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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

woodpecker, a mere 13 cm from beak to tail, couldn't be expected to hammer any louder. I was looking into the sun and it was difficult to tell whether it was the Brown-capped *Dendrocopos nanus* or Grey-capped *D. canicapillus*. For the Brown-capped, at about 1,067 m, this may well be an altitudinal record.

To work up an appetite for lunch, we gained several other ridge tops, ultimately reaching a pine-covered open patch, at least 457 m above Subathu. By now the sun was fairly hot and a few Common Kestrels *Falco tinnunculus* were floating on thermals, no doubt looking for food. But some Eurasian Griffons *Gyps fulvus* seemed to be riding the thermals for the sheer joy of it. As we settled to a sandwich-black coffee lunch, I noticed a bird hawking insects with short sallies into the air. It resembled the male Oriental Magpie-Robin *Copsychus saularis* and so I took no further notice. But when it perched on a bush directly below us, the bird revealed its powder-blue crown and nape. This lifer was a male Blue-capped Redstart *Phoenicurus caeruleocephalus*. That moment will also remain a lifetime's regret, for not having carried a spare film-roll. A moment later, a Great Barbet *Megalaima virens* came and perched so close at eye-level that I could count its moustachial bristles! This was a lunch hour, truly of dreams.

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 upto 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 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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