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Indian Birds
ISSN 0973-1407

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Subscription information
Six issues will be published annually in February, April, June, August, October, and December.

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Front cover: Black-headed Oriole Oriolus xanthornus, Kolkata, 29.i.2006
( Photo: Sumit Sen).
Back cover: Top: 4 juvenile Black-necked Stork Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus
( Photo: Kamal Bhatt). Bottom: Gyps sp. vultures in Pokhara (Photo: Hashim Tyabji).
Mount Abu Wildlife Sanctuary, Sirohi district, Rajasthan (24°33’–24°43’N 72°38’–72°53’E; 1,158 m above m.s.l.) lies in the southern part of the Aravali Range. A checklist of 146 species of birds, including 23 new records, is presented along with information on status, location, distribution, and breeding. Previous notable records are compared with our study wherever a change in their status or abundance is perceptible.

Study area
The Aravali Range is considered to be the oldest mountain range in India, comprising rocks that date from the Archean (3.8 to 2.5 billion years ago) to Older Palaeozoic (5.4 to 2.5 billion years ago) periods. Mount Abu stands on an enormous, detached mass of gneissic rock, which rises steeply out of the flat plain, and stands well apart from the rest of the Aravalis. Declared a wildlife sanctuary on 7.iv.1960, Mount Abu Wildlife Sanctuary (Sanctuary) covers an area of 328 km². Altitudinally it varies from 300 m at the foothills to 1,722 m at Guru Shikhar, the highest peak in the Aravalis. The climate of Mount Abu varies according to the altitude. At the top (1,200 m and above) it remains moderate and pleasant in summer. However, in winters the nights are often frosty. Maximum rainfall (av. 1,500 mm) is during July–September, from the south-west monsoon. Temperatures on the plateau in winters the nights are often frosty. Maximum rainfall (av. 1,500 mm) is during July–September, from the south-west monsoon. Temperatures on the plateau in winters the nights are often frosty. Maximum rainfall (av. 1,500 mm) is during July–September, from the south-west monsoon.

Earlier ornithological works
Captain E.A. Butler (1875, 1876 & 1877) of HM’s 83rd Regiment was the first to publish a detailed account of the birds of Mount Abu. He seems to have visited Mount Abu from 1874 to 1877, but never stayed for long. Dr George King collected specimens at Mount Abu from December 1867 to December 1868. He sent this collection and his manuscript notes to A.O. Hume who used them to add remarks and comments to E.A. Butler’s three-part paper.

In the introductory section of Indian hill birds, Ali (1979) tabulated 72 taxa from Mount Abu. He also listed 21 taxa whose occurrence / absence he suspected. Indian hill birds was written to meet the needs of the average visitor to an Indian hill station and merely dealt with a representative selection of the commoner birds.

Recent accounts of the birds of Mount Abu, Devarshi & Trigunayat (1989) and Prakash & Singh (1995) are rife with erroneous and doubtful records, which we briefly discuss below. To ignore them would merely perpetuate the errors. Although Devarshi & Trigunayat (1989) have questioned birds listed for Mount Abu in Ali (1979), they appear to have used Ali’s uncorroborated records of Alpine Swift Tachymarptis melba and Wire-tailed Swallow Hirundo smithii, in compiling their checklist. Asian Palm Swift Cypsiurus balasienstis has been included in their list, presumably based on Butler (1875), who recorded it only once. Although Streak-throated Swallow Hirundo fluvicola, Southern Grey Shrike Lanius meridionalis, and House Crow Corvus splendens have been listed by them, their occurrence at Mount Abu is unlikely. Moreover, three conspicuous Galliformes of Mount Abu, Indian Peafowl Pavo cristatus, Grey Junglefowl Gallus sonneratii and Red Spurfowl Gallopérdix spadicea are strangely not included in their list.

Prakash & Singh (1995) have not only perpetuated erroneous and doubtful records of Ali (1979) and Devarshi & Trigunayat (1989) they have included inaccuracies in their list. They list Short-billed Minivet Pericrocotus brevirostris, which is a species confined to eastern Nepal and north–east India. The Short-billed Minivet of Butler has long been erroneously considered conspecific with P. ethologus, but the two differ in ecology and distribution (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005).

The specimen of “P. brevirostris, Vign.”, collected by Butler (1875: p. 465) was actually P. ethologus, which is not unlikely to occur in this part of India during winter. They have also described the Jungle Myna Acidothyes fuscus as resident, but we did not record this species at all. Rajasthan is well beyond its known distribution range. They have described the Greater Whitethroat Sylvia communis as a common winter migrant whereas it is an uncommon autumn passage migrant through north–west India.

The Black Francolin Francolinus francolinus recorded by Joshi & Joshi (2004) is also an error. The species is not found on Mount Abu.

In the recently published Important bird areas of India (Islam & Rahmani 2004), Mount Abu has been rightly declared an IBA on the basis of its biome assemblage of birds of Tropical Dry Deciduous and relict patches of Tropical Semi–evergreen Forests (Site code IN–RJ–10), but the authors erroneously mention the “presence of [a] good” population of Pied Tit Parus nuchalis. The species has never been recorded at Mount Abu.

Thus, for reasons of accuracy and expediency we reject the above records of Devarshi & Trigunayat (1989), Prakash & Singh (1995), Joshi & Joshi (2004), and Islam & Rahmani (2004) from this study.

Methods
Ten trips to Mount Abu were organized in different seasons from 25.iii.2001 to 19.vi.2005. Ornithological observations were made in all habitats represented in the area. An effort was made to spend time in the study area during all seasons so that the true status of the avifauna is reflected. We have also incorporated ten casual records by others. We did not survey forests at the foothills of Mount Abu.

Results and discussion
A total of 136 species during March 2001–June 2005, and ten casual records by others, have been combined to produce a comprehensive checklist of 146 bird species for Mount Abu. The high number of species new to Mount Abu (23) indicates the...
restricted nature of recent works (Devarshi & Trigunayat 1989, Prakash & Singh 1995).

While the total number of species recorded (146) may not be impressive, Mount Abu boasts of four Red Data Book species – the Near–threatened Darter Anhinga melanogaster, the Critically Endangered Indian White-backed Vulture Gyps bengalensis and Long-billed Vulture G. indicus and the Vulnerable Green Munia Amandava formosa (BirdLife International 2001). The Indian endemics include Grey Junglefowl Gallus sonnerati, Indian Blackbird Turdus simillimus usually considered conspecific with Turdus merula (but see Rasmussen & Anderton 2005), White-spotted Fantail-Flycatcher Rhipidura albogularis and Green Munia.

Another taxon worthy mentioning is the north–western race of the Red Spurfowl Galloperdix spadicea caurina Blanford, 1898, with Mount Abu, southern Rajputana [= south Rajasthan], as its type–locality (Ali & Ripley 1980). Though fairly common and unthreatened, the Aravali race has a very small distribution, with Mount Abu as its principal stronghold.

In winter (December–January) and in early May, when stragglers (e.g. Blyth’s Reed Warbler Acrocephalus dumetorum) were in transit and summer migrants (Indian Blackbird, Indian Golden Oriole Oriolus kundoo and Asian Paradise-Flycatcher Terpsiphone paradisi) had already arrived in Mount Abu, maximum number (50) of bird species were recorded (three field days). Minimum bird species count (26) was during monsoon, particularly in August (two field days).

Most records concerning migrants and winter visitors were not unexpected as they occurred within their accepted ranges of distribution. However, some species, like Olivaceous Leaf-Warbler Phylloscopus griseolus, Red-throated Flycatcher Ficedula parva and Grey-headed Flycatcher Callicippa ceylonensis, each of which was encountered only once or twice, were much rarer than would have been expected.

For certain species noted by Butler (1875), we were constantly on the lookout. In fact we went specifically for Common Cuckoo Cuculus canorus and Indian Plaintive Cuckoo Cacomantis passerinus in the months of May and June. Common Cuckoo was recorded once although Butler (1875: 460) observed that it arrived “at Mount Aboo [= Mount Abu] in considerable numbers towards the end of May” and “are remarkably noisy, enlivening the hills” with their notes for at least two months. We did not record the latter species at all, despite its host species being present!

The apparent absence of owls at Mount Abu is probably real for we never saw nor heard any. But in the foothill forests of Abu, owl species will undoubtedly be recorded with additional effort.

It is sobering to note that most of the species recorded by Butler at Mount Abu have declined in numbers. The adjectives used by Butler like “very abundant”, “abundant”, “very common”, “considerable numbers” etc., to describe abundance of the species, seem irrelevant today. Butler found the resident vultures, Indian White-backed Vulture, Egyptian Vulture, Longbilled Vulture “common”. Jungle Bush-Quail Perdicula asiatica “very common”, Red-rumped Swallow Hirundo daurica “very abundant”, Common Cuckoo Cuculus canorus in “considerable numbers”, Green Munia “common”, Spotted Munia Lonchura punctulata in “large flocks”, and Crested Bunting Melophas lactami as “one of the commonest birds”. Although we recorded these species, a considerable diminution of populations has occurred.

Though extensive, our list is not necessarily complete; difficult taxa like Phylloscopus warblers probably being under represented.

**Physical changes that have occurred in MountAbu**

Large scale changes have taken place in the forest cover of Mount Abu in the last century. Butler (1875) found the Mount Abu jungles “im penetrable” that it was “impossible to explore whole of them”, and consequently doubtless a few species escaped notice. During 1938–1939 Prakash (1997) noted “dense unbroken green of forested hills” and saw “four dead tigers, being carried on bamboo poles on men’s shoulders to the kothi [=residence of the Agent to the Governor General]”. The last tiger in Mount Abu was reported in 1970 (Anonymous Undated). Large-scale infrastructural works like the dams, Kodra and Kodra II, and air force radars have erupted on the hill slopes. The forest in the foothills of Mount Abu has been largely cleared and even on the top only fragments of good habitat remain. A contributory factor to the above pressures is the weak management of the Sanctuary. While nominally under the control of the D.F.O., Mount Abu, there is little evidence of field activity by forest guards who are poorly equipped, unsupervised and largely unmotivated. Institutional weaknesses are also highlighted by the confusion over the status of the Sanctuary. Though 328 km² of Mount Abu are declared protected, only 112.98 km² are notified as the Sanctuary area (Anonymous 2003).

**Acknowledgements**

Permission to visit the Sanctuary was granted by Forest Department of Rajasthan. Valuable assistance was received from T.R. Verma, D.F.O., and Karan Singh, Range Officer, of the Sanctuary. R.G. Soni dug out photograph of Jungle Owlet from his collection. Jugal Kishore Tiwari, Satish Kumar Sharma and Shantanu Kumar supplied unpublished information on several species. Shantanu Kumar commented on an initial draft of the paper.

**Appendix**

The following species were recorded by others, but eluded us during our study from 2001–2005. Status of most of these can be described as extremely rare as they are based on only one or two records from Mount Abu. Our comments are given in square brackets [].

Indian Shag Phalacrocorax fuscicolis: Occurred on “the lake” at Mount Abu (Butler 1876). Black Kite Milvus migrans: Butler recorded the species as abundant (1875). Even as late as the 1940s McCann (1942) found the species “common”. [Has the food supply depleted due to the closure of abattoirs and butcher shops? The present human population of]
Mount Abu is distinctly vegetarian.

Western Marsh-Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*: Not recorded by Butler but one specimen was “obtained” by Dr King at “the lake (Nakki)” (Butler 1875).

Besa Sparrowhawk *Accipiter virgatus*: A young male was collected “at or near Aboo by Dr. King” but not recorded by Butler (1875).

Bonelli’s Eagle *Hieraaetus fasciatus*: Not recorded by Butler but Hume observed it twice, “soaring over the upper plateau of Mount Aboo” (Butler 1875) [Quite possibly occurs occasionally in winter].

Brown C rake *Amaurornis akiok*: Butler (1876) described it as, “by no means common”, and “shot a specimen at Mount Abu in the middle of May” [Quite possibly still occurs].

Eurasian Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola*: Only one record of a bird trapped in a damp spot in the forest near St. Mary’s High School (Shivrajkumar 1949). Not recorded by Butler (1876).

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*: Butler (1876) observed a few on a small patch of marshy ground at Mount Abu [Although he did not specify the site, the species is likely to occur in winter].

Indian Skimmer *Rynchops albicollis*: Hume considered occurrence of the species at the “little Lake” (Nakki) utterly abnormal and suspected some mistake. However, Butler included it in his list on the strength of four specimens shot by Dr Newman (1876) [Essentially a species of fluvial habitats. This record, even at that time, was doubted by Hume].

Indian Plantitive Cuckoo *Cacomantis passerinus*: Described as, “not uncommon at Aboo”, and arriving “about the beginning of June”, by Butler (1875). [Our visits in May 2001 and 2002 and June 2005 did not yield the species].

Sirkeer Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus leschenaultii*: Butler (1876) noted that it was “not very common in the cold weather” (Butler 1875). [Quite possibly occurs occasionally in winter].

Lesser Pied Kingfisher *Ceryle rudis*: Recorded by Butler (1875), “both in the hills and in the plains”. McCann (1944) mentions its occurrence “during the dry season”.

Blue-tailed Bee-eater *Merops philippinus*: “Escaped” Butler, but Hume shot two and Dr King had “several in his list” (Butler 1875). European Roller *Coracias garrulus*: Reported by Trivedi (2003), but not seen by us.

Eurasian Wryneck *Jynx torquilla*: Butler (1875) saw “one on the wing once at Mount Aboo”. [Not at all unlikely in winter].

Eurasian Crag-Mart in *Hirundo rustica*: “Not uncommon” in the cold weather (Butler 1875). [Its presence is likely in winter].

Eurasian Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*: Only “Dr King noted this from Aboo” (Butler 1875).

Long-tailed Minivet *Pericrocotus etologus*: Butler (1875) “got two good specimens, male and female”. [Has been recorded from Kota in winter (Shantanu Kumar, verbally)].

Marshall’s Iora *Aegithina nigrorufa*: Marshall (1876) noted specimens of two males and one female in Hume’s collection, which he thought were suspiciously like this taxon. [We did not meet it during the study and think that the habitat is not suitable for it.]

Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus*: Butler (1875) found it “uncommon”.

Common Stonechat * Saxicola torquata*: “Common on the hills and in the plains” (Butler 1875). Malabar Whistling-Thrush *Myophonus horsfieldi*: Butler (1875) saw a pair once. [Rare record. Occurrence unlikely in the absence of flowing streams. The present day dams were not there in Mount Abu in the Nineteenth Century.]

Tickell's Thrush *Turdus unicolor*: Butler (1875) shot a female. [A mere straggler in south Rajasthan].

Variable Wheatear *Oenanthe pica*: Butler (1875) found it “common”.

Streaked Fantail-Warbler *Cisticola juncidis*: Butler (1875) noted that it was “not very common in the hills”.

Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata*: Butler (1875) described it as “common” during winter.

Tickell’s Warbler *Phylloscopus affinis*: Butler (1875) found that it was “common on the hills”.

Rusty-tailed Flycatcher *Muscicapa ruficauda*: Butler (1875) recorded it “sparingly at Mount Aboo during the rains and in the cold weather”. [This record of Butler is suspect. Instead of rains and cold weather it is likely to occur in Rajasthan during autumn passage. It breeds in the Himalayas from north-east Afghanistan to eastern Nepal and winters in evergreen broadleaved forests of Kerala. The only record in Rajasthan is from Bhartapur during autumn passage (Kannan 1986)].

Verditer Flycatcher *Eumyias thalassina*: Butler (1875) “observed it on one or two occasions” during “the rains”. [Occasionally during winter, east of the Aravalis in Rajasthan].

Spotted Creeper *Salpornis spilonotus*: Butler did not see “a specimen in the flesh” but Dr King shot one (Butler 1875).

Srioluted Bunting *Emberiza sriolata*: Butler (1875) observed it “occasionally at Mount Aboo in the cold weather”.

Black-headed Bunting *Emberiza melanochroa*: Butler (1875) saw “a few small flocks” and “shot specimens there as late as the middle of May”.

Grey-headed Starling *Sturnus malabaricus*: Butler (1875) found it “common at Mount Aboo in the hot weather, congregating in considerable flocks in May and June”. [HSS has recorded it in Banswara. It has also been recorded at Sitamata (Shantanu Kumar, verbally). The species was present in small flocks of 3–5 birds during flowering of *Butea monosperma* (February–March) at Phulwari Wildlife Sanctuary (2001–2004) and Kumbhalgarh (2002), Satish Kumar Sharma, verbally].

Black-headed Oriole *Oriolus srichorum*: Not recorded by Butler (1875) but Nirmalkumar (1969) recorded the species once. [We have recently recorded it from Phulwari Wildlife Sanctuary, Udaipur].

References


Anonymous. Undated. [Rajasthan Forest Department brochure].


Editors. 1948. ‘Occurrence of the Laggar Falcon (*Falco jugger* Gray) at Mt. Abu’ – a correction.


**Systematic list**

146 bird species observed in Mount Abu are treated below. The account includes information on abundance, status, location, distribution and breeding. Previous, notable records of species are briefly compared with our observations, where change in their status or abundance is perceptible. The common and scientific names follow Manakadan & Pittie (2001). In a few cases we have accepted the taxonomic arrangements of Rasmussen & Anderton (2005) and del Hoyo et al. (2005).

Abbreviations used:

* = new record, species not previously reported from Mount Abu.

? = status uncertain / unconfirmed.

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**Little Grebe** *Tachybaptus ruficollis*: Resident. Found on all waterbodies. Observed breeding during December–January.


? **Little Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax niger*: Uncommon. Four sightings at Nakki: on 21.v.2001 (one), 10.v.2001 (one), 15.iii.2003 (five) and 18.ii.2005 (two). Butler (1876) did not record it. Hume comments that Dr King “shot (and preserved) a specimen on the lake at Mount Aboo” (Butler 1876).

? **Great Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax carbo*: Resident? All our sightings were recorded on Nakki Lake (20.i.2002) and one at Jawai Talab on 8.xii.2002.


? Darter *Anhinga melanogaster*: Uncommon / rare. Only one sighting of an individual at Krodra II on 20.v.2001. Butler (1876) thought that it was common at Mount Abu. The species has obviously declined. Probably there is not enough fish in the polluted Nakki Lake to support it any more.

**Little Egret** *Egretta garzetta*: Vagrant. One on 7.xii.2002 at Nakki Lake. Not recorded by Butler (1876).? Black-crowned Night-Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*: Five birds were recorded on 25.iii.2001 near Nakki Lake. Not recorded by Butler (1876). However, Hume states that the species was “obtained on Aboo” (Butler 1876).

**Little Green Heron** *Butorides striatus*: Resident. Not uncommon. Regularly sighted at Bander Mayer and, once in the Salgaon area. A single bird was recorded at Nakki on 19.vi.2005. Butler (1876) also saw it “on a few occasions”.

? **Black Stork** *Ciconia nigra*: Winter visitor? One juvenile was observed catching fish from a drying Bander Mayer Lake on 14.iii.2003. Not recorded by Butler (1876).

**White-necked Stork** *Ciconia episcopus*: Local migrant? Two were observed on 14.iii.2003 at Bander Mayer Lake. Butler (1876) saw birds “feeding by the side of the Lake” [Nakki]. Dr King “also obtained it at Aboo” (Butler 1876).

**Gadwall** *Anas strepera*: Winter visitor. Two birds on Nakki Lake (19.i.2002) and one at Oria (20.i.2002).


**Northern Pintail** *Anas acuta*: Winter visitor. 21 birds were observed on 19.i.2002 at Nakki lake, 20 at Oria and 21 at Mini Nakki on 20.ii.2002 and one at Jawai Talab on 8.xii.2002.

**Common Teal** *Anas crecca*: Winter visitor. Four at Oria and three at Salgaon on 20.i.2002, eight at Jawai Talab on 8.xii.2002 and two on 15.iii.2002 at Nakki Lake.

**Common Pochard** *Aythya ferina*: Winter visitor. More than 20 were observed at Mini Nakki on 20.i.2002.

**Tufted Pochard** *Aythya fuligula*: Winter visitor. Two birds were observed at Oria on 20.i.2002.

**Oriental Honey- Buzzard** *Pernis ptilorhynchus*: Resident? All our sightings were during spring and summer. Butler (1875) described it as, “not a common bird, occurs in the jungles of the Aravalli ranges”, and “killed one and saw others at Aboo in the jungles at the foot of the hills”; and according to Hume the species was obtained from “there” by Dr King (Butler 1875).

* Black-shouldered Kite *Elanus caeruleus*: Local migrant? Two sightings of single birds on 20.vii.2002 and 6.xii.2002 in the fields near Oria. Butler (1875) did not record it and commented that it does not “ascend the hills”.

* Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*: Only two sightings of single birds on 25.iii.2001 and 10.v.2002 indicating a decline of the species, for Butler (1875) found it “very common”.

* Indian White-backed Vulture *Gyps bengalensis*: Only one sighting of an individual on 26.iii.2003. Butler (1875) found it very common.

**Long-billed Vulture** *Gyps indicus*: Resident. Usually one / two birds seen except once when five birds were observed on 19.v.2001. Butler (1875) found it very common and breeding.
Jungle Bush-Quail \textit{Perdicula asiatica}: Resident. Uncommon / rare. Only one sighting on 20.v.2001 in Bikaner House. Butler (1876) found it “very common”, and according to Hume, “numerous specimens” were collected by Dr King (Butler 1876).

**Red Spurfowl** \textit{Gallopoeidas pinnatae}: Resident. Common. Usually in pairs but once (19.i.2002) more than six birds were observed feeding at Sunset Point on Dr. King found it common at Abu “especially where there is much bamboo” (Hume & Marshall 1879). Butler frequently saw the young broods, varying in number from four to eight, but only once saw the nest at Mahábháshwar in the month of April (Hume & Marshall 1879).

**Grey Junglefowl** \textit{Gallus sonnerati}: Resident. The crowing call of this vocal forest bird was heard throughout the study area and the foothills. The birds are very wary, as they are still hunted by tribals. The forest department regularly feeds them at a few points in the Sanctuary. Dr King noted that “the eggs were found here from the middle of April to the end of May” (Hume & Marshall 1879). Butler (1876) noted that “it is not as common at Aboo, that is, actually on the hill, as ought to be, owing to the merciless way it has been destroyed of late”. McCann (1942) observed in 1941 that it had declined in numbers since 1916 when he first visited Aboo and its familiar note was “scarce”.

**Indian Peafowl** \textit{Pavo cristatus}: Resident. Common. It is quite possible that the loss of tree cover in the recent past forced peafowl to move up from the foothills, for Butler (1876) did not record it at Mount Abu and observed that the species abounds “in the jungles at the foot of Aboo”.

**White-breasted Waterhen** \textit{Amaurornis phoenicurus}: Resident. Not uncommon. The creation of waterbodies at Mount Abu has very likely helped the species. Butler (1876) “shot a fine specimen in a rocky nullah at Mount Aboo on the 21st June”. Hume commented that he had seen many specimens from Abu (Butler 1876). **Common Moorhen** \textit{Gallinula chloropus}: Resident. Three at Salgaon on 20.ii.2002. Not recorded by Butler (1876) but Hume (ibid.) commented that “it was obtained on one occasion at Aboo”.

**Common Coot** \textit{Fulica atra}: Winter visitor. Common. Observed at Nakki Lake, Oria and Salgaon, in small numbers, of up to five birds. Butler (1876) did not record the species. However, Hume commented that the species had been once seen “on the lake at Aboo” (Butler 1876).


**Peregrine Falcon** \textit{Falco peregrinus}: Resident. Rather uncommon / rare. Constant vigilance for the resident Shaheen Falcon (\textit{F. p. peregrinator}) was rewarded on 22.ix.2002, when one individual was observed near Gau Mukh. Butler (1875) “shot a fine specimen (female) at Mount Aboo on the 10th April 1875,” of the latter, “and met with it on one or two occasions at the same place”. The Shaheen is known to breed at Mount Abu (Editors 1948).

**Eurasian Griffon** \textit{Gyps fulvus}: Winter visitor. Only one sighting of an individual on 21.i.2002. Not recorded by Butler (1875). McCann (1942) erroneously noted \textit{G. f. fulvus} as “a common species breeding in suitable places on the crags” (p. 216), which was subsequently corrected by Ali & Abdulali (1945) to \textit{G. indicus}.

**Short-toed Snake-Eagle** \textit{Circaetus gallicus}: Two records. A pale bird was observed on 25.iii.2001 at Bailey’s Walk. On 16.iii.2003 one bird was observed soaring at Kodra.

**Crested Serpent-Eagle** \textit{Spilornis cheela}: Resident. Not uncommon, and spread throughout the study area. On 14.iii.2003 a bird was seen perched on the artificial boat at Nakki Lake, unconcerned about human disturbance.

**Shikra** \textit{Accipiter badius}: Resident. Common. **Eurasian Sparrowhawk** \textit{Accipiter nisus}: Visitor. One bird was observed soaring near Peace Park on 6.xii.2002. Butler (1875) observed that “it was by no means common”.

**White-eyed Buzzard** \textit{Butastur teesa}: Two birds were observed on 10.v.2002. Butler (1875) did not record it in the “hot weather”.


**Steppe Eagle** \textit{Aquila nipalensis}: Visitor. Up to four birds were seen at a garbage dump near Sammi Gate of the Sanctuary on 26.iii.2001. One individual was seen regularly from 19–21.1.2002 and one on 6.xii.2002. Not recorded by Butler (1875).

**Changeable Hawk-Eagle** \textit{Spizaetus cirrhatus}: Resident in the foothills. However, there is a recent record of one bird from Uttarayan, Mount Abu (Shantanu Kumar, verbally.) Hume obtained “numerous specimens” were collected by Dr King (Butler 1876). “shot a fine specimen in a rocky nullah at Mount Aboo” (Hume & Marshall 1879). Butler (1876) “shot a fine specimen breeding in suitable places on the crags (p. 216), which was subsequently corrected by Ali & Abdulali (1945) to \textit{G. indicus}.

**Common Kestrel** \textit{Falco tinnunculus}: Winter visitor. One individual was seen regularly from 19–21.1.2002 and one on 6.xii.2002. Not recorded by Butler (1875).


**Spotted Dove** \textit{Streptopelia chinensis}: Resident. Common.

**Eurasian Collared-Dove** \textit{S. decaocto}: Possibly a straggler. Although quite common in the surrounding plains it is rather rare in Mount Abu. One bird was recorded at Arna (c. 800 m) in September 2004 (Jugal Tiwari, verbally.) Butler (1876) “met with one or two specimens” at Mount Abu.

**Yellow-legged Green-Pigeon** \textit{Treron phoenicoptera}: Resident. Rather uncommon. Two sightings: five birds on 20.v.2001 and six on 20.ii.2002 at Salgaon. Although Butler (1876) did not observe this bird at Mount Abu, Hume (Butler 1876) states that Dr King “obtained” it there.

**Alexandrine Parakeet** \textit{Psittacula eupatria}: Scarce? Recorded less than ten times during one year (May 2004–May 2005) at Arna (c. 800 m alt.) and Chhipari (c. 650 m alt.), and a nest was found on a semul tree \textit{Salmalia malabaricum} during July–August 2004 at Chhipari (Jugal Tiwari, verbally.) Butler (1875) did not record the species, but was given a specimen by Dr Newman (ibid.).

**Rose-ringed Parakeet** \textit{P. krameri}: Resident. Common. More than 300 birds were observed coming to roost on trees around the Polo Ground on 6.xii.2002.

**Plum-headed Parakeet** \textit{P. cyanocephala}: Resident. Only two sightings of small flocks on 19.i.2002 and 15.iii.2003.

**Pied Crested Cuckoo** \textit{Clamator jacobinus}: Breeding monsoon visitor. Two birds were recorded on 13.viii.2001.

**Common Cuckoo** \textit{Cuculus canorus}: Summer visitor. Butler (1875) observed that it arrived “at Mount Abu in considerable numbers towards...
the end of May” and was “remarkably noisy, enlivening the hills” with its notes for about two months. During our visits in May and June the species was heard only once at Trevor Tank on 18.v.2005.

**Brainfever Bird Hierococcyx varius**: Resident?

Single birds observed on 20.v.2001, 21.ix.2002 and 20.vii.2002. * * *

**Asian Koel Eudynamys scolopacea**: Rare. One was recorded at Chhipaheri (c. 650 m alt.) in August 2004 (Jugal Tiwari, verbally). Butler (1875) “did not find it very plentiful at Mount Aboo”.

**Greater Coucal Centopus sinensis**: Resident? Recorded on 26.iii.2001 at Salgaon, on 20.v.2001 at Kodra II and, near Sunset Point on 18.vi.2005. During our visits in May and June the species was heard only on one or two occasions” only.

**Indian Jungle Nightjar Caprimulgus indicus**: Resident? Common. It becomes very vocal during May and June; possibly moves down to breed. Butler (1875) found it “very plentiful at Mount Aboo”.

**Indian Jungle Owl Glaucomys radiatum**: Although not recorded by us there is one winter record. R.G. Soni photographed a single bird near Gaumukh in December 1999 (verbally) Not recorded by Butler (1875) at Mount Abu. However, he found it “not uncommon in the jungles at the foot of Mount Aboo”.

**White-breasted Kingfisher Halcyon smyrnensis**: Resident. Not uncommon.

**Small Green Bee-eater Merops orientalis**: Resident? Single birds recorded on 26.iii.2001 (Sanctuary). It is possible that they go down to the plains to breed during summer.

**Brown-headed Cuckoo-Shrike Copsychus saularis**: Resident. Not uncommon. Butler (1875) “met with it on one or two occasions” only.

**Oriental Magpie-Robin Copsychus saularis**: Resident. Butler (1875) found it “not very common”.

**Indian Robin Saxicola fulica**: Resident. Less common than the previous species. Two chicks were being fed by parents on 20.v.2001.

**Black Redstart Phoenicurus ochruros**: Winter visitor. Common.

**Indian Chat Cercomela fusca**: Resident. Common.

**Indian Scimitar-Babbler Pomatorhinus horsfieldi obscurus Hume, 1872, Stray Feathers**: Occasional. One was seen near Achalgah in December 2004 (Jugal Tiwari verbally). Butler (1875) “met with it on one or two occasions” only.

**Rufous-bellied Babbler Dunetima hypyrhtra abuenis**: Resident. Not uncommon throughout the study area. Mount Abu is the type–locality for this taxon.

**Rufous-backed Shrike Lanius schach**: Winter visitor. Common. "by no means common" and "did not often meet with it at Aboo".

**Rufous-backed Shrike Lanius schach**: Winter visitor. Common. "by no means common" and "did not often meet with it at Aboo".

**Blue Rock-Thrush Monticola cinclorhynchus**: Rare / uncommon. One bird was recorded in the Sanctuary. Mount Abu is the type–locality for this taxon.

**Greenshank Tringa nebularia**: Rare. One individual was seen on 11.viii.2001 at Trevor St Mary’s School. Butler (1875) also found it "not very common".

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Tickell's Blue-Flycatcher Cyornis tickelliae: Resident. Widespread and quite common.


Asian Paradise-Flycatcher Terpsiphone paradisi: Summer visitor. Arrives around mid-March and moves down by end of September. A white male was seen at Mini Nakkii on 26.iii.2001. Singles (plumage? White?) were seen again on 19.v.2001, 10.v.2002 and 21.1.x.2002. Interestingly, Butler (1875) "never met with one in white plumage".

White-spotted Fantail-Flycatcher Rhipidura albogularis: Resident. Common. Counted ten individuals on 20.1.2002, feeding on flies at a garbage dump near the Sammi Gate of the Sanctuary. On 7.xii.2002, on the slope facing Anadra, a single bird was recorded at c. 530 m above m.s.l.

Great Tit Parus major: Resident. Uncommon. Recorded a few times near Honeymoon Point, Chhipaberi and Sunset Point. One was observed feeding four chicks at Arna (Jugal Tiwari, verbally). Butler (1875) mentions that it "occurs sparingly".

Indian Yellow Tit Parus aphonotus: Resident. Common.


* Rock Bunting Emberiza cia: Vagrant. One bird was seen feeding at Sunset Point on 14.i.2003. (Sangha & Devarshi in press).

Grey-necked Bunting Emberiza buchanani: Winter visitor. Uncommon / rare. Only one individual was observed on 19.i.2002 near St Mary's School. Recorded by Butler (1875) as "not very common".


Common Rosefinch Carpodacus erythrinus: Winter visitor and passage migrant. Up to 13 were seen on 20.1.2002 and six on 26.iii.2003. Butler (1875) noted it as "very plentiful at Mount Abob in the cold weather".

Green Munia Amandava formosa: Resident. Not uncommon throughout the study area. Two loose flocks (+/5) were observed feeding on grass seeds on the track in the Sanctuary on 20.i.2002, two to three birds near Oria on 20.vii.2002, nine in a lantana–infested area near St Mary's School on 8.xi.2002, more than 24 feeding in the soccer field of St Mary's School on 16.iii.2003 and five on 18.iii.2005 in the Sanctuary. Although from time to time various observers have claimed discovery of ’new’ sites at Mount Abu, the species is present throughout the study area. At Achalgarh an unusually “large flock of 50” birds has been recently reported (Mehta & Sharma 2004). The species is absent in Mount Abu during August–October. The birds probably descend to the foothills where agriculture is prominent (Tiwari & Tiwari 2005). Butler (1875) found it "common".


Spotted Munia Lonchura punctulata: Resident. Not uncommon. Nidification was noted on 13.viii.2001. Two pairs were observed bringing maize leaves and, twice, cloth rags, for constructing nests in date palms (scientific name) near Doodhia Nullah and Jhajjar circuit house. Although Butler (1875) noted it as "common, and associating in large flocks in hot weather" we observed it only in small numbers.


Yellow-throated Sparrow Petronia xanthocollis: Resident. Not uncommon. In spring numbers began to increase. On 14.iii.2003 they were in good numbers on flowering Erythrina indica trees. All but few disappear after autumn. Breeds in April / May. Butler (1875) found it “very abundant at Mount Aboo” and breeding in April.

Brahminy Starling Sturnus pagodarum: Summer / monsoon visitor? All our sightings are from summer and monsoon months. Butler (1875) found it “common at Mount Aboo”.

Rosy Starling Sturnus roseus: Passage? A flock of about 200 birds was seen flying in the valley near Arna in July 2004 (Jugal Tiwari verbally). Butler (1875) found it “not so plentifully, on the hills”.


Indian Golden Oriole Oriolus kundoo: Summer visitor. All sightings during May. Once on 11.viii.2001. Butler (1875) noted that it was present, “both on the hills and in the plains,” but was “not plentiful”.

* Black DrongoDicrurus macrocerus: Only two sightings on 25.iii.2001 and 7.xii.2002 in the Sanctuary. Butler (1875) found it “somewhat scarce on the hill”.


White-bellied Drongo Dicrurus caerulescens: Resident. Not uncommon. Commoner than the previous two species.

Indian Treepie Dendrocitta vagabunda: Resident. Common.

* House Crow Corvus splendens: Vagrant. Only one sighting on 7.xii.2002, on the slope facing Anadra at an altitude of c. 860 m above m.s.l.


Breeding of Long-billed Vulture Gyps indicus at Ramanagaram hills, Karnataka, India

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The hills of Ramanagaram (12°07’–12°58’N 77°08’–77°25’E) are located to the south-west of Bangalore (Karnataka, India). They stretch for 75 km from south to south-west of Bangalore (Karnataka, India). They stretch for 75 km from south to south-west of Bangalore (Karnataka, India). They stretch for 75 km from south to south-west of Bangalore (Karnataka, India). They stretch for 75 km from south to south-west of Bangalore (Karnataka, India). They stretch for 75 km from south to south-west of Bangalore (Karnataka, India).
the Important Bird Area (IBA) network in India (Islam & Rahmani 2004).

Once widespread across India in particular and South Asia in general, vultures showed a shocking decline over the last one and half decades (Prakash et al. 2002b). Since 1990, vulture populations have dropped by over 90 per cent, with population losses of more than 98 per cent reported in many areas. These vultures (three species of Gyps vultures namely, the Oriental White-backed G. bengalensis, Long-billed G. indicus, and Slender-billed G. tenuirostris) are now listed as critically endangered species (BirdLife International 2001). This catastrophic decline has been linked to kidney failure, resulting from the use of the anti-inflammatory drug “diclofenac” on domestic livestock (Oaks et al. 2004, Arun & Azeez 2004). However, the cause of such a colossal loss of vulture population is still being debated upon (Prakash et al. 2002a, Satheesan 2004, 2005, Gemi 2005).

Ramanagaram hills have been a home to critically and globally endangered vulture species for a long time (pers. obs.; Subramanya 2004). Recently, eight Long-billed Vultures were observed on the ledges of the steep and high rocky cliffs in Ramadevarabetta State Forest, close to Ramanagaram town, located c. 45 km south-west of Bangalore (Joseph 2005, Prashanth 2005, Subramanya & Naveen 2005). The birds seemed healthy. These vultures, according to the Bombay Natural History Society, appear to be the only known and last surviving population of the species in inland southern India (Vibhu Prakash verbally, June 2005).

The survival of this small population of vultures gives hope that its entire population may not have been lost in this part of the country. It is quite possible that this isolated population has been able to resist the effects of agents that have almost decimated the species elsewhere or may not have been exposed to the same. Considering the importance of this isolated population, the birds were monitored during the breeding season of 2005–2006. This note highlights the nesting of this critically endangered species in the area. The present observations are part of a much larger study of the birds, specifically vultures in the Ramanagaram Hills region.

**Nesting area**

Ramadevarabetta State Forest, spread over an area of c. 5 km², comprises of three hill complexes, the largest being the Ramadevarabetta complex, with six peaks of varying heights (highest 934 m). This is an important Hindu pilgrimage centre, with a temple on top of the hill and is frequented by devotees from surrounding villages and towns and even distant cities.

**Nests and Nest-sites**

Nests were observed on a steep-sided cliff, located on the southern side of the Ramadevarabetta hill complex. The nests were constructed about 35 m from the ground and were quite inaccessible to humans either from the ground level or from the top of the cliff. A total of three nests were observed between January–February 2006. Two of the nests were on horizontal rocky ledges, while the third was within a deep cavity above another ledge on the cliff-side. Two of the nests that were clearly visible, comprised of neat piles of twigs and grasses. The rocks around the nests were copiously coated with white excrements, in addition to several sections of ledges and cavities that were used as perching sites. An adult was always present near the nest containing nestlings. No efforts were made to approach the nests, observations being through a telescope placed vertically, and even flapping them. During that visit, an adult seemed to be incubating an egg in the third nest.

Visit to the site on 12.iii.2006 revealed the commencement of a new nest close to the cavity that held one of the nestlings. Both the nestlings appeared to be in good health and were observed moving around the nest area. A total of nine adults were observed perched on the ledges and later flying around the hill-tops. On 9.iv.2006, ten adults were observed, either perched on the ledges or soaring on the thermals. Both the nestlings had grown-up to adult size and appeared healthy. No sign of the nest with the incubating bird observed on 26.ii.2006 could be seen, while a bird continued to incubate at the new nest, observed on 12.iii.2006.

This is the first breeding record of Long-billed Vultures, from inland Karnataka, since the outbreak of the “Vulture Crisis” (Prakash 2002b) in India. This IBA site assumes additional importance as populations of Long-billed Vultures, known from other localities in Bangalore and Tumkur districts of Karnataka, have been wiped out (pers. obs.).

**Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank M.B. Prashanth, Deepak Arya, Shantha Manohar and S. Sandeep for accompanying them on various field trips to the locality. The visits to Ramanagaram Hills were partially supported by the Karnataka State Forest Department.

**References**


Satheesan, S.M. 2005. Vulture soup for truth-seeking Gypsophiils souls. asian-raptors@
Sun-bathing by Yellow-legged Green-Pigeon *Treron phoenicoptera* at Vadodara, Gujarat, India

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[With one colour photo online: www.indianbirds.in]

**Introduction**

The Yellow-legged Green-Pigeon *Treron phoenicoptera*, commonly known as ‘green pigeon’, is a widespread resident of India (Ali & Ripley 1983; Grimmett et al. 1998). It is largely arboreal, but descends to the ground occasionally. It feeds on drupes, berries and wild figs of numerous species of *Ficus*. It keeps in flocks of 5–10, sometimes congregating in larger numbers to gorge on ripe banyan *Ficus benghalensis* or peepul *F. religiosa* figs in company with the other birds (Ali & Ripley 1983). In this note I record an instance of mass sun-bathing of the green pigeon, on a single tree in Vadodara.

Vadodara city (22°18’N 73°10’E), in Gujarat (India), famous for its heritage of large numbers of banyan trees, is a good habitat for green pigeons. They are common in areas like the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda campus, Harni, Laxmivilash Palace campus, Lal Baug, and railway station in flocks of two to forty (pers. obs.), perching on *Ficus* trees. However, it is difficult to spot perched birds as they get camouflaged in the surrounding leaves.

Observations

On 21.xii.2005, at 07:30 hrs, I counted 89 fluffed-up Yellow-legged Green-Pigeons sun-bathing on the branches of a dry and leafless *Cassia siamea*. The tree is located in the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (O.N.G.C.) campus, in Tarsali area (22°15’N 73°12’E), about 9 km from Vadodara railway station. The same number of birds was counted again at 08:15 hrs and 09:30 hrs. All the birds had oriented themselves, at an angle to face the sun. Their feathers were fluffed and they perched close to the branch, covering their tarsi with feathers. Their necks too were retracted into the fluffed feathers. They had left by 10:30 hrs, when the temperature was about 15°C. The minimum ambient temperature of previous night was 9.8°C.

The green pigeons were seen perched on the dry tree only in the morning, and recorded continuously for 19 days from 21.xii.2005 to 8.i.2006 on that tree. However, their number and duration of perching varied (Table 1). The minimum ambient temperature during this period varied between 9.8°C and 12.4°C. No other activity was observed at this time, except occasional preening. The birds perched till 09:30 hrs on cool days unless they were forced to fly due to some disturbance.

**Discussion**

The dry *Cassia siamea* was adjacent to *Pithacelobium dulce*. Besides this the entire area of O.N.G.C. and Baroda dairy campus is full of vegetation such as *Peltocorum, Cassia, Prosopis, Neem, Peepul, Banyan*.

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**Table: Sun–bathing by Yellow-legged Green-Pigeon**

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<th>No. of birds</th>
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<th>Time (hrs)</th>
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etc. However every time all the birds were observed on the same dry tree. It seemed that by perching on such tree, the pigeons were directly exposing themselves to sunlight, and thus warming up during the cool mornings.

Sun-bathing is a form of thermo-regulatory behaviour, in which a bird absorbs heat from the sun and hence reduces the metabolic expenditure needed to maintain its optimum body temperature, especially in cool or cold conditions. It may occur during loafing and preening spells at any time of the year (in temperate regions, especially in spring, autumn, and winter) and at any time of the day (in tropical regions, especially during the early and late hours, particularly on cold nights) (Simmons 1985). Sun-bathing has been observed often in other genera of the Columbidae, like *Columba* and *Streptopelia* (pers. obs.). Surprisingly, normally camouflaged birds become conspicuous during this process of thermoregulation.

The green pigeons spent more than two hours sunning themselves on 21.xii.2005 and 24.xii.2005. They are, perhaps, able to allocate so much time to sun-bathing as their food is sedentary (growing on plants) and they do not have to spend time searching or chasing after it.

**Acknowledgments**

I owe my deep gratitude to Dr B.M. Parasharya for his invaluable suggestions in improving text. I thank Shri Kishan Jadhav for identifying the plants. I also sincerely thank Shri S.V. Pawar, Inspector, C.G. Meteorology, Vadodara, for providing temperature data.

**References**


**Black-necked Stork Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus nest with four chicks in Marine National Park, Gujarat, India**

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(See photo on back cover)

Globally, the Black-necked Stork *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus* is classified as Near Threatened (BirdLife International 2004). It generally raises a successful brood of two or three young. So when I was informed by Mr Radadiya, ACF, Marine National Park, Jamnagar, that he has seen a nest of Black-necked Stork with four chicks at Jodiya Range of Marine National Park (Jamnagar district, Gujarat), I knew this was a rare occurrence. The nest was 60 km from Jamnagar and I visited it on 22.xii.2005. On the advice of Radadiya, two forest staff of Marine National Park accompanied me. The nest was on a neem tree *Azadirachta indica* (c. 19 m above the ground) situated on the cotton farm of Sri Chhaganbhai. When I reached the area I could see the adult male and female Black-necked Stork along with one juvenile on the nest while two chicks were on the ground. However, I could not see the fourth young one. In the meantime I took a few pictures of the nest with young. Perhaps disturbed by our presence, the adult storks flew from nest followed by the two young ones on the ground. The third juvenile, remained on the nest for a while and later followed the rest of the family. But I had not yet spotted the fourth juvenile. So I stayed the night at Jodiya and went searching for the family the next day. A short while later we found all the four juveniles along with the female stork in the nearby river. Probably this was the first time all the juveniles had left the nest.

In Dudwa National Park, Uttar Pradesh, nest building starts around August and chicks hatch around second week of October (Maheswaran 1998). One nest with three chicks was observed in 1996 but only two survived by the time they dispersed from the nest around mid-February. However, in Etawah and Mainpuri districts of Uttar Pradesh, Black-necked Stork start nest building around mid-August and chicks hatch by mid-January. According to Sundar (2003), breeding success was very low with only one young fledged successfully out of four nests that he observed. According to Maheswaran et al. (2004), population of the Black-necked Stork appears to be declining in India except Gangetic plains of Uttar Pradesh and northwestern India especially Gujarat where populations are stable or marginally increasing. My observation of nest with four successfully fledged chicks supports their claim. To raise such a big brood, storks require an enormous amount of food, especially freshwater fish. The area still supports several freshwater wetlands with abundant fish, which provide an uninterrupted food supply for Black-necked Storks during their breeding season.

The RFO, Shri B.K. Shilu and his staff took good protective care of the nest and the storks during the nesting period.

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**Shama Futehally Award**

Zafar Futehally would like to offer an award of Rs 5,000/- for the most enjoyable article in *Indian Birds* in the year 2006. The article will be judged by its success in combining its scientific quality with a light-hearted and enjoyable style. The award is offered in memory of his daughter Shama.
Indian White-backed Vultures *Gyps bengalensis* nesting in Mahuva, Bhavnagar district, Gujarat, India

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**Introduction**

Populations of the *Gyps* vultures in South Asian countries have been declining precipitously during the recent past. The once abundant Indian White-backed Vulture *Gyps bengalensis*, Long-billed Vulture *G. indicus* and Slender-billed Vulture *G. tenuirostris*, now face extinction. The major cause for their decline is the veterinary drug, Diclofenac, which is the most widely used veterinary pain killer in South Asia.

Mahuva town (21°05’N 71°45’E), in Bhavnagar district, Gujarat, holds a sizeable population of c. 150 White-backed Vultures and is famous for its coconut *Cocos nucifera* plantation.

**Methods**

A rapid survey for nests of vultures was carried out from 12–27.iii.2005, during three visits to the coconut plantations in Mahuva. This aimed to collect baseline data on nesting of vultures in Bhavnagar district, to provide information to the forest department for the management, protection and conservation of the species and, to evaluate disturbance factors to nesting birds. The end of winter, October–March, is the nesting season of *Gyps* vultures in Saurashtra (Dharmakumarsinhji 1955). By observing the movements of vultures through binoculars, from the outskirts of the town, we identified an area of c. 4 km² of coconut plantation where the vultures roost. This area was thoroughly surveyed, by scrutinizing the canopy of every coconut tree, through binoculars, to detect the presence/absence of nests. The observations were made from the ground to prevent disturbance. The activity of adult birds on the nests was recorded. The approximate height of each nesting tree was estimated. Names and addresses of farmers were registered for the exact location of nesting trees.

**Results and discussion**

150 White-backed Vultures were counted during the survey. All these vultures roosted and some nested on the coconut trees. We recorded 25 active nests of White-backed Vultures in an area of 4 km². All the nesting trees were located in private plantations of local farmers. The nesting trees were marked by colour bands for the identification of exact location of the nesting tree. Each tree held just one nest, with a sole exception holding two. The average height of the nesting trees was 16.78 m. Chicks were observed at just two nests. To minimize disturbance, nests were not visited closer, hence the clutch size was not observed. At least one adult was observed at a nest, probably incubating the egg or newly hatched chick.

If the number of nests recorded (25) was compared with the number of adult birds seen (150), it would be difficult to conclude whether the population was thriving or falling! This would require a more detailed study, perhaps for a couple of years, to find out the real status of the vultures at Mahuva.

Despite its rarity, owners of the coconut groves are becoming increasingly intolerant towards the vultures. According to them, trees utilized by vultures, loose their productivity as vultures damage its leaves and flowers, thus disturbing the fruiting process. A healthy coconut tree yields 1,500–2,000 coconuts annually, which amounts to an income of about Rs 500–600. We observed 85 damaged trees (including 24 used for nesting) belonging to 15 farmers. To prevent such damage, farmers use air-rifles, fire-crackers, etc., to prevent vultures from alighting on their coconut trees. This has resulted in the birds being vary and frightened of human approach, taking off no sooner a roosting or nesting tree was approached.

**Conclusion**

To protect vultures in Mahuva, it is imperative that local farmers be made aware about their status in India as well as in South Asia. Involvement of communities is a basic requirement for the conservation of any species, particularly in privately owned areas, and outside protected areas. To protect vultures, the state should consider fiscal reimbursements to farmers to mitigate the crop loss.

**Acknowledgement**

We are thankful to Shri C.N. Pandey, Director, GEER Foundation, Government of Gujarat, for providing travelling expenses for the survey. We also thank Shri V.B. Raol and Mr. D.P. Jhala for accompanying us in the field work.

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**A vulture congregation in Pokhara, Nepal**

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(See photo on back cover)

On 9.xii.2004 while birding in some fallow fields on the outskirts of Pokhara (Nepal), with a small group from England, we encountered a large mixed species flock of vultures (> 60 birds). We stopped and approached slowly and managed to get in close enough to see an almost totally consumed carcase of a donkey. None of the vultures was feeding on the carcase. They were spread out over an area of about 200 m². There were four species present – Slender-billed Vulture *Gyps tenuirostris*, Indian White-backed Vulture *G. bengalensis*, Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus* and what I at first glance identified as Eurasian Griffon *G. fulvus*. Later, going over photographs with Hem Baral in Kathmandu, we identified them properly as juvenile Himalayan Griffon *G. himalayensis*. Interestingly there was not a single adult plumage Himalayan Griffon present, although we saw a fair number in flight, both before and after, this sighting. The following morning we saw about 20...
vultures in a kapok tree, not far from this spot, amongst which were three adult Himalayan Griffons, a couple of Slender-billed Vultures and the remaining (as I realised later but not then) juvenile Himalayan Griffons.

Of the 60+ birds about 40 were juvenile Himalayan Griffons, most of which were in two large groups with a few individuals scattered about. There were about ten Slender-billed Vultures and a dozen Indian White-backed Vultures. Some of these were among the Himalayan Griffons, some were on their own and the largest group (of non-Himalayan Griffons) was a mix of Slender-billed Vultures and Indian White-backed Vultures, of which two were juveniles. There were also four Cinereous Vultures (two juveniles); huge and hulking even in comparison with the Himalayan Griffons. Above us circled at least two dozen large raptors silhouetted against the mid-afternoon sky and so, not easy to identify. However, most of them were Aquila eagles—with at least a few Steppe Eagles Aquila nipalensis and possible Greater Spotted Eagles Aquila clanga. However there were no eagles on the ground.

A few interesting aspects of this congregation emerge. The large numbers of Gyps vultures seen, given the fact that we know that ‘Diclofenac’ is available and used on cattle in Nepal (Baral et al. 2005). Could it be that in the hills Diclofenac is not as extensively used as in the plains? Could it also be that Himalayan Griffons are less susceptible to Diclofenac than other Gyps species? The second point relates to identification. I now realise that the great majority of my ‘Eurasian Griffon’ sightings have actually been juvenile Himalayan Griffons—especially in the plains. I’m probably not alone in mis-identifying this species on a regular basis. Given how wide-ranging a juvenile Himalayan Griffon is during winter, this is something that birders across northern India need to be careful about. (A quick aid in separating the two species is that the upper parts of immature Himalayan Griffons are very streaky in appearance while Eurasian Griffons have a uniform appearance including immature plumages as well. Illustrations in most of the guide books show the Himalayan Griffon immature to be greyer than Eurasians but this seems misleading to me.) The other thing that struck me was the very low ratio of adult plumage birds in relation to immature plumage Himalayan Griffons.

Reference

A record of the Rufous-necked Hornbill Aceros nipalensis from West Bengal, India
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The Rufous-necked Hornbill Aceros nipalensis has a historical distribution in India in the states of West Bengal, Sikkim and the north-eastern states except Tripura (Ali & Ripley 2001). Most of the recent sightings of this species from India have been from Arunachal Pradesh (Choudhury 2003, Birand & Pawar 2004). Grimmett et al. (1998) and Kazmierczak (2000) mentioned that this bird occurred in West Bengal, and Islam & Rahmani (2004) recorded its occurrence in three protected areas (PAs) in West Bengal. These are Buxa Tiger Reserve, Neora Valley National Park and Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary. The report of this species from Buxa is based on a sighting from Buxa Tiger Reserve in 1992 (Allen et al. 1997) whereas records from other areas are based on assumptions or unauthenticated records. The first definitive sighting with photographic evidence of this species within 12,722 ha Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary (26°51’34”N 88°24’45”E), Darjeeling district, West Bengal, was made by the authors on 23.x.2005 near Latpanchar village, within the Latpanchar beat of the sanctuary. Two adult males and an adult female were sighted. It is therefore, distributed in seven PAs of India namely, Namdapha and Manas National Parks and five sanctuaries – Buxa, Mahananda, Eagle’s Nest, Kamlang and Sessa. This is also the current western-most distribution record for this species, the former being in Buxa; about 60 km on the eastern side of the current site (Fig. 1). The habitat wherein the birds were sighted was tropical semi-evergreen forest. Given the resident status of this species, there might be a thriving population of this species within Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary. Further research is required to assess the current status of this species in this region. Habitat destruction is not an immediate threat for this species in this area, however, threat from poaching cannot be ruled out. Indigenous people were known to hunt this bird for the pot and hunting outside the PAs in recent times cannot be ruled out. Trapping or hunting this bird attracts a penalty of Rs 25,000/- (US$ 550) and imprisonment for a minimum of three years, extendable up to seven years, as it is a Schedule I species of the Wildlife (Protection) Act of India, 1972. Therefore, in addition to carrying out a thorough survey for this species in northern West Bengal, an awareness generation activity among local people should be undertaken.

Acknowledgements
The authors would like to thank the Divisional Forest Officer, Wildlife Division I, Darjeeling District (West Bengal, India) for providing permission to conduct ornithological survey within Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary.

Figure 1 – Recent sighting areas of Rufous-necked Hornbill from West Bengal, India.
As an Army cantonment, Subathu is almost 200 years old. Situated at 1,219 m above m.s.l., in the Simla Hills (30°58’37"N 77°01’37"E), its moderate climate is a great attraction for birds on their year round altitudinal movements. A fairly well preserved pine forest is the boas of this cantonment township and that, coupled with limited terraced cultivation, makes it a favoured bird breeding zone both in the summer and winter. Add to this a minimal human disturbance to bird life, as the combined population of the military garrison and the township around it, is less than six thousand! Some luck, for some avians, somewhere!

When we drove up to Subathu on 7th 2005, there was an uninterrupted soft drizzle, grey skies and drifts of mist every now and then. However, late into the afternoon, when the sun penetrated the clouds for about 45 minutes of bright sun shine, we were simply mobbed by birds from all directions. They seemed intent on making good the lost feeding hours, in the process, almost all birds had lowered their proximity threshold. So much so that White-crested Laughingthrushes Garrulax leucolophus moved about nonchalantly within two meters of us. Little wonder then that within minutes I had unwittingly used up all the twenty unexposed frames in my camera. Just as well, because I could now sit back and watch them all at leisure with my mind’s eye.

Soldiers, as a tribe, tend to carry the baggage of historical heritage to ridiculous limits. When I saw this jolly flock of eight White-crested Laughingthrushes (my lifetime’s first in the wild) I felt a kind of proprietary kinship with the species. For, after all, was it not a fellow soldier, Maj. Gen. Thomas Hardwicke who first introduced this laughingthrush to science? Although he collected a specimen at Srinagar in 1796 ("mountains above Hardwar", on the present day road to Joshimath in Uttarakhand), his claim was established only in 1815. Was the delay the usual turf war between an amateur naturalist and soldier to boot and the scientists? Never mind the past, here was a flock of eight White-crested Laughingthrushes (Which in this instance has grown from 3 birds about ten years ago) in permanent residence on the premises of our host, also a retired soldier. Of course, the White-crested Laughingthrushes, pooh-poohing all such sentiment, existed there because of an extensive, thick bamboo brake, their favoured roost and nesting niche.

I was in great luck that day. In a mixed party of Red-vented Pycnonotus cafer and the Himalayan Bulbulis P. leucogenys there were several Red-billed Leiothrix Leiothrix lutea and many more Grey-headed Flycatcher-Warblers Seicercus xanthochistos. The Latter two were also lifers for me. Although all birds looked washed and cleaned by the prolonged drizzle, the lacquered red beak of the Leiothrix and the exquisite lime-yellow breast and belly of this warbler had the sparkle of finished gems. Their whispered calls were a balm to the ears after the explosive decibels emitted by the White-crested Laughingthrushes. In all fairness to the laughingthrushes, I have to confess that I rather miss their joyous calls, which, filtering through closed windows was a welcome wake-up alarm.

My favourite, the Blue Whistling-Thrush Myophonus caeruleus, was in the silent mode but his mere presence was refreshing. On a solitary silk-cotton tree in the compound of the Bamboo Lodge were seen Large-billed Crows Corvus [macrorhynchos] japonensis, Indian Treeties Dendrocitta vagabunda, Alexandrine Parakeets Psittacula eupatria and a woodpecker, most probably the Fulvous-breasted Pied Dendrocopos macei. This ramp walk came to an end when tidings of Red-billed Blue Magpies Urocissa erythrorhyncha took to chasing each other among pine trees to the merry chatter of their call. How did John Gould’s artist, Henry C. Richter, paint, so true to life, one magpie on the glide and a whole tiding of them in a sequence as the back drop, without the benefit of first hand experience in the Himalaya? I presume that is what genius is all about! I had seen all this bird life from one spot in less than an hour. There were at least twenty other familiar calls from outside the circle of my vision.

When the Indian Bird Conservation Network (IBCN) were scouting for Important Bird Areas (IBAs), I had suggested, through a brief concept paper (Singh 2006), that they should have a good look at the Army cantonments and certain Government of India establishments such as Sriharikota as potential IBA sites. Anyway, for the moment, let me take you back to Subathu.

The next day was sunny. We were out of the house at sunrise. Mountaineers seldom walk on a level, trodden path. So our host led us down a hillside and up another. On such occasions, photography and bird-watching are great face savers when one is out of breath! Just a decade ago, on these hills we would have by now put up a least a dozen Black Francolin Francolinus francolinus, as many Red Junglefowl Gallus gallus and perhaps an odd Kaleej Pheasant Lophura leucomelanos as well. Today we just heard one Black Francolin, saw several Great Tits Parus major and twice heard the “tzeet-tzeet” of the Blue Whistling-Thrush. Cresting a rather bald ridge, we surprised a solitary Indian Peafowl Pavo cristatus. He was not taking any chances and with laboured wing beats he vanished down the valley in a powerful glide, the echo of his alarm call lingering a while. We gained the last ridge-top before breakfast. From a dead tree, close by, came the rather faint sounds of a woodpeckers’ hammering. The reason was soon obvious because the pygmy

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**Birds walk the ramp at Subathu, Himachal Pradesh, India**

Lt. General Baljit Singh

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It was time for the last walk of the day, this time ostensibly to work up a thirst for a sun-downer! Descending through freshly ploughed, terraced fields, we put up clouds of sparrow-sized birds. The first impression was of an exclusive congregation of female House Sparrows *Passer domesticus*. That was untenable, of course. Closer observation revealed the birds to be Hodgson’s Mountain-Finches *Leucosticte nemoricola* in flocks of up to a hundred. With that, the tally of my lifetime’s first encounters, in the past 24 hour period, stood at an incredible six. Of course, altogether we had seen more than thirty species and heard an equal number in less than two days. So Subathu is definitely an attractive destination for serious bird watching.

Almost all Army Cantonments of Subathu vintage are steeped in the history of the Raj. When Simla became the summer capital, Governors’ Generals/Viceroy’s of India rode up on horse-back and Subathu was the natural midway staging post. The garrison commandant’s residence, which Capt. P.C. Kennedy had constructed around 1820, now inevitably became the great watering-hole for Raj personalities on their annual altitudinal migration (!) and in the process embalmed this quaint little cantonment with the mystique, nostalgia, romance and gossip of the Raj.

Once the railway track to Simla was commissioned, in 1903, Subathu slipped into one hundred years of solitude. But that most imposing colonial mansion, Kennedy House, was retained in its pristine dignity. Today it serves as the Garrison Officers’ Mess and the trees around it are full of avian comings and goings the year long.

On the drive back to Chandigarh we lost count of the Streaked Laughingthrushes *Trochalopteron [Garrulax] lineatus* and the Blue Whistling-Thrushes that crossed our path. Stopping at a way-side eatery for a cup of coffee, we saw on the facing hill slope one Great Tit, a pair of Indian Robins *Saxicoloides fulicata* and several Common Mynas *Acridotheres tristis* in a tight knot on the ground, locked in mortal combat.

What more could one ask of life, when you have an abundance of such innocent pleasures!

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Zoos’ Print
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Recoveries from the Newsletter for Birdwatchers (1965) - 10
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By 1965, its fifth year, the Newsletter had become fairly well known in the then small birding community of India, and a few articles from Pakistan relating to birds common to our two continents reassured us—as we are essentially a part of one subcontinent.

Rev. A. Navarro, to whom you have been introduced before, took a group of students from St. Xavier’s High School, Bombay, to Kendal in Ahmedabad district for bird watching, “instead of sitting at home for the Diwali holidays, firing crackers and feasting on sweetmeats”... (1) Our first impression of the situation was one of dejection and disappointment...the countryside seemed devoid of any interest for bird watching...But first impressions are not always the best...At the end of six days, footing it out for miles, we found to our great surprise and joy a list of hundred varieties of different birds.” I quote one paragraph from this long four page article.

“Along the bullock cart ruts and nullahs, along side which there grew an abundance of green grass with bushes and small trees to break the monotony, we saw seven varieties of warblers. This was a pleasant and refreshing sight. Here we saw the Indian Great Reed Warbler, Blyth’s Reed Warblers, the Orphee Warbler, the Booted Tree Warbler, the Ashy Wren Warbler, and the Indian Wren Warbler. What a splendid company they made on the wing, bristling with the enjoyment of their environment. But of all this glorious company two of them—Blyth’s and the Booted Tree Warbler—we were destined to watch more often on trees, while the others preferred to rest on bushes, reeds and grass. Blyth’s Warbler, which was the most common everywhere, gave us the joy of hearing its rather monotonous ‘chat-chat-chat’ chant. But what was our surprised delight when we suddenly discovered him warbling at noon, trimming his throat to a sweet, melodious and soul-lifting song akin, we thought, to that of the Oriole: only his was a much softer and less high-pitched melody.”

Brother Navarro had the distinction of discovering a new species for India during his visit to Fennel Hill (Karnala Bird Sanctuary) near Mumbai on 31.i.1965. “It must have been around 11 o’clock when I was almost at the top of the hill, on the right side of the road, when suddenly a noisy party, made up mostly of Warblers, Flycatchers and some birds of another variety, were enjoying themselves in a delightful cacophony in a very thick patch of the forest. My attention was caught by a pair of birds calling to each other incessantly. Their calls were altogether unfamiliar to me as much as their colour was. I sat down on the ground flora most ten minutes observing. Finally I was convinced that the birds that I was observing were something I had never seen before. So I decided there and then to secure at least one specimen of them.”

“Luckily I did secure one of them. After examining it with some care I placed it, not without some misgivings, in the group of the Pied Shrike of the Genus Hemipus. Later
in the evening at the foot of Fennel Hill two more pairs came my way as they flew through the thickest part of the forest. Once I got home I examined the specimen more carefully and saw that it was the Ashy Minivet.”

D.A. Holmes and J.O. Wright continued with their series of annotated list of birds around Sukkur Barrage in Sind. Reading about the commonest birds from experts is never boring, and the authors produced a useful list of birds seen in different seasons. For example, this is what they say about the Koel *Eudynamys scolopacea*. “Only a few decades ago this bird was very rare in Sind. Now, however, it is a common visitor to Lower Sind from April to November. Its spread to the Sukkur region has not yet been so successful. It did not arrive here till May 21st and remained scarce.” Then about the Hoopoe *Upupa epops*. “This Hoopoe is a winter visitor leaving about mid-April. The first autumn arrival was noted on July 20th. Although from its distribution the common bird here is presumably the typical subspecies (*U. e. epops*). Few birds seen in this area during the winter have had any visible white on the crest.” The white on the crest presumably is a feature of the migrants, if I recall correctly my conversations with Yuvraj Shivrajkumar in Kutch during the ringing season.

S.D. Jayakar and Hari Pulugurtha of the Genetic and Biometry Laboratory in Bhubaneswar, Orissa, (where J.B.S. Haldane worked), discovered an impressive roost of White Wagtails *Motacilla alba* and three sub-species on the roof of the secretariat in November 1964. Every day around 17:00 hrs over 200 birds descended there and then roosted in the neighbouring karanj trees *Pongamia pinnata*.

I wish I had more space for T.J. Roberts’s lovely article ‘Vultures in the desert’, but I can only give you a taste of his writing by quoting a paragraph from his 2,250-word account. The detailed descriptions he gives of the several species of vultures would be useful for vulture experts, and if any of you are interested I will be glad to send you a Xerox copy of his article. In the June 1965 issue he wrote:

“I had to cross a stretch of some ten miles of pure desert and in one of the ‘pats’ my eye was attracted to the pathetic sight of a three-quarter grown sheep lying on its side. From its feeble attempts to rise and join the flock which we had ridden past half a mile previously, it was obviously ‘in extremis’. It was not until about two hours later that I was returning along more or less the same track when I realized that in all the empty waste, the lamb had attracted the ever watchful vultures. There were some fifteen birds wheeling high overhead and more coming into view. I stopped and watched the circling birds and was intrigued to realize that apart from two or three White-backed Vultures *Gyps bengalensis*, which is usually the only species seen in the cultivated areas of Bahawalpur, there were also eight or nine slightly larger birds with pale khaki bodies which were Griffon Vultures *Gyps fulvus*.”

At the end of April 1965 K.K. Neelakantan was at Thekkady on a brief visit, “and was disheartened to see that a number of forest giants had been felled to provide room for a long line of buildings”. He went again on 25th July wanting very much to add Rufous Woodpecker to his life listing. He failed to do that but there was some consolation in seeing three White-necked Storks on the traditional nesting tree near the boat jetty. He sent a list of 53 birds seen during his visit and was surprised that no Grey Wagtail or Grey-headed Mynah was seen during this visit.

D.A. Holmes wrote a major article on the water birds in Sind in the August issue after he migrated to Pakistan. “My title” he said, “may seem anomalous to some but the Sind Desert is a widely held misconception. Despite its indubitably hot desert climate, most of this region is not desert. The annual inundation of the Indus now contained a regulated… an abundance of *jheels* and water logging menaces the agriculture of the region. The result is a wealth of water birds which provided my most exciting bird watching.”

In autumn the paddy fields ring with the lovely calls of green and wood sandpipers, the forerunners of the waders that abound in the area in winter. From November to February the sound of guns (far too many of them) keep the wings of thousands of duck whistling over every jheel and crakes and bitterns can be flushed from any reedbed.” One of Holmes’ weaknesses was fast driving and tragically he died while speeding around a bend in Geneva. It was the end of a very fine contributor to the Newsletter.

In the December issue K.S. Lavkumar wrote at some length about the birds around Rajkot: “October” he said, “is a very interesting month and our farm complex was no exception, and all the passage migrants one might hope to see in this part of the country are here. Spotted Flycatchers are frequent, but their inconspicuous colourings make them ‘rare’. Pale Brown Shrikes are commoner than at other times of the winter, while for a period, Kashmir Rollers are more numerous than the Indian Roller which is a beautiful and typical bird of cultivation. It is always good to see two species closely related side by side as then the comparisons are easy, and many of our novice members had a fine opportunity of getting to know the two Rollers. The same is true of the cock Pied Bush Chats and the Pied Wheatears, both of which are frequent and were also able to compare the hens of the Pied Bush Chat with the mate of the Collared Bush Chat, though the cock himself has yet evaded us. Common House Sparrows hang around in gossiping flocks around the farm houses and with them invariably are a couple of yellow-throated sparrows, the yellow throat never conspicuous at this time of the year, but when side by side the two sparrows are easily told apart.

The year ended with the Editor’s report on a meeting in Delhi between representatives of IUCN and WWF with members of the IBWL and others. The meeting was significant for the progress of the conservation movement in India for it paved the way for the IUCN General Assembly meeting in New Delhi in November 1969, which resulted in the famous Project Tiger.
Common birds of India

In spite of his various pre-occupations and commitments, Dr. Asad R. Rahmani could find time to write a book on the common birds of India, which has been published by the publications Division of the Govt. of India. Dr. Rahmani has been involved in the field-work and study of birds for nearly 30 years or more. This makes him one of the most competent and the right person to write on the subject of birds of India. As he himself writes in the book, “Much of the description is based on my personal field

notes. Additional information is from books by Dr Salim Ali, Grimmett et al., and from other sources” … The author admits that “It is not a comprehensive book on Indian birds, because many common birds have been left out due to lack of space.”

In this small book of about 106 pages, nearly 119 commonly seen birds from all types of habitats across India have been covered besides 12 species (including 2 vultures) which are not so common have also been discussed. This is less than 10 percent of all the birds to be found on the Indian subcontinent, which number about 1,300. In the brief but fairly comprehensive introduction, the reader is informed of the biogeography of the country and its climate and the distribution of birds in some important regions including the Andaman and Nicobar and the Lakshadweep Islands.

Review

There are sub-sections on bird migration, sanctuaries, birds in Indian culture, bird trade, wildlife protection and threatened bird species. The chapters at the end, on books for further reading, glossary, bird research institutes and extinct, threatened and endangered birds are informative and useful. The main text is in narrative style.

The book is well printed with almost no printing mistakes, but the binding could have been better and stronger. Low price of Rs 180/- should put it within the reach of many birdwatchers. If the colour photographs had been numbered and the corresponding numbers inserted, the text would have been more convenient for beginners.

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Correspondence

The birds at home
‘The birds at home’ by Pragati Nayak (Indian Birds of Jan-Feb 2006) is one of the most charming essays I have read for a long time. Her approach to ornithology is probably what appeals to most of us. At some stage of our lives we suddenly find that we are smitten by birds. It happened to me at the Doon School, Dehra Dun when I was eleven.

The school campus was well wooded and full of birds. But as members of the Naturalists, a society for junior boys, my friends and I used to go out on most Sundays to study the avifauna of the Doon Valley, which lies between the Shivaliks and the foothills of the Himalayas. We were also responsible for the collection of stuffed birds that Dr Salim Ali had bequeathed to the Doon School.

Today, I am 74, but the thrill of birding has not left me. I cannot take part in field trips like I used to—in Kerala, the Palani hills, the Kaveri delta, the leeward side of the Western Ghats in Tamil Nadu—but if I hear a call outside my window I still want to go out and ascertain who is singing the song.

I wish Mrs Nayak years and years of pleasure and friendship with the birds of her neighbourhood.

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Correction

Wednesday’s post brought the January-February issue of Indian Birds, as ever containing some interesting articles. Joe Homan’s initiative to organise the first South Indian Bird Watchers’ Fair was most inspiring. Pragati Nayak’s short article, ‘The birds At home’, strongly conveyed the message that one does not have to be a professional to enjoy bird watching, and that one can observe the bird life in ones immediate vicinity.

Living in the Kumaun my attention was first drawn to Dr Arun P. Singh’s description of his observations while trekking in the valleys of the Saryu and eastern Ramganga, and over the intervening high ridges. I would however like to draw your attention to one error that has crept in. Dr Singh describes his trek as being in Bageshwar and Almora districts. However when he crossed the Ramganga bridge (1,870 m) between Gogina and Namik, he entered Munsiyari block of Pithoragarh district, and the rest of his trek as far as Birthi was in this block. The E. Ramganga down as far as Nachni (between Tejam and Thal) forms the border between Bageshwar district on its west bank and Pithoragarh on the east.

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