

## Letters to the Editor

### Birds of Nainital District

I was shocked to read the article, "Birds of three different forest habitat in Nainital district (Western Himalaya), Uttarakhand, India," by Kamal Joshi & Dinesh Bhatt, in *Indian Birds* 7 (2): 33–37. This paper contains erroneous and misleading information about species that have no possibility of occurring in the area. The Common Golden-backed Woodpecker *Dinopium javanense*, resident in hills of south-western and north-eastern India has been included as a summer visitor in the list of birds recorded in this paper. Similarly the Bar-bellied Cuckooshrike *Coracina striata* that is resident in Andamans has been recorded as a winter visitor. Some time back, Yellow-cheeked Tit *Parus xanthogenys* was split into two species namely Black-lored Tit *Parus xanthogenys* and Yellow-cheeked Tit *Parus spilonotus*. Whereas a subspecies of the former, *P. x. xanthogenys* occurs in the area and is recorded by the authors, the latter species occurring in the eastern Himalayas and the north-eastern Indian hills has also been recorded. Black-throated Prinia *Prinia atrogularis*, a species found in the eastern Himalayas and north-eastern Indian hills also figures on the list of species recorded in the study.

District Nainital is blessed with amazing bird diversity and there would probably be more than 550 species that have been recorded from this area. In a span of two years, by recording just 160 species, the authors have not justified the funds raised for their project from the UGC-SAP grant. Besides these, there are other technical problems with the paper. The status of many species is given incorrectly. Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix*, a winter visitor to the area is shown as resident. Eastern Skylark *Alauda gulgula*, a resident, is shown as winter visitor. Eurasian Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*, a winter visitor is recorded to be resident. Long-tailed Minivet *Pericrocotus ethologus* is altitudinal migrant in the district of Nainital. It occurs in the foothills during winters & goes to higher elevations to breed in summers. The status of this species is given as winter visitor. Bulbuls are known to feed on a wide variety of foods, including fruit, seeds, nectar, small insects and other arthropods and even small vertebrates. The status of four species of bulbuls recorded in the study is given as 'frugivore.' I am amused to learn that all the Corvids on the list are classified as 'frugivore' except, for some unknown reason, the Black-headed Jay *Garrulus lanceolatus* and Jungle Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos* that are mentioned as 'omnivore'. Blue-headed Rock-thrush *Monticola cinclorhynchus* breeds in the area during summers. In winters it migrates to the Western Ghats. But it is treated as a winter visitor to the area by the authors. Oriental Magpie Robin *Copsychus saularis* is a resident of district Nainital but is shown as a summer visitor. Here I have just given a few examples, whereas the list of species with wrong status is long. The authors have used Grimmett *et al.* (1998), a modern-day field-guide showing status & distribution, yet they have erred in many places.

What surprises me even more is that how could the authors, in a span of two long years, miss out some of the most common species of the area. I would like to name a few such species here. Hill Partridge *Arborophila torqueola* can commonly be heard in areas in the immediate vicinity of Nainital town. Red-breasted Parakeet *Psittacula alexandri* is a common resident

of lower foothills around Haldwani. Common Hawk Cuckoo *Hierococcyx varius* is one of the most vocal birds in areas around Haldwani from March to September. Common birds like Indian Grey Hornbill *Ocyroceros birostris* (common around Haldwani), Common Hoopoe *Upupa epops* (breeding resident), Indian Roller *Coracias benghalensis* (common at lower elevations), White-browed Wagtail *Motacilla maderaspatensis* (common breeding resident), and House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* (common at lower elevations) do not figure in the bird list at all.

The authors failed to find a single species of kingfisher during their two-year study whereas species like Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* can be seen foraging on the shores of Naini Lake in the middle of Nainital town. Other common species of kingfishers found on River Gola flowing next to bustling twin cities of Kathgodam and Haldwani are White-throated Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis*, Crested Kingfisher *Megaceryle lugubris* and Pied Kingfisher *Ceryle rudis*. Similarly none of the bee-eaters, swifts, owls, nightjars, rails & crakes, snipes, waders, gulls, terns, grebes, cormorants, egrets, herons, storks, pittas, leafbirds, shrikes, dippers, martins & swallows, tesias, wren-babblers, leiothrixes, shrike-babblers, accentors, munias, finches and buntings have been recorded during the study. The authors can claim that since the study was focused on species dependent upon forests, certain groups of birds like egrets and cormorants could afford to evade their attention. Here I would like to point out that in habitats like Haldwani, these birds can easily be seen on open rivers like Gola that are bordered on both sides with thick forest. However, I am surprised at entries like Lesser Coucal *Centropus bengalensis*, Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis* and Eastern Skylark *Alauda gulgula* that are not found in forest habitats but are grassland species.

*Indian BIRDS* is a journal of international repute. Lot of hard work, on part of the editorial team and various authors, has gone in to attaining this reputation. Publication of loose material is detrimental to the repute of the journal. It seems that the authors had taken upon themselves, a task they were not capable of carrying out. This paper is like a virus in the Indian ornithological literature. Now that it is published, it remains as a blot on Indian Ornithological literature, and extremely difficult to rectify. I urge you to be more vigilant in the future, and request you to kindly look into how such major lapses were allowed to be published.

– Manoj Sharma

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### Response of authors

With reference to the letter written by Mr Manoj Sharma regarding the article 'Birds of three different forest habitats in Nainital district (Western Himalaya), Uttarakhand,' [*Indian BIRDS* 7 (2): 33–37] I would like to submit the following:

Previous reports from this region indicated either 127 [Tak, P. C., 1995. *Aves. In: Himalayan ecosystem series fauna of western Himalaya, Uttar Pradesh. Part I* (Ed. Director) Zoological Survey of India, Calcutta, pp. 169–200], or 81 avian species [Sultana, A.,

& Khan, A. J., 2000. Birds of oak forest in the Kumaun Himalaya, Uttar Pradesh, India. *Forktail* 16: 131–146], and not 550 species as mentioned by Mr Sharma. Rather, a total of 623 species have been recorded from the entire Uttarakhand (Narwade, S. S., Jathar, G. A., & Rahmani, A. R., 2006. Bibliography of the birds of north India. *Buceros* 11 (1): 2 pp., 1–144. (Pp. 120–122).

I would appreciate if Mr Sharma brings out a list of 550 bird species from Nainital district in the form of scientific publication. In the first instance, on the Internet, I could not come across any such avian list/report published by any author from this region.

Based on my sightings I understand that some populations of Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix*, Eastern Skylark *Alauda gulgula*, and Eurasian Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis* may be resident or winter visitors in this region.

The main feeding guild of bulbuls is frugivore [sub feeding guild- frugivore-insectivore, please see Table 5 (p. 36) of the article].

Other species such as Common Hawk Cuckoo *Hierococcyx varius*, Indian Grey Hornbill *Ocyrceros birostris*, Common Hoopoe *Upupa epops*, Indian Roller *Coracias benghalensis*, White-browed Wagtail *Motacilla maderaspatensis*, House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*, kingfishers, waders, gulls, terns, grebes, cormorants, storks, etc. are generally found in urban/rural areas

or riverine habitats and hence were not included in the list of the forest bird species (as this study focused on the forest birds).

Lesser Coucal *Centropus bengalensis*, Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis*, and Eastern Skylark *Alauda gulgula* were sighted at the edges of the forest habitat and hence included in the forest bird list.

I deeply regret the wrong identification, in case of Common Golden-backed Woodpecker *Dinopium javanense*, Bar-bellied Cuckooshrike *Coracina striata*, and Black-throated Prinia *Prinia atrogularis*, and typographical errors (at my end) regarding inclusion of some species of corvids under frugivore category, and for wrongly showing Blue-headed Rock Thrush as winter visitor and Magpie Robin as summer visitor.

I am grateful to Mr Sharma for reading my article carefully and pinpointing the problems of the paper. I apologise for these mistakes (inadvertently) committed by me. I apologise to my co-author for submitting the manuscript directly to *Indian BIRDS* (IB), and responding to comments from reviewers also without consulting him.

– Kamal Joshi

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