Does Sykes’s Crested Lark Galerida deva occur in Kerala?
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In this note, I take you through a set of references and analyses that conclude that the Sykes’s Crested Lark Galerida deva does not have a distribution in Kerala.

Historical information on the distribution
1. In Birds of Kerala (1969), Salim Ali refers to the display song of this species while describing Malabar Lark G. malabarica. However, he did not come across the bird nor collected any specimens from Kerala. He also does not mention anyone to have come across this species (sighting or specimen) in Kerala.
2. In Kerala Puthakal (1986 in Malayalam), Induchoodan (aka, Neelakantan) dedicates a whole text to this species along with Malabar Lark Galerida malabarica. He mentions that the major difference between Sykes’s Crested Lark and Malabar Lark is the flight song, which the former has, and the latter does not. (So comically described as similar to the difference between “Namboodiri” & “Namboodiripadu”. Namboodiri and Namboodiripadu are two closely related sects of Hindu Brahmins in Kerala and “padu” in Malayalam means “to sing”).

Neelakantan found this lark to be common in Palakkad district in central Kerala, and extensively describes its song flight. This is by far the most definite reference of its presence in Kerala.

Recent information on the distribution
2. The only recent published reports of this bird are by Praveen et al. (1994, 1997) from Walayar reservoir (Palakkad district). Both these reports are misidentifications! The birds we referred to were Oriental Skylarks Alauda gulgula. These records have been corrupting literature for sometime and it is time that I corrected them. Oriental Skylark is very common in most of the dry reservoir beds in Palakkad district and can be heard singing high up in the sky.

The song flight of the Sykes’s Crested Lark
Though I have been quite familiar with the song flight of Oriental Skylark for a long time, it was quite recently that I was able to study the song flight of Sykes’s Crested Lark near Bangalore. Some of the birds (probably males) took to the wing on occasions and let pour a much richer warbling (compared to an Oriental Skylark) without any traces of dry “riti-riti-riti” but with a good mimicry of calls of many other birds. The species mimicked are listed below:

1. Large Pied Wagtail Motacilla maderaspatensis.
2. Indian Robin Saxicola caerulescens.
3. Indian Robin Saxicola caprata.
4. Pied Bushchat Saxicola caprata.
7. Small Pratincole Glareola lucta.
10. Brahminy Kite Haliastur indus at a much subdued pitch.
11. Indian Grey Hornbill Ocyceros birostris again much subdued.

1 Malabar Lark does sing but always from the ground or from a perch.

The main differences in the song flight of Sykes’s Crested Lark and Oriental Skylark are given below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Galerida deva</th>
<th>Alauda gulgula</th>
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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>The song delivered by flying in circles or in a zigzag flight at a height of about 20m from the ground. Ali &amp; Ripley (1986) describe the flight as “…soaring, hovering, wandering…” I never saw the bird hovering more during all my observations.</td>
<td>The song delivered by hovering at a single location and gaining height vertically until the bird reaches 30-40m above the ground. Ali &amp; Ripley (1986) describe, “…suspended in the heavens or less stationary at this pitch, hovering on vibrating wings…”</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>All the song flights that I could time rarely exceeded 90 seconds and never went above 120 seconds.</td>
<td>The song can go on for quite a few minutes, though I have not precisely timed any. Ali &amp; Ripley (1986) mention, “may last for over ten minutes without an instant’s pause”.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>The ascent of the bird from its perch is at a tangent to the ground.</td>
<td>The ascent (after the initial take off) is vertical, on rapidly quivering wings with legs dangling.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>The reach of the call is not more than 50–100m. One has to strain ones ears to pick the call if the bird is singing further away.</td>
<td>The call can easily reach over 150–200m.</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>Ali &amp; Ripley (1986) mention that this bird has a better vocabulary in mimicry. This probably has attributed its song to be more deliberate with disjoint phrases.</td>
<td>The song is much more freely delivered, continuous and the “riti-riti-riti” notes fill in whenever the bird is not mimicking.</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>On some occasions, the birds were seen singing from a perch (a stone). The song notes were similar (with mimicry) and duration mostly lasted 60-90 seconds.</td>
<td>I have never come across a Skylark singing from a perch except for a short burst of “riti-riti-riti” that lasts no more than 10 seconds; as if the bird is ascertaining itself that it has not forgotten the phrases!</td>
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Analysis
The crux of the hypothesis is that Neelakantan (1986) was referring to the Oriental Skylark while he wrote the elaborate text for the Sykes’s Crested Lark. The key to the puzzle is the flight song that he describes in the book. Portions of his text describing the lark as, “...a gandharva singing from the heavens...” when translated embraces this meaning. “... A continuous melody with an assortment of songs and tunes interweaved with multitudes of other harmonies superimposed with the jingling of the anklets lasting for at least four to five minutes [author’s emphasis]...” “...Fluttering its wings, the bird performs this orchestra from the sky by hovering [author’s emphasis] with short vertical ascends and descends ...”

Neelakantan saw his lark sing high up in the air and explicitly mentions that it was “suspended” while singing. Nowhere in the text does he give an impression of a “wandering” or “flying in circles” kind of flight for the bird. The “spec in the sky” phenomenon, the “vertical ascent” and the time extent of the song flight indicate an Oriental Skylark rather than a Sykes’s Crested Lark. Moreover, he has missed describing the Oriental Skylark, a possibly more common species (as it is now), in the book that indicates a misidentification. In light of these arguments, it is more likely that Neelakantan’s bird must have been an Oriental Skylark.

Though I have discussed this with many birders from Kerala, all of them consider it a “tough thought” to view against a publication made by the undisputed doyen of Kerala ornithology whom all of us consider “the authority”; particularly in screening dubious records.

Does the distribution of Sykes’s Crested Lark extend up to Kerala?
This is a difficult question to answer but I can give circumstantial evidence that it does not. Ali & Ripley (1986), Grimmett et al (1999) and Kazmierczak (2000) give southern Karnataka (Bangalore and Mysore area being the tip) as the southern-most limits of this bird. We do not have any published reports from Tamil Nadu. Namassivayan (verbally, i.2005), Sanju Varghese (verbally, i.2005), and I have covered many dry areas in Palakkad district (1987 till date) and have not come across this bird. Walayar and other reservoirs do have a similar habitat (open grassy meadows with some exposed rocks) to that around Bangalore, where I have recorded it. There is a possibility that it could occur in some of the drier parts of north Kerala (a fast disappearing habitat!). However, C. Sasikumar confirmed (verbally, iv.2005) that he has not seen this bird anywhere in north Kerala.

Hence, we may conclude that Kerala does not fall in the distribution range of this species. I would appreciate any comments on this note or information on sightings of Sykes’s Crested Lark from Kerala, Tamil Nadu or the border regions of Karnataka (Nagarhole, Bandipur, Mangalore, etc.).

Observation details
I collected the details of the song flight of Sykes’s Crested Lark during two summer visits to T. G. Halli, a reservoir near Bangalore. The birds sang on the wing five times between 11:30hrs and 13:00hrs on 9.iv.2005 and seven times between 09:30hrs and 12:00hrs on 17.iv.2005. The details of Skylark’s song are from my observations of the bird over the past 12 years from many areas in Kerala and from a few places in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

References

Praveen.J is an amateur bird watcher actively pursuing the hobby for the last fifteen years. He is interested in the distribution and movements of birds of the Western Ghats and South India. He is the moderator for the e-mail discussion groups for birds for Kerala (Keralabird) and North East India (birdsofNEIndia).

A record of a Sooty Tern Sterna fuscata from the Valparai plateau, south India

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The Valparai plateau is in the Anamalai hills of the southern Western Ghats, south India, with tropical evergreen forests fragmented by several tea plantations. On 17.vi.2004 some children brought a Sooty Tern Sterna fuscata to us, which had reportedly fallen to the ground behind their school. When the bird did not move for some time and crows (Corvus sp.) started gathering around it, they picked it up and brought it to our research station. It seemed completely exhausted and could not move when put on the ground. We collected morphometric information (given below) using a wing rule and digital vernier callipers. The bird died a few minutes after we received it. There were no evident external wounds on the bird.

The Sooty Tern is described to be a pelagic tern seldom coming to land, and is reported to breed in the Maldives and the Vengurla rocks off the western coast of the peninsula (Ali & Ripley 1983). There have been a few reports of vagrants (“storm blown!”) from Bihar, Assam and Tamil Nadu. The non-breeding range of the species is insufficiently known (Ali & Ripley 1983). We believe that the individual could have been storm-blown as there was heavy rainfall and strong winds on that day. This is presumably the first record of this species from this area, even though under unnatural circumstances.

This individual did not have the characteristic white frontal band till the eye as reported for adult birds in Ali and Ripley (1983) and Kazmierczak (2000). Instead, this individual had a dark head with buff white speckles on the forehead. It also did not have the clear buff white spotting on the back and the wings as reported for juveniles in Ali and Ripley (1983) and as illustrated in...