

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.

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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 Latpanchor village, within the Latpanchor 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.

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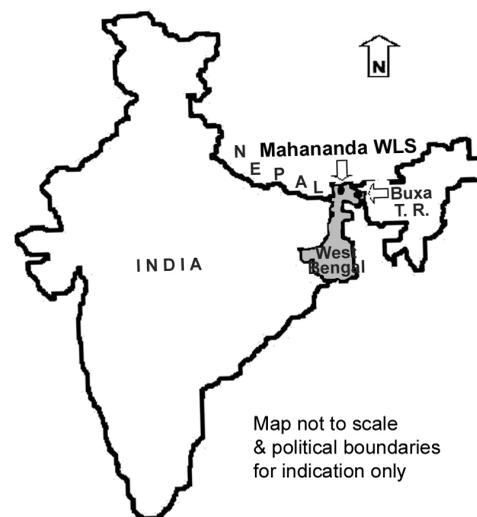


Figure 1 – Recent sighting areas of Rufous-necked Hornbill from West Bengal, India.

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Birds walk the ramp at Subathu, Himachal Pradesh, India

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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 boast 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 7.ii.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 Uttaranchal), 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 Bulbuls *P. leucogenys* there were several Red-billed Leiothrix *Leiothrix lutea* and many more Grey-headed Flycatcher-Warblers *Seicercus xanthoschistos*. 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 Treepies *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 woodpecker's hammering. The reason was soon obvious because the pygmy