

—A flight down memory lane— The little brown puzzles-4

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During the very first BNHS mistnetting camp at Changalra outside Bhuj in Kachchh district and subsequently in the intensive mistnetting followed up around Hingol Gadh, apart from the Chiffchaffs *Phylloscopus collybita*, I do not recollect having captured any other member of the *Phylloscopus* tribe. Now, when I think back, the reason can be explained by the fact that as Chiffchaffs foraged in acacia, prosopis and other thorny trees and shrubs, and so came low down to get entangled in the nets, the other leaf warblers tended to remain in taller, full foliated, evergreen trees, from where at least two species made their presence known by very distinctive calls. Whether there were other species present, I just cannot affirm. Observing them among the dense leaves was difficult not only because of their hyperactive movements but also because of the continuous motion of the crowns of trees, relentlessly blown about by the strong north easterly winds that are so typical of winter in Saurashtra and Kachchh. The moment a bird was located in the binocular field, it would be swept out by the wind tossed branch or would have flitted out of sight. I remember feeling quite exasperated at times as I attempted to get a proper view. One could not, however fail to register the very characteristic flicking of the wings and tail, the frequent hovering before a cobweb-festooned bunch of leaves or the quick ariel sallies after some unseen insects. The two calls that were very distinctive were a cheerful 'Chisavik' uttered at intervals and a rather pleasant 'Chivi-chivi-chivi'. The first was that of the Greenish Leaf Warbler *P. trochiloides* and the latter that took me a while to trace down, to the Western Crowned Leaf Warbler *P. occipitalis*. I am sure there were also a couple of other species from among those that winter along the Western Ghats and in S. W. India just as *P. occipitalis* does.

It was early in my birdwatching years that I saw a couple of small birds flitting up and down boles of large mango trees. Against the light I could not make out the colours and my immediate response was that I had a pair of Chestnut-bellied Nuthatches *Sitta castanea* in front of me. Manoeuvring carefully so as not to frighten them, I positioned myself with the morning sun behind me and immediately I realised I had a species of the then called willow warblers. It was after reading through Stuart Baker's volumes that I zeroed on to them being Olivaceous Leaf-Warblers *P. griseolus*—less from the physical description than from the recorded habit of flitting up and down boles of large tree trunks, and boulders and walls of fortresses. At Hingol Gadh there is a viewing point from where you can look down to the base of the fortifications. Among the rocks there you can invariably find a couple of these little birds flitting around. Seen in the field, it is the over all smoky colour that catches the eye. The sulphur yellow belly is not clearly visible.

During my Delhi days, I do not remember being guided through the intricacies of leaf warbler identification by Horace

Alexander, the recognised expert on these birds. The reason would be that most of the outings were to some water body and the main attraction were wagtails, waders, and among the bordering plantations of *Acacia nilotica* where time was spent comparing Blyth's Reed-Warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum*, Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata* and Common Chiffchaff. The shady orchards that lined the road joining Timarpur to the Grand Trunk Road must have been full of a variety of leaf warblers, but we never went bird watching there, a pity.

In the Himalaya, including the species mentioned above there are 18 species of leaf warblers. They breed during summer from the mid altitudes right up to the meadows. They are a thoroughly confusing lot. Working out the combinations of green, olive-green or brown above, bright to suffused yellow or plain white below, a prominent light line down the middle of the crown or an uniform crown, yellow or white supercilium, two, one or no bars on the wings, along with or without a yellow rump patch is most difficult, especially, as indicated earlier, with birds that are continually on the move, often with others of their kind supplanting each other in the binoculars' field of view. To add to the difficulty is the harsh mountain light that throws shadows into deep contrast with the lighted areas and, as often as not, the tiny birds are frenetically feeding among the high conifers. I did, however get to know the Tickell's Warbler *P. affinis* well because it is a common breeding bird above tree line and across the high passes into Tibet. During my memorable 1954 trek into SW Tibet, I found several pairs very confiding, nesting in the dense juniper and caragana shrubs of the high plateau. I suspect I have seen this warbler in winter



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Fig. 1. Grey-hooded Flycatcher-Warbler at Pangot, Uttaranchal: 26th November 2007.

alongwith the other two in tall trees down in the plains. I can do no better than quote Salim Ali from his *Indian hill birds*: 'Numerous other species of willow-warblers also breed in the Himalayas and visit the plains and hills of the Indian Empire abundantly during winter. They are all tiny birds, mostly much smaller than the Sparrow, olive-green or olive-brown above, yellowish or dirty whitish below, without or with one or two bars on the wing. They flit about restlessly amongst the foliage of trees and bushes..and are never quiet for a moment..' He goes on to add, 'Many are so alike and confusing that it is difficult to tell them apart in the field. The call notes of the different species, however, and their nesting characteristics when once learnt, are sufficiently distinctive as a rule to furnish clues to their identification.'

As though causing confusion for the birdwatcher in recognising them is not enough, there is another group that shares the Himalayan landscape with them, the Flycatcher-Warblers of the genera *Seicercus* and *Abroscopus*. There are seven species all of which, though like the leaf warblers, small and active and mingling with them, are brighter in coloration. I am most familiar with the Grey-headed Flycatcher-Warbler *Seicercus xanthoschistos*. This little bird is possibly the most common among the mixed hunting parties of small birds that are so characteristic of the Himalaya; it is the one that can be most easily mistaken for one of the brighter leaf warblers, but it continually flashes its white outer tail feathers which are a great help in identification. During the 1954 summer trek in the Gharwal before I proceeded to Tibet, I had seen a little warbler, olive green above, bright yellow below with a broad yellow supercilium off setting a black mask. There was nothing like it in Salim Ali's *Hill birds* which I carried, but I had wonderful views and made quick sketches of the bird. It was several years later when Dr. Salim Ali gave me a bunch of printouts of the illustrations for his *Pictorial field guide* that I saw a bird matching my sketch! I had seen a Black-faced Flycatcher-Warbler *Abroscopus schisticeps*, considerably to the West of its recorded range!

There are two other genera of warblers that are extremely difficult to tell apart even in the hand, let alone in dense vegetation in which they skulk. These are the real "brown puzzles". They belong to the genera *Cettia* and *Bradypterus* and are collectively and very appropriately known as the Bush Warblers. There are nine species in the former and six in the latter genus!

The *Bradypterus* bush warblers, from the illustrations in field guides, are rather like reed warblers in colour, size and shape. They inhabit coarse grass and dense shrubberies in mountain country. All but one are to be looked for at high altitudes along the Himalaya, while one, the largest, is a resident of the Sri Lankan highlands. I am afraid I have not come across any of them during my treks in the Himalaya primarily because, I suspect, I have never penetrated areas that have the sort of undisturbed vegetation apparently favoured by these skulkers; even if I did see one along the wayside, I would have passed it over as one of the reed warblers. From the distributions shown in the three Field Guides (Grimmett, Kazmierczak, and Rasmussen) one gains an impression that as more and more birdwatchers trek into the mountains in formerly 'restricted' areas, the ranges will be expanded. At least, I am out of the race.

The *Cettia* bush warblers are smaller and more akin to the leaf warblers. Cetti's Bush-Warbler *Cettia cetti* is a winter visitor to the Punjab and I did not come across it in my Delhi days. Another is a winter vagrant to Assam; the remainders are shown as occurring along the Himalayan range, two extending up to Kashmir. Of these, the Brown-flanked Bush-Warbler *C. fortipes* is a resident around my house at Vashishta above Manali. This little warbler continuously utters its loud and distinctive "Cheeeee-whichikavu" and "Cheee-whichoo" throughout summer. The "Cheee" starts at a very low key growing louder to be followed by the explosive "which.." The bird itself, being nondescript and small is adept at remaining hidden among dense shrubberies and very difficult to locate. It is this little bird that brings me to the story I promised about earlier as to why careful notes should be kept of the sounds birds make.

The respected senior mountaineer Gurdial Singh and Nalni Jayal, former Secretary Environment, Forests and Wildlife, Government of India were my house guests; hearing this distinctive call through out the day Nalni asked me what bird it was because he remembered it from his mountaineering days in the Western Himalaya but had not been able to see the bird. Without hesitation I said "The Blue Chat!" Now the Blue Chat *Erithacus brunneus* (see below) is, or was a common bird above 7,000' (meters?) during summer and like the warbler it too was highly secretive and more often heard than seen. It lived in dense shrubberies in shaded and wet locations. I was familiar with the bird and its call long before I had heard the warbler; it two had a double call, a breathless "Se-se-se-se" followed by and explosive "-chivivivi". Over the decades that fruit farming became dominant in Himachal Pradesh, the formerly common Blue Chat seems to have become scarce and I have not heard its call for quite a good many years. I am ashamed to say I never really gave the absence of the very familiar sound a second thought. The matter would have rested there had not I, a couple of days after the guests had left, heard the chat calling from a cool, damp and heavily shaded bit of my orchard. Old memories came flooding back and I rejoiced that I had enhanced the ecology on my land-at the same time, with both the birds calling, I realized my mistake. Needless to say, I immediately wrote to inform of the mistaken identity, but I will never get over my faux pas. The little, nondescript warbler had given a power kick on the back side of a complaisant 'expert' and well it may, for its old English name was the Strong-footed Warbler! Oh! And incidentally, the Blue Chat is now the Indian Blue Robin *Luscinia brunnea*! [Concluded.]



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Fig. 2. Brownish-flanked Bush-Warbler at Gunapani (2,591 m) in Kullu district, Himachal Pradesh.