

Unusual nests of Red-rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica* in Ratnagiri district (Maharashtra, India)

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Palkar, S.B. 2006. Unusual nests of Red-rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica* in Ratnagiri district (Maharashtra, India). *Indian Birds* 2 (4): 108. Sachin Balkrishna Palkar, Sahyadri Nisarga Mitra, Near Laxminarayan Temple, Chiplun, Ratnagiri district, Maharashtra 415605, India. Email: sahyadricpn@rediffmail.com.

Red-rumped Swallows *Hirundo daurica* construct a retort-shaped nest with mud. Both sexes take part in this construct. They collect pellets of wet mud in their beaks and stick these to the roof of a veranda, temple, under a bridge, etc. First they make a retort-shaped outline of the nest and then paste mud pellets, a pellet at a time, to make an egg chamber. After that the birds make an entrance tunnel. The outer surface of the nest is rough. After completing construction, they give a soft lining of fine grass, twigs and feathers to the egg chamber.

We give below two observations on unusual nests from Chiplun city (17°31'N 73°31'E) and Pimpali village.

Chiplun

Vindhyawasini is a famous Hindu temple in Chiplun. Here a pair of Red-rumped Swallows regularly builds a nest attached to the roof of the temple and someone frequently breaks the nest. The birds rebuild it at the same place.

On 23.vi.2004 we observed that the nest had been completely broken. Only a mud outline remained and two hatchlings lay dead on the ground. Both adult birds were wandering around the place.

On 7.vii.2004 we observed a very unusual nest of at the same place. It had two entrances at opposite sides. The normal-sized nest was shaped like the "head of a bison". After an hour's observation we realized that both birds were busy lining the nest. They used only one tunnel for entering and leaving it. Later we climbed up to the nest and saw that one tunnel was blocked on the inside.

Pimpali

Pimpali is a small village 8 km from Chiplun. Here Red-rumped Swallows *Hirundo daurica* had attached their nest to the roof of the "Gramdevata" temple, which was under renovation. During painting, the painters started to break the nest. Mr Jayant Kanade (President of Sahyadri Nisarga Mitra), who is a resident of Pimpali, advised them not to break the nest but to paint over it. The roof was painted white as was the nest. Now the nest was fully 'camouflaged'. Both birds accepted their painted over nest and used it for three years! In 2004 they built a new nest, attaching it to the coloured one.



Unusual nest of Red-rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica* in Vindhyawasini (Chiplun).

White-backed Vultures *Gyps bengalensis* in Gujarat

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Would like to place on record some observations, of vultures, made in 2004 in Gujarat. Near Mahuva, Bhavnagar district, a few farms with coconut plantations, had about 125–140 roosting White-backed Vultures *Gyps bengalensis*. I was told that about 50 nests were present during the breeding season. Local farmers recalled a larger number of roosting birds. They said that about eight years ago there was a high rate of mortality among the birds.

These birds faced several threats. Apparently their presence reduced the production of coconuts and spoilt the

palm fronds. The birds were constantly disturbed by people, who not only threw stones at them, but also used firearms to scare and even kill the birds.

The nesting birds were also threatened by egg collectors. Vulture eggs are in demand locally as a cure for tuberculosis and asthma.

Advocacy for the protection of vultures, among the coconut farmers, has educated them to the extent that they have agreed not to harass roosting birds nor disturb those nesting.

At Chhapariyali village, near Mahuva, a charitable asylum is run by a 'mahajan' of the Jain sect, for crippled, weak or 'useless' beasts, and shelters over 3,000 head of cattle. Dead animals are skinned and the carcass disposed in an open area. More than 500 White-backed Vultures were seen there. Large numbers of these birds were also seen at Nagla village in Mahuva taluk. This area is home to about 50 Asiatic lion *Panthera leo*, whose abandoned kills are another source of food for vultures.

We also found colonies of White-backed Vultures near Hanuman Gala and Banej-Jambudi near Gir. A Red-headed Vulture *Sarcogyps calvus* was seen here and the local people informed us that it nested in the region. During a tour of Surat district, I spotted 175–200 vultures at the Surat Panjarapol Trust garbage dumps at Akhakhhol and Tharoli. Most of these were White-backed Vultures but some were Long-billed Vultures *G. indicus*. Importantly, 15–20% of these were juveniles.

Prevalence of HPAI H5N1 virus in wild birds

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A major outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) strain H5N1 in Barheaded Geese *Anser indicus* and other nesting waterbird species in Qinghai Lake in China in May–July 2005 is reported to have killed over 6,500 birds. This outbreak marks only the second time in history that wild birds are being infected in any numbers by HPAI and marks a turning point in our understanding of the ability of HPAI to kill wild birds. This H5N1 virus was first reported in 1997 when it caused the deaths of six people in Hong Kong SAR and links to poultry led to wide-scale culling operations to contain the virus. In the subsequent years, singles or small numbers of mainly captive, peri-domestic birds and birds that feed in the vicinity of inhabitation or farmland in Hong Kong, elsewhere in southern East China and South East Asia were reported. Since the outbreak in mid 2005, over 45 species in Asia and Europe that have been found moribund or dead have tested positive to this virus.

A review of food and feeding habits of the birds reveals three main groups being infected: (a) flocking and colonial nesting species that feed or rest in wetlands or near farmland (e.g. Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*, Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus*, Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*, Coot *Fulica atra*, Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*, Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*, Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*, Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*, Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*, Bar-headed Goose, Greater Scaup *Aythya marila*, Barnacle goose *Branta leucopsis*, Goosander *Mergus merganser*, Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*, Asian Openbilled Stork *Anastomus oscitans*, Pallas's Gull *Larus ichthyæetus* and Brownheaded Gull *Larus brunnicephalus*), (b) species that feed and scavenge on land and waterways near farms, villages and towns (e.g. Feral pigeon *Columba livia*, Largebilled Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos*, Magpie *Pica pica*, Grey Heron, Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* and Scaly-breasted Munia *Lonchura punctulata*), and (c) predatory/scavenging species (e.g. Buzzard *Buteo buteo*, Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* and Largebilled Crow). A wide variety of captive birds have been affected have picked up the virus and would have been fed infected food or may from infected birds in the collections. While both resident and migratory birds are

falling victim to the virus, a predominance of migrants has been observed to date. At least few species such as swans appear to be more susceptible to the virus; outbreaks in these species across parts of Europe are believed to be in response to exceptionally cold weather driving birds to these regions, although the source of the virus infecting these birds across their range is not clear.

The H5N1 virus has been isolated only from a very small proportion of dead or moribund wild birds to date. Wide scale sampling of apparently healthy wild birds in Asian, African & European countries has so far not revealed the virus. The sole exception is of six ducks of 13,000 wild birds in China, within bird flu infested provinces. This suggests that the virus is highly lethal and that infected birds may not be capable of long distance migration. However samples sizes to date are very small and with the exception of the Iceland Whooper Swan, only a tiny fraction of any biogeographic population has been sampled, highlighting the need for comprehensive surveillance. Concern of HPAI has increased the reporting of dead wild birds and has helped to improve our understanding of the wide range of such deaths, including due to bacterial and viral diseases, intentional or accidental poisoning and inclement weather.

Ongoing experimental work on testing of susceptibility of the H5N1 in Mallard and few other species has revealed that while some birds die, others survive and shed virus for a few weeks and during this time can infect other individuals of the species. How these results correlates to birds in the wild and the ability of birds to carry this virus over long distances not known and needs to be investigated.

Information on results of surveillance of wild birds has been slow to become available to the public and is preventing timely epidemiological studies that are urgently needed to assist with risk assessments. Formal national reporting to OIE on wild birds is often still inadequate and incomplete on the identity or age of species to support epidemiological studies. For example, reports made in Feb–March 2006 cover 157 outbreaks, of which only in 70 (45%) species identified to species level and as a consequence the majority of information is not usable.

As wild birds are often implicated as a major vector in

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