

Food-sharing among passerines at Lava, eastern Himalaya

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The eastern Himalayan region lies between 26°40'–29°30'N 88°05'–97°05'E and covers a total area of 93,988 km² comprising the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim and West Bengal. The eastern Himalaya is also designated as an Endemic Bird Area (EBA) (BirdLife International 2003).

We visited Lava (c. 2,200 m), in eastern Himalaya region of West Bengal, for a training programme in August 2005. It has rich sub-tropical and temperate forests dominated by species of *Quercus*, *Castanopsis*, *Magnolia*, *Michellia*, Birch, etc. Chatterjee & Ghose (2004) have recorded c. 280 species of birds from Lava.

In this note we describe what seems to be a food-sharing behaviour among small passerines. Our observations were made in an area of fringe forest, where shrubs of the *Cestrum* sp. (Solanaceae) were abundant and flowering / fruiting in profusion. The bright red flowers attracted a host of insects. Tits (Paridae) usually fed on these insects. The flowering season begins from mid-May onwards, with fruit (berries) maturing within the next seven to eight weeks. The matured berries are 1–1.5 cm long, oval shaped and dark red in colour. In the last week of August 2005 a few flowers were present along with mature berries. Therefore, it was assumed that the earliest fruiting started in mid-June and the last fruit would be ripe by November. It was seen that fruits were available to the birds like Green-backed Tit *Parus monticolus* and Black-spotted Yellow Tit *P. pilonotus* from June till the

end of October. We observed that these birds fed on the fruits in a particular style. Berries were eaten from the side that was unexposed to the sun and from the closest point to the stem, which caused the residual part to dry up early. Significantly, the tits left the berries half eaten, exposing the seeds inside, leaving the bottom of the fruit intact, which later became an anchor for the seeds. During monsoon, the common finches of this area, namely Yellow-breasted Greenfinch *Carduelis spinoides* and Red-headed Bullfinch *Pyrrhula erythrocephala*, fed on these exposed seeds. The residual part of the fruit and the seed which were of ovoid shape were left for the other birds, Dark-breasted Rosefinch *Carpodacus nipalensis*, Hodgson's Mountain-Finch *Leucosticte nemoricola*, Red-headed Bullfinch. Both, altitudinal migrants and resident finches fed on the exposed seeds. Finches that arrive in winter, from the Himalayas, also feed on these berries, whenever the area is prone to rain and dense fog in the month of October.

References

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Sighting of Green-billed Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus tristis* along Alaknanda River, Uttaranchal, India

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Green-billed Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus tristis* is a non-parasitic cuckoo (family Cuculidae). It is distributed along the Himalayan foothills, the terai, bhabar, and duars in the north and the east, south to Chota Nagpur Plateau and northern Eastern Ghats (Ali & Ripley 1981). However, its western-most limit in the northern part of the subcontinent is unclear. While Ali & Ripley (1981) state that

the bird is distributed west to Garhwal Himalayas in Uttaranchal, Grimmett et al (1998), Kazmierczak (2000) and Rasmussen & Anderton (2005) have curtailed its western-most limit to Kumaon. Here, we report its occurrence in Upper Bhagirathi valley in Garhwal, which is nearly 150 km west of Kumaon, corroborating the distribution range given in Ali & Ripley (1981).