

Sind Woodpecker *Dendrocopos assimilis* from Jaisalmer District, Rajasthan, India

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The Sind Woodpecker *Dendrocopos assimilis* is described as resident in the north-western parts of the Indian Subcontinent, being widespread only in Pakistan (Ali & Ripley 1983; Grimmett *et al.* 2011), while near-endemic to South Asia (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Its range within India has been depicted as: along the western border of India, making a small incursion in Punjab up to Ludhiana (BirdLife International 2014). Specimens from Firozpur, in the western parts of the Punjab (India), and Sirsa (western Haryana), have been mentioned by Rasmussen & Anderton (2012). We describe here the first photographic record of a Sind Woodpecker from India.

On the evening of 09 August 2011, at c. 1730 hrs, we noticed two woodpeckers on a *Prosopis cineraria* tree near Murar (26.62°N, 70.02°E), Shahgarh tehsil, Jaisalmer District,

Rajasthan. The birds were photographed [129, 130], and both were immediately identified as Sind Woodpecker using the available field guide (Grimmett *et al.* 2011).

The species was identified by the black malar stripe extending to meet the black area on the neck-sides, and the large white patch on shoulder and head. The photographed individual was identified as a male, as it had a red crown (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), but we could not identify the gender of the other bird. Realising the importance of the sighting, we watched the two birds foraging on the tree trunk for some time until they flew away.

One bird was seen again at c. 1600 hrs, three days later on 12 August 2011, c. 100 m away from the place of the first sighting. Another was sighted at the first location on 22 August 2011 [131], feeding on the trunk of an *Acacia* sp. tree.



129. Sind Woodpecker at Murar, Jaisalmer, Rajasthan, seen on 09 August 2011.



131. Sind woodpecker seen on 22 August 2011.



130. Sind woodpecker feeding on *Prosopis cineraria* tree bark on 9th Aug 2011.

Murar has an undulating landscape, with sand dunes and patches of vegetation. The area is part of the Shahgarh grasslands in the Desert-Thar biogeographic Zone (zone 3A) of India (Rodgers *et al.* 2002). Vegetation of the area is classified as northern tropical thorn forest (6b)—subdivision desert thorn forest-type C1 (Champion & Seth 1968). The dominant vegetation comprises—trees: *Capparis decidua*, *Prosopis cineraria*, and *Salvadora persica*; scrub: *Leptadenia pyrotechnica*; and grasses: *Lasiurus scindicus* and *Cenchrus catharticus*.

The birds were seen very close to the international border of India and Pakistan, which is sparsely populated due to harsh climatic conditions, and security restrictions imposed by the government (Pande *et al.* 2013).

An earlier record of this species was from Sind, Pakistan, and comprised part of John Henry Gould's museum collections

deposited at the Natural History Museum, England, registered as BMNH 60.4.16.114 (Jansen 2013). While the specimen from Firozpur mentioned in Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) remains untraced, their Sirsa record must refer to the one collected by A. O. Hume from "Urneewalla, Sirsa" (or Urneewalla) [=Arniwala, Sirsa, Haryana 30.07°N, 74.47°E], on 04 February 1870 and now in BMNH (Hargitt 1890). It is a common bird in almost all parts of Pakistan except in the Baluchistan region up to the Afghanistan border in the north, and eastern Iran (BirdLife International 2015).

Hence, this sighting is not unexpected, given the proximity of its location to the described range of the species (just across the Indo-Pak border in Jaisalmer). However, this is its first photographic record from India, and thus is noteworthy. Since it inhabits riverine tracts among sand dunes and tree plantations in canal-irrigated desert areas (Ali & Ripley 1983), it is possible that it might be moving further east towards the area irrigated by Indira Gandhi canal in Rajasthan.

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Letters to the Editor

Pigeons adopt a pebble after failure to lay eggs

Many species of birds readily accept and incubate eggs of other nest parasitic species. Scientists often use devices disguised to resemble normal eggs to study the incubation conditions. There are published (Conover 1985), and anecdotal (BBC News 2004) reports of birds incubating foreign objects along with their normal clutch, even moving

them back to the nest if displaced. However, in all the reported cases foreign objects are accepted in lieu of, or perhaps in addition to the eggs already laid in the nest by the birds. For example, gulls are more likely to abandon the nest if all the three eggs of a clutch were replaced with pebbles (Conover 1985).

I report here an observation of a pair of Rock Pigeons *Columba livia* that adopted a pebble following their failure to lay a clutch. This pair tried, unsuccessfully, to build a nest in a flower pot placed in the balcony

of a sixth floor apartment in Gurgaon. The pigeons never laid any egg in the rudimentary nest they built with few twigs. Eventually, on 13 May 2010, they adopted and started incubating a pebble (XX1A), which was already present in the pot, about five cm from the location where it was finally moved and incubated. The pebble was much bigger than a pigeon's egg in all its dimensions (XX1C). Both the male and the female took turns in incubating the pebble, as per the reported normal daily schedule for the pigeons (Cornell Lab of Ornithology 2010). During the entire incubation period the nest was continuously tended, nesting material being brought and placed around the stone. Although the nest was rudimentary during the first two weeks (XX1B), a large amount of the nesting material was brought on the 15th, and 16th days, close to the expected hatching time. The pebble was finally abandoned on the 27th day (09 June 2010), which is much later than the normal average incubation period of 18 days for rock pigeons.

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132. (A) The female pigeon incubating the pebble. A part of the pebble was always exposed, presumably due to its large size. (B) The nest on the second day of incubation. For the first two weeks the nest was rudimentary with only few twigs placed around it. (C) The nest on the 17th day of the incubation with large amount of the nesting material. The inset shows a pigeon egg scaled to the same size for comparison.

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