one on the campus so early

in the evening. As I had to go past the tree, I watched the bird and found it staring at me, peering directly below as I went under the hole. I returned a little later to observe it closely. The bird was a little shy and tried concealing itself. Not wishing to disturb it, I observed it from a distance. A couple of colleagues joined me and had a look at the bird. As we watched, another bird peeped out, obviously a young one. Ten days later, in early March 2005, I could see the nest occupied by the youngster. It looked greyish, lacking the distinct "horns" as well as the mottled pattern of its parent and instead appeared to have fine vermiculations. I could not see the adult, which no doubt watched from a nearby perch. It was surprising that the numerous crows present nearby did not harass the bird.

A male Asian Paradise-Flycatcher *Terpsiphone paradisi* has been haunting the car park for several years, each winter without fail and, was there this year too. He was used to people and would continue to carry on with his business of snapping flies in mid-air and returning to the same or an adjacent branch giving excellent views. I noticed that he was not alone and was in the company of three females! The three female birds had spread out over a distance of just 100m along the path. The male took the liberty of visiting their territories whenever he fancied and even chased them away when he located a juicy morsel!

Oriental Magpie-Robins *Copsychus saularis* were in song and this season more birds were seen in the campus than in earlier years. Had there been a population explosion or was it because of the dry conditions that more birds were easily spotted? Last year birds had started using a nest-box put up for them and had successfully raised young ones. It is always wonderful to begin the day with a concert from this lovely songster. Another bird that I often heard each morning (January-February) was the Brown Flycatcher *Muscicapa dauurica* that called from the bare, flowering *Plumeria* sp., next to my house. Apparently, the bird roosted on the tree and called a few minutes after sunrise before leaving the roost to forage. On days when I woke up early, before the sun was up, I would hear the loud calls of the Mottled Wood Owls *Strix ocellata*. The Painted Spurfowl *Galloperdix lunulata* is another regular bird that calls in the mornings from the scrub-covered hillside opposite my house.

The hordes of Common Rosefinches *Carpodacus erythrinus* that were noticed four years ago (*c*. 2,000 in number), were no longer seen in the valley. Their absence was linked to the lack of food crops in the vicinity. Nevertheless, there was some compensation. There was possibly a Jack Snipe *Lymnocryptes minimus*, a new bird for me and for the campus, on 21.ii.2005. I noticed it flying up almost vertically from the dried bed of the "Lost Pond" and landed a few meters away under a bush. The small size, long bill, the mottled plumage and the flight pattern suggested it to be this bird but I would like to have a better view before jumping to any conclusion. On 31.iii.2005, three Ashy Woodswallows *Artamus fuscus* turned up on a pylon close to the main road. They called and flew around hawking insects for a while before flying away and disappearing from view. I had never seen these birds here or in the neighbourhood earlier in the past seven years of my stay in Rishi Valley.

Even in a drought year, things do happen, at times taking one by total surprise. If we are not alert just imagine the kind of interesting things we could fail to observe!

Distribution and extent of Pond Herons *Ardeola grayii* with red legs in India

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During the breeding season, Pond Herons *Ardeola grayii* in India change the colour of their tarsi and feet from dull green to yellow or red (Hancock and Kushlan 1980). In other species of the same genera, red legs have been seen on breeding Chinese Pond Heron *A. bacchus* in Hong Kong, China (N. McKilligan, in litt. 2005), on females of the Maldivian subspecies of the Pond Heron *A. g. phillipsi* whose legs are reported to turn rose-coloured during the breeding season (Ali and Ripley 2001), and the Madagascar Pond Heron *A. idea* whose legs turn distinctly reddish during the breeding season (BirdLife International 2005). For the nominate subspecies, this phenomenon is barely documented and it is not known if all individuals obtain the flush briefly during the breeding season, or whether it is restricted to some individuals in an area. Reddish colouration on tarsi and feet in breeding adults was previously thought to be rare. However, in some locations, red-legged Pond Herons occur regularly each year throughout the breeding season though they constitute a small percent of the population (Etawah-Mainpuri districts: 2.1 - 2.6% of the total population; Sundar 2004). Red-legged Pond Herons have been seen in Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Kerala in India (Abdulali and Alexander 1952, Parasharya and Naik 1987, Relton 1996, Wesley 1993, 1996, Sundar 2004). In addition to change in leg colour, Pond Herons acquire a distinct blue colouration on the base of the bill and bluish-green facial skin during the breeding season. This change in colour of the beak is well documented and is widespread with birds in Thailand and Sri Lanka also sporting this colouration (Dharmakumarsinhji 1955, Grimmett *et al*. 1998, Rasmussen and Anderton 2005, www.orientalbirdimages.org). In this note I report new locations in India with red-legged Pond Herons, and present information on the percentage of Pond Herons with red legs in the population from some locations. These findings are discussed in the light of known information on this aspect.

Methods

Records of red legs in Pond Herons were obtained opportunistically during travels in India. In addition, experienced bird watchers were consulted to determine if they had sighted Pond Herons with red legs. Requests for observations on red-legged Pond Herons were sent out on web-based discussion groups that focussed on birds.

To ascertain the population-level incidence of this phenomenon, standardised road transects were conducted in Gujarat, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh. Counts of non-breeding Pond Herons and those with red and yellow legs were *...Contd. p. 113*