

marshaled to assist the authorities in locating nesting pairs not only in the two key districts of Ahmedabad and Kheda, but in isolated locations across the state. Here is a wild creature that would lend itself to full publicity. In addition to this highly publicized program, we must now take a leaf from the International Crane Foundation (ICF) USA, and start a captive rearing program. It has been shown that by removing one egg from a nest, the parents are not disturbed and continue to incubate the remaining egg. If the egg is removed at the onset, a third egg may be laid! By removing one egg, the chances of both hatchlings successfully reaching adulthood is increased. Crane siblings are extremely competitive and as often as not, the younger chick does not survive unless the wetland is large enough and each parent can lead one offspring to forage at a distance from the other.

The immediate official response to any suggestion of starting a captive rearing program would be negative! The Sarus is a Schedule-I species and so it cannot be interfered with in the wild. Taking eggs from wild nesting pairs would be flouting conservation laws regardless that such birds are unsuccessful in hatching their eggs, or if they do, are unable to raise even one chick. I can understand the objection, lest any free for all take place. As I visualize it, government gives statutory recognition to a group undertaking the responsibility to start rearing cranes in captivity. The wildlife department would be represented on the board and there would be continual monitoring of the work in progress. The model provided by the ICF should be followed and, one of their representatives should be co-opted on the board of management. Their experience and expertise would be essential to any programme initiated in India. The entire programme must be in full public view and as many concerned birdwatchers as possible should be integrated into it.

Unlike the Whooping Crane *Grus americana*, which the ICF helped save from the very brink of extinction, the Sarus is a resident species with local movements dictated by the

availability of water. The American bird is a long distance migrant, which must have resulted in considerable problems, particularly in getting the captive reared birds to integrate with the wild population. For us, this would not be a problem at all. Each year in summer when the water bodies are at their lowest, Sarus collect in the perennial wetlands where young birds start pairing. Captive reared youngsters would be introduced to these natural gatherings. Conceivably, individuals from the captive reared group would partner wild youngsters and the newly formed pair may find a wetland of their choice, even taking up residence in water bodies forming part of landscaping in many of the new housing societies coming up. What ever they do, our main concern should be to see that as many young birds are added to the population as possible.

Even as the highly scientific programme is initiated to raise as many young as possible, a parallel effort has to be initiated where the pairs nesting in traditional locations are given public protection, and imaginative awareness programmes need to be developed involving the communities concerned, the neighborhood schools, etc., and provide intensive media coverage. Sarus have survived into the present century because they enjoyed high sentiment and it is this sentiment, which needs to be kept alive, avoiding dependence only on wildlife legislation. It may also be seriously considered to artificially feed each pair so that the juveniles grow strong. If the feeding is done by the children of the community, all the better. Wetlands, where summer congregations occur, should be highlighted and grain and other nitrogenous feeds should be provided. Many of the farm houses coming up are landscaped with water as a central feature. Such properties should be registered and pairs of Sarus given them. Soon we would have a semi-feral population strengthening the beleaguered wild one.

If we cannot stem the decline of Sarus Cranes in Gujarat, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, I fail to see how we can ever succeed in saving so many other species on the brink of extinction.

## First sighting of Black Stork *Ciconia nigra* and Ashy Minivet *Pericrocotus divaricatus* from Meghalaya, north-east India

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The Nokrek National Park (25°20'–25°29'N 90°13'–90°35'E) is located in Garo Hills (Meghalaya, India), spread over parts of three districts, namely, West Garo Hills, East Garo Hills and South Garo Hills. Nokrek was declared as a national park in 1997, covering an area of 47.48 km<sup>2</sup>. The park area acts as the core area of Nokrek Biosphere Reserve (total area: 820 km<sup>2</sup>). The national park area has been

acquired by outright purchase of land from local communities by the Government of Meghalaya.

A bird survey of this little known protected area was carried out from October 2001 to May 2002 as a part of the Important Bird Areas (IBA) program of the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) (Lahkar et al. 2002). This is a note reporting the sightings of two rare species in north-east India that were seen during this survey.

### Black Stork *Ciconia nigra*

On 7.i.2002 at 16:30 hrs, we (B.P.L. & P.J.) saw a lone stork in flight at Jatragre (25°25'N 90°27'E, c.412 m a.s.l.) near Chokpot, in the southern range of Nokrek National Park. The bird had white under parts, black neck and under wing with distinct red bill and legs, which left no doubt that it, was an adult of this species. This was the first sighting of Black Stork from the state of Meghalaya (Choudhury 1998; Ali & Ripley 1987).

According to forest personnel and local people, there was no wetland close by. Perhaps, the rivers that flow out of the hills get wide and shallow in the plains, becoming a suitable feeding site for a large water bird like this stork. The bird might be foraging in such areas and was looking out for its roost. It could also well be that an individual strayed from the neighbouring lowlands of Bangladesh (Kazmierczak 2000) or perhaps it was en route to the lowlands of Assam's plains.

### Ashy Minivet *Pericrocotus divaricatus*

On 28.x.2001 at 08:10 hrs, we (H.J.S., B.P.L. & M.F.A.) saw a single female minivet in the northern range of Nokrek National Park near Daribok (25°29'N 90°19'E). It was in a mixed flock of White-spectacled Flycatcher-Warbler *Seicercus affinis*, Grey-headed Flycatcher *Culicicapa ceylonensis*, Streaked Spiderhunter *Arachnothera magna*, Rufous-bellied Bulbul *Hypsipetes maclellandii*, Black-faced Flycatcher-Warbler *Abroscopus schisticeps* and Brown-eared Bulbul *Hemixos flava*.

On 5.i.2002, we (BPL & PJ) saw another female minivet at 16:20 hrs, in a forest patch along the Dareng River (25°26'N 90°26'E), in the southern range of Nokrek. The bird actively foraged in a mixed flock of Black-crested Bulbul *Pycnonotus melanicterus* and Brown-eared Bulbul.

Ashy Minivet can be readily separated from other minivets by its grey-toned coloration (with no red or yellow). The white forehead and under parts, grey back and black tail with white outer rectrices were clearly noted during both the sightings. The Ashy Minivet can be confused with a female Rosy Minivet *P. roseus*, which is found in the region and is considered more common than the former. However, during our observations we neither saw any pale yellow under parts nor the dull olive-yellow rump present in the female Rosy Minivet. Perhaps the only other minivet that needs to be taken into account is the female of Swinhoe's Minivet *P. cantonensis* (formerly conspecific with *P. roseus*). However, the lack of yellow in the wing was clearly noted on both the occasions, confirming our identification.

The status of Ashy Minivet in India is little known—it is perhaps one of the most erratic winter visitors, appearing in small numbers all over the country. This additional record extends the distribution to the Garo Hills of Meghalaya.

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## Sightings of Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca* from Vadakara, north Kerala

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On 4.x.1999, we were watching shorebirds on the sandbanks of Vadakara (11°60'N 75°58'E) when one of us spotted a duck amidst a flock of waders. Its overall colouration was dark and blackish. A closer look showed that the head, nape, back and wings were dark chocolate brown. There was a hint of buff-brown patch visible on the face at certain angles which stood out on otherwise dark features. At rest, the under tail coverts were a clear white patch. The bird was very wary, taking wing at the slightest disturbance and settling at a distance. In flight, the trailing-edge of the upper wing was dark brown with a prominent broad white wing-bar extended from the tip to the base of the wing. Under wing and belly was whitish. Later a few

fishermen flushed it and to our surprise the duck flew directly to the sea. The size and colour were characteristic of a pochard (*Aythya* spp.) and we tentatively concluded in the field that it could be a Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*.

One of us (SM) got to see the same species (always single) on two occasions in subsequent years—on 10.x.2000 flying across the estuary towards the sea and on 30.xi.2002 resting on the banks and taking wing at the slightest disturbance and flying directly to the sea—hence the bird got nick-named, “The Sea Duck”.

The identification of this elusive “sea duck” remained inconclusive for a long time. It was only after referring to the recent, well-illustrated field guides (Grimmett et al. 1999,