

# —A flight down memory lane— The little brown puzzles—3

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Until the 1960s, pesticide spraying in agriculture was hardly ever done. Groundnut had not become the dominant cash crop and there was great variety in the agricultural landscape of Saurashtra where I did much of my early birdwatching. Borders of individual farm properties had hedgerows of *Euphorbia* sp., and there was plenty of grass and thorny trees. There were niches for all varieties of birds. During mid-September as the monsoon rains weakened, the ripening crops provided a paradise for birds: the resident having full grown chicks following them and huge numbers of northern migrants passing through onto their wintering areas further south in India and west to the savannahs of East Africa. Flying low over the vegetation would be flocks of Common Swallow *Hirundo rustica* catching aerial insects as they flew westwards. Higher up would be Red-rumped Swallows *H. daurica* leisurely circling after insects rising on the warm thermals. Seated along telegraph wires would be what we used to call the European Rollers *Coracias garrulus*, all facing west! From their vantage points they would fly down to capture prey, insects and small reptiles that are plentiful following the rains. I had gained an impression that whenever they flew to another perch, the tendency was to move towards the West! All the flying rollers would be doing so in the same direction. While individuals would tarry over some good grass area for a few days, they never stayed long and seemed to be in a hurry to move on. By mid November all would be gone. Salim Ali's *Birds of Kutch* introduced me to passage migration and these rollers were the most visible example. If the European Rollers drew attention by their size, color and preferred vantage perching sites, in the hedgerows and among thorn shrubberies vast multitudes of smaller birds swarmed the countryside. They advertised their presence by very characteristic calls: *Chucks*; *Churr, Churrs...*; loud *Taks*; and subdued *Tuk-tuks*. It is these birds that are the subject of this essay.

Salim Ali's book on the birds of Kutch (now spelt Kachchh) was extremely handy since it dealt with a region close

to and very similar to my own. The illustrations could not hold a candle to the latest illustrated field guides, but what they lacked was more than amply made up by the excellent description in the author's concisely crisp descriptions. There was so much movement going about in the shrubberies and thorn trees that isolating which *churr* or which *tack* came from which bird was not easy! For a period of a fortnight in October, the great majority of the birds were Greater Whitethroats *Sylvia communis*. Sparrow-sized and rather plain, they did show a distinct white throat, some of the birds appeared to have a distinct russet in the wings. Like the rollers, they would be gone, as per Salim Ali, to East Africa.

Though numerically less plentiful, never the less in considerable numbers were two other warblers, the very distinct Eastern Orphean Warbler *Sylvia crassirostris*,<sup>1</sup> a large warbler with a black head (sooty in females) contrasting sharply with the white throat, and the much smaller Lesser Whitethroat *S. curruca*. These two species were passing through to their wintering areas in peninsular India further south. By end October the numbers would drop with only those that would spend the cool months would remain. Apart from their distinctive white throats, white outer tail feathers flashed in both species as they hunted among the tangles of branches or flew from one shrub to another.

I recall my delight when I noticed that there were very distinctive variations in the grey of the head contrasting to a greater or lesser degree with the dark ear coverts in the Lesser Whitethroats. Referring to the books (Salim Ali, Hugh Whistler and Stuart Baker), I learnt that the overall darker coloured birds were a subspecies. I also found some of the birds had more uniform sandy upper parts with less contrasting dark ear coverts to give me a third subspecies! The three are now recognized as full species: *Sylvia curruca*, *S. althaea* and *S. minula* respectively. It is a pity I did not attempt to tag which sound came from which, though I knew an Orphean was around on hearing its louder "tak". The fourth *Sylvia*, Desert Whitethroat *S. nana*, a small pretty bird in a subdued way came my way when I visited the Little Rann of Kachchh many years later. There was a stand of Tamarisk out in the open salt flats and I asked to be driven to it. The delightful little bird, for it is indeed the smallest of the whitethroats, was there giving me great sights of its subdued yet distinctive colors. I am sure it was calling, but the sounds emanating were very subdued and carried away



Fig. 1. Hume's Lesser Whitethroat *S. althaea*

<sup>1</sup> Recently elevated to specific level as it differs sufficiently from Western Orphean Warbler *S. hortensis*, which is now treated extralimital within our range.

on the strong gusts of winter wind that are so characteristic of our region. I would confidently direct any one wanting to see this attractive winter visitor to the isolated tamarisk clumps in the Rann.

Whitethroats, in all honesty, cannot be ascribed as difficult to identify. Their jizz (mannerisms) is quite distinctive, with raised crown feathers, white throats and flashing white outer tail feathers. Accompanying these hordes of passage migrants would be another brown bird more often than not passed over as one of the warblers, the Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*. What drew attention to this otherwise quiet bird is its upright stance and the frequent sallies after aerial insects in true flycatcher fashion; I include it here because at first it did give me a little trouble and because with the Greater Whitethroats and the European Rollers it is a passage migrant to East Africa. The numbers peak by the middle of October and then the birds are suddenly gone! An interesting aspect of all these passage migrants is that they are autumn passage migrants with us. They do not return to their northern summer breeding grounds by our way. A little knowledge of geography will explain how admirably, over the millennia birds have developed migration patterns best suited to the climate. During autumn, the monsoon rains leave behind a land of plenty specially for insect eating birds; also, any strong winds would be tail winds as the NE Monsoon strengthens making the passage to East Africa easy. During spring, that is late February through March and April, the winds would be largely against the fliers and besides, the dry winter months reduce insect prey. At this time of the year the passage up the Nile valley to the Mediterranean is best suited since there the winter rains leave behind what the monsoon rains did in India. The spring migration then, takes another route. Even those birds going south into peninsular India appear not to swarm through Saurashtra and Kachchh on their way back north, rather they seem to move back over a broader front across Central India. Of course, this just a surmise but over a long period, one does get a feel of what is going on.

While I am on the subject of autumn passage migrants, I might as well mention the two delightful meetings I have had with the Rufous-tailed Scrub-Robin *Cercotrichas galactotes* an attractive bird that spends much time hopping energetically on the ground and among low bushes, its long, expressive, rufous tail cocked, and fanned. I saw one bird in the Hingol Gadh scrub jungle where I have done intensive birdwatching and the other on the bund at Khijadia near Jamnagar. It is commoner in Kachchh. As I said, this delightful bird finds place here along with the flycatcher because of their being part of the great autumn migration that was such a dramatic feature in the early half of the last century. On a couple of occasions, traveling by the Delhi Mail to Gujarat for my vacations, I have seen this great migration traveling south along with the train! I am not sure such sights are possible today since so much of the vegetation has been altered and the huge application of pesticides used for the monsoon crops.

Birds are audio and video manifestations. Sound plays a very important part in their life cycles. Very similar

looking species have to recognize each other and this certainly depends on the nuances of their calls. To become truly able to identify species that are similar, a birdwatcher has got to train to recognize



Fig. 2. Lesser Whitethroat

Clement Francis

calls. I always wondered at the great accuracy with which Salim Ali recorded bird calls. In my earlier days, I too had acquired considerable proficiency; unfortunately, unless continually practiced, the ability gets eroded and there is every possibility of mixing species. Apart from distinctive calls each species shows high preference for specific vegetation and even levels of the vegetation! The preceding “puzzles” all could be identified by their preferred surroundings, biologists call these “niches”; the greater the variety of niches in a given area the greater will be the variety of species found. I have, very early in life appreciated the absolute importance of maintaining great mix of crops, shrubs and trees, preferably native to the area. Today, biodegradation due to over grazing, monoculture in agriculture and forestry have to be seen as harmful to birdlife as indeed the application of inorganic manures and spraying of pesticides are. With the numbers of any given species reduced, it becomes difficult to acquire a familiarity with its niche preference (there are few niches left for choice anyway), calls and their jizz.

My friends used to marvel at the way I could identify a bird merely by its call and its movement among foliage. I regret, now I have lost the capacity merely because I have not been actively following birds. How important this ability is, is demonstrated now outside my window where two warblers regularly come to a leafless tree and make aerial sallies after aerial insects. One is smaller than the other and its sallies are more wandering and leisurely, where as the larger warbler makes direct sallies like a flycatcher. Both are individuals of the really difficult group, the Leaf Warblers, which in former times were known as Willow Warblers. I have already introduced you to one of this tribe, the Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*, but now I find that we have two distinct species of chiffchaffs to add to the confusion! Earlier the confusion was there when we tended to mix this leaf warbler with the Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata*, and the separation of the species which were treated as subspecies would explain why; the one we rolled off our tongues as *Hippolais caligata rama* during the bird banding camp in Kachchh is now *H. caligata* the Booted Warbler resembling a chiffchaff and *H. rama* the Sykes Warbler more like one of the smaller reed warblers! We now have two full species of chiffchaffs, the Common Chiffchaff *P. collybita* and the Mountain Chiffchaff *P. sindianus*! I wish best of luck to the brave younger generation with its enthusiasm and efficient digital cameras.

*To be continued...*