

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 vouch 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.

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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 (KeralaBirder) and North East India (birdsofNEIndia).

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

V. V. Robin¹ and Sudheendra Rao N. R.

National Institute of Advanced Studies, Indian Institute of Science campus, Bangalore 560012, India. ¹Email: robinvijayan@yahoo.com

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

Grimmet et al. (1999) and Kazmierczak (2000). Marginal white spots were visible on the back only upon close inspection. It had grey colouration from the neck to the end of the thorax while the region from the belly to the vent was white (see backcover). The bill, wing and tail shape were typical of *Sterna* spp., terns. The moult seemed new, and morphometric information matched with measurements in Ali and Ripley (1983). We presume that this individual was a sub-adult bird, based on these characters. The dead bird was handed over to the Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History, Coimbatore, south India, where they skinned and stuffed the bird. After the dissection, we were informed that the bird was a female and that its stomach was empty, it had very little fat content, and no visible skeletal (or wing) damage. The post mortem report indicates that the bird possibly died of fatigue.

Morphometric readings:

Body length (tip of bill to tail tip)	-	355.0mm
Wing length (primary)	-	287.0mm
Bill length (from base of skull)	-	042.7mm
Tarsus length	-	022.6mm
Tail length	-	145.0mm
Base of tail to fork	-	080.0mm

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V. V. Robin is a research associate at the National Institute of Advanced Studies and is working with Dr Anindya Sinha on the conservation biology of the threatened White-bellied Shortwing in the Annamalais, Western Ghats.

More on the distribution of the White-winged Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus*

Tim Inskipp

Email: inskip@btinternet.com

The article on 'Distribution of White-winged Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* in India and a new record from Andhra Pradesh' provides a useful summary for the species. I would like to add some extra information and clarify a few points.

The detailed list of records from each state does not include Bihar, Himachal Pradesh or West Bengal, and only mentions the Andaman Islands, Assam and Tripura incidentally; in addition, Raipur is stated to be in Madhya Pradesh, whereas it is now part of the split-off state of Chhatisgarh (see e.g. Chandra and Singh 2004).

Bihar: Dalgleish (1902) noted that in the Darbhanga district he 'shot a bird which I identified as this species, but unfortunately lost the skin'; he gave no date for this record. Himachal Pradesh: Perennou and Mundkur (1991) listed a count of five made during the annual Asian Waterfowl Census.

West Bengal: Majumdar et al. (1992) referred to two collected on 20.vi.1965 and one collected on 2.v.1966 in North 24-Parganas district. Chowdhury (1984) recorded it in the Calcutta area and Anon. (1995) reported it from the Sunderbans. Carol Inskipp and I saw one on 27.iii.1980 near Calcutta.

Andaman Islands: Hume (1879) referred to a specimen procured on 16.iv.1879 at Aberdeen by F. A. de Roepstorff, and added

that 'Later in the season a flock of this same species was seen at Haddo but none were procured.'

Assam: Inglis (1896-1902), referring to Hylakandy district in Cachar noted that 'I find I have identified a Tern as this species, but will re-examine the skin to see whether it is correct or not.' Baker (1929) reported that 'Hole, Primrose and I all obtained specimens in Cachar.' van der Ven (1988) noted that three were seen at Dipor Bheel, Gauhati during the Asian Waterfowl Census. Datta (1995) noted that it was a common migrant to Dhubri district, and Choudhury (2000) listed it as an uncommon winter visitor to Assam.

[Tripura: Hume (1870) referred to a 'beautiful specimen in full plumage' collected in 'Tipperah'; this was clarified by Hume (1879) as from the Meghna river, Comilla, which places it in present day Sylhet, Bangladesh.] Chhatisgarh: Pittie et al. (2005) suggested that 'Ali and Ripley (2001) erred in dating D'Abreu's record from 1935'; however Ali and Ripley's statement 'Once taken in Madhya Pradesh (Raipur, D'Abreu, 1935, JBNHS 38: 112)' is clearly just a citation of the reference, not providing a date for the occurrence.

Extra references for other states

Andhra Pradesh: Perennou et al. (1990) listed 10 counted during the AWC in 1990; Perennou and Mundkur (1991) listed 22 counted in 1991.

Delhi: Carol and I saw one on 19 April 1980. Gujarat: Perennou et al. (1990) listed two counted in 1990; Perennou and Mundkur (1991) listed 25 counted in 1991.

Jammu and Kashmir: Anon. (1982) and Williams and Delany (1985) referred to one seen in Ladakh during the period August-November 1981.

Karnataka: Perennou et al. (1990) listed 31 counted in 1990; Perennou and Mundkur (1991) listed two counted in 1991.

Kerala: Perennou and Mundkur (1991) listed 75 counted in 1991.

Orissa: Perennou and Mundkur (1991) listed 5,230 counted in 1991. Dev (1992) described a summer-plumaged bird seen at Chilika Lake but no date was given.

Rajasthan: Perennou and Mundkur (1991) listed seven counted in 1991.

Tamil Nadu: Scott and Rose (1989) listed one counted in 1989; Perennou and Mundkur (1991) listed 32 counted in 1991; Mundkur and Taylor (1993) listed one counted in 1993.

In addition, Lopez and Mundkur (1997) provided annual figures for India - 1994: 21, 1995: 10, 1996: 232, and a composite map for