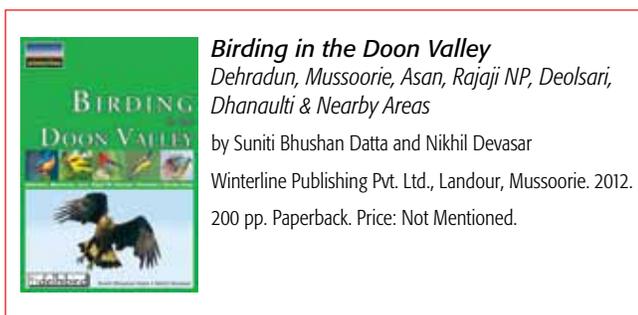


Reviews

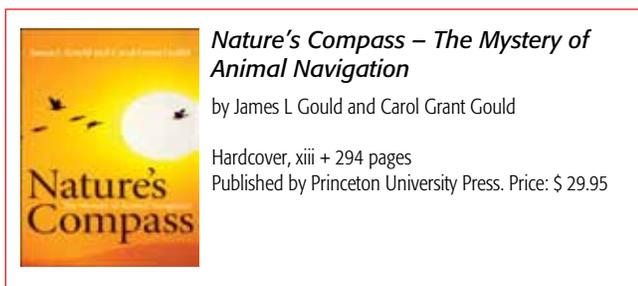


Birding in the Doon Valley
Dehradun, Mussoorie, Asan, Rajaji NP, Deolsari, Dhanaulti & Nearby Areas
 by Suniti Bhushan Datta and Nikhil Devasar
 Winterline Publishing Pvt. Ltd., Landour, Mussoorie. 2012.
 200 pp. Paperback. Price: Not Mentioned.

A close friend, planning a trip up north to the Doon Valley asked me for some tips on planning a trip that would enable him to do some birding with his family just a couple of weeks ago. Having visited the Doon Valley and surroundings thrice, I was able to give him a rough idea of the terrain and suggested a few well-known birding spots. As a strange coincidence, I received this book for review the following week!

This is just the book one wishes to have to guide you while travelling to a new area. Covering 17 localities (Birding Hotspots) in and around Dehradun, it provides detailed maps of the localities covered, with write-ups, giving useful and practical tips to birders, listing important species likely to be encountered and other useful details like places to eat and stay. The text is written in a warm, friendly style with a sprinkling of humour, making it eminently readable. What is more interesting is that this section has nuggets of history of the areas covered that makes one look out for things other than merely birds. There are also additional information in boxes describing experiences concerning natural history as well as historical facts. Habitat and bird photographs complement the written material.

The next section which forms half of the book consists of accounts of 200 selected species, each illustrated with a colour



Nature's Compass – The Mystery of Animal Navigation
 by James L Gould and Carol Grant Gould
 Hardcover, xiii + 294 pages
 Published by Princeton University Press. Price: \$ 29.95

Contents: Preface (pp: ix-xii), Acknowledgements (pp: xiii), Navigating – Problems and Strategies (pp: 1-17), When and Where (pp: 19-33), A Matter of Time (pp: 35-68), Insect Compasses (pp: 69-116), Vertebrate Compasses (pp: 117-154), Piloting and Inertial Navigation (pp: 155-184), The Map Sense (pp:185-225), Migration and the Future: Conservation and Extinction (pp: 227-243), Bibliography (pp:245-280), Illustration Credits (pp: 281-288), Index (pp: 289-294).

If a particular phenomenon in the world of birds can be termed as singular, then it has to be migration. Decades of research have ensued in unravelling facets of bird migration on how different species undertake long and hazardous journeys

(mostly by the second author, an accomplished photographer). The photographs are well chosen and provide adequate details that help identification. The collection includes some rare and difficult-to-see species. The 3-4 line accompanying text discusses the size, essential identification features of the species, along with some information on its ecology and behaviour. Information on the status and localities where the species is likely to be seen are also given.

There is also an annotated list of 504 species of birds known from the region that gives status and season codes and with cross-references to three well-known bird books: Kazmierczak, Ali & Ripley's Handbook and Grimmett and Inskipp's fieldguide (2011 edition). Besides, there is a glossary of terms, a guide to binoculars, lists of popular bird guides, useful addresses and a list of recommended hotels and lodges, organised area-wise. A brief Introduction to the region and a couple of indices of the scientific and common names of birds complete the contents of this book.

It is really encouraging to find a spurt in new publications on birds in India, especially of regional interest. This will undoubtedly give a new impetus to birding activities in bird-rich regions of the country by attracting attention of birding enthusiasts - local as well as outsiders. This will hopefully result in more information generation on birds of the region and also help in their conservation by raising awareness. It is books like these that can help create more awareness among the younger generation which seems to be moving away from nature. However, publications such as this should also be brought out keeping in mind the affordability factor so that they can be accessed by all sections of the society.

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with precision; year after year, generation after generation. A birder would naturally find a book on animal navigation quite engaging. In a set of eight illuminating chapters, the author-couple offers latest understandings on animal migration with amazing zest and equally sound scientific rigour.

The book describes simplistic navigation methodology like movement towards (or away from) a cue (known as 'taxis') and keeping track of individual legs of the route to compute location (known as 'dead reckoning') compared to navigation with a GPS and a map. However, authors caution that the 'magical nature of animal navigation' and their sense of direction as perceived by us is largely due to human tendency to anthropomorphise; 'imagining that animals see challenges the same way as we do and use same strategies to solve problems they encounter'. This is not necessarily true as one discovers in the chapters.

Animals, like humans, can also use celestial cues like the Sun and stars for navigation. There is a non-trivial issue which is frequently overlooked however; there is hardly anything up in the heavens above that is static and does not move with time. Animals need to know the precise time to use the cues. For this reason, it is pertinent to understand the clock and calendar sense of animals before hypothesising a celestial navigation methodology and the authors walk us through some of the path-

breaking experiments in this topic.

If pigeons have been the most popular model for avian navigation studies, honey bees fill this role in the insect world. This has been largely due to their 'dance language', 'the second most information-rich exchange in the animal world' after human language. When a bee discovers a rich food source, they perform a waggle dance when back in the hive drawing a compressed figure eight pattern. The direction of waggling encodes the direction of the food relative to the sun's azimuth. This remarkable discovery paved way for further studies on how bees program direction and location based on the Sun, polarised light, magnetic fields, celestial and terrestrial cues and how they are used in combination or backup. Similar experiments with different kinds of challenges were executed on homing pigeons to understand vertebrate navigation. Experiments also focus on experienced individuals vs. novices, juveniles vs. adults. Some of these are of particular interest for birders as juveniles tend to get disoriented and appear as stragglers way outside their regular range. The chapters Insect Compasses and Vertebrate Compasses form the crux of the book and provide a strong footing for the reader to understand more advanced research challenges.

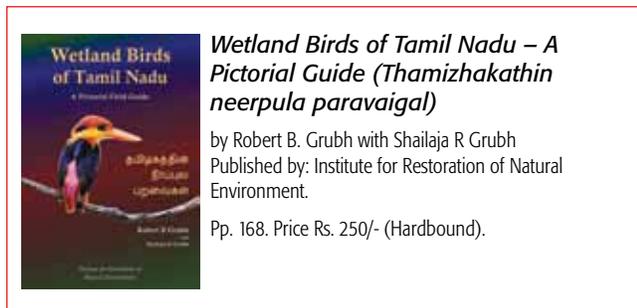
True map sense is the most ideal navigation strategy. However, research is still nascent in elucidating how exactly it works in animals. Estimating longitude is far more complex than latitude. Are birds determining longitude based on time? Could this be a magnetic map? Is an olfactory map just a fanciful thought? Do birds really need a global map for navigation like

humans? Complex questions in this domain are discussed in a dedicated chapter on map sense.

Understanding birds' migration strategies provides us with an in-depth knowledge on their survival strategies. In a rapidly changing world, with habitats under siege and global climate undergoing unprecedented changes – this knowledge is essential for devising beneficial conservation strategies. An expensive system such as migration has evolved because their benefits outweigh costs. But as climate gets warmer and ocean levels rise, this equation is under scrutiny. Can certain species afford to stop migrating? Do they have to change course and/or timing of migration? At a juncture where we are evaluating priorities in conservation, this knowledge can go a long way in framing scientifically sound strategies.

This is a popular science book presenting complicated phenomena and explanations in a lucid and comprehensible way. At the same time, it is an essential volume for a student of natural history on identifying problems in nature, designing experiments around them and interpreting their results. There are innumerable designs interspersed in this book which can aid a keen student. The thirty-five page bibliography should be an ideal vehicle to pursue further and contribute to the ever-growing knowledge of animal navigation.

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Contents: Foreword by P. Kannan; About this book; Some tips for birdwatchers; Wetlands and wetland birds; Species description; Appendices; Bibliography and Index.

This is a compact, handy and colourful bilingual guide (in English and Tamil) to the wetland birds found in the state of Tamil Nadu.

According to the authors, the objective of this publication is to, "assist birdwatchers in recognizing most of the birds inhabiting the wetlands of Tamil Nadu and Puducherry," (p. 11). The book covers 149 species and includes 213 photographs.

The text is brief, covering English, Tamil, and scientific names, size in relation to standard species, identification aspects, brief notes on status and distribution (not uniformly for all species), occasional notes on behaviour, and migration. Colour photographs, arranged in plates, illustrate all species described.

Some of the useful features of this book include: flight photos and close-ups of unique features of some species, pointers to critical identification features (found in Peterson field guides), a couple of tables discussing the distinction between similar species and description of subspecies of yellow wagtails.

There is no explanation given to justify the choice of species featured in the book but most of the commonly seen birds in the state are included. However a few rare species find place here

and a few other species one would expect to find a place in the book are missing. Examples of the former include Great White Pelican, Black-necked Stork, Mallard and Indian Skimmer. The latter includes some storks (Black and Lesser Adjutant), Fulvous whistling Duck (a species that has recently occurred and found breeding in the outskirts of Chennai), raptors like Fish eagles, Spotted eagles and the Peregrine, terns (White-winged black, black-bellied and Sandwich). Though not strictly classified as waterbirds, species found in wetland habitats such as Blue-tailed bee-eaters, Indian Courser, weaverbirds, prinias and warblers too could have been included in this volume. Perhaps the author could have provided a complete list of wetland birds occurring in the state for the benefit of the birdwatchers.

The author has followed the old names in English (used by "Salim Ali and earlier ornithologists"). However he has, where essential, included some of the "exotic names introduced recently by some authors" to reduce confusion. In the case of Tamil names too, the author has avoided misleading names in circulation and resorted to transliteration of English names to avoid ambiguity. However some of the transliterated names used here appear awkward (e.g., Gull-billed tern). I think it is time someone takes the initiative to coin Tamil names when there is no existing name or where there is confusion in the existing names.

The textual details for individual species vary a great deal. A close scrutiny indicates that in some cases the data on identification is inadequate – examples include Yellow vs. Chestnut bitterns, White-eyed Pochard, Great vs. Red knots, Sandpipers (Common, Spotted and Green), and Sandpipers. In the case of the Grey plover, for instance, there is no mention of the presence of the "black armpit" so clearly noticeable in flight. At the same time, some species are described in great detail with supporting photographs and, in some cases, tables (eg. Little vs. Saunders Tern, Heuglin's vs. Great Black-headed Gulls and Yellow wagtail subspecies). Similarly, one would have expected more

uniform treatment when giving details of distribution, ecology and status of birds. In some cases these details are absent or sketchy. No details of habitat and localities of earlier sightings are given for Spoonbilled sandpiper, a rare species in the state. From the details given in some cases, it appears the author is not familiar with the latest status and distribution of all the species dealt with in this book. For instance, it is stated that the first sight record for the Indian Skimmer for south India is by Balachandran (2010) from Manakudy estuary, whereas there have been earlier records (Vikas Madhav and Nagarajan - *Birding Asia*, 13 (2010): 98). Similarly the status of Avocets is slightly outdated. The statement that bronzewing jacana is the commoner of the two species may not be true for the entire state as it is almost absent in the vicinity of Chennai and northern Tamil Nadu. It would have been most appropriate for a book like this to summarize these details and make it available to the birdwatchers of the state.

Tighter editing of the text would have enhanced the value of the book. (eg: pg: 85 - "male alone *hatches* the eggs"; pg: 134 - "House (sic) Swallow is a winter visitor"; pg: 96 - "spotted sandpiper is *imperfectly* but distinctly spotted"; pg: 75 - "These kite-like birds of prey (Marsh and Pied harriers) can be recognized by their steady *flapping flight* low over the water surface..."; pg: 52 - "the adults have a large patch of *red wattles* on the head" (all the emphasis are mine). There are also

some misleading statements concerning the size of certain bird species: Whitebellied sea eagle ("*about four times larger than Brahminy kite*"), Greater and lesser flamingo, jack snipe etc.

It would have been nice to provide the actual sizes of each species and also short accounts that describe the features and ecology of each bird group. Also a glossary dealing with technical terms and a map showing the bird topography would have added value to this publication.

The map showing the important bird-attracting wetlands of Tamil Nadu and Puducherry does not indicate the actual locations of these wetlands. Besides, I find a few important wetlands have been left out in this list such as the Kaliveli wetlands near Puducherry and some other proposed Ramsar Sites (Islam and Rahmani, 2008).

These criticisms apart, the book has been well brought out and is bound to be a valuable field guide for birdwatchers in the field. Some of the photographs are of high quality and the compilation has been painstakingly done. The bilingual text makes it more accessible to the non-English speaking naturalists and would give the birdwatching movement in the state a big boost.

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Letter to the Editor

White-naped Tit *Parus nuchalis* feeding on bagworm (Lepidoptera: Psychidae)

We visited Banni Naliya and Phot Mahadev area in the Greater Rann of Kachchh from 28 October to 1 November 2008, and spotted White-naped Tit *Parus nuchalis* twice. The first sighting was of four birds, one of which had got hold of a bagworm (Lepidoptera: Psychidae), and was trying to detach it from the branch it was stuck to, or get through its thorny shield. We observed one of the birds approaching the one with the bagworm, and interact with it in various ways; the other two did not participate in these interactions. The bird with the bagworm flew into a

thick bush, followed by the other. We could not continue our observations after this, as the birds were invisible to us.

On the second occasion, at the same place, we saw four birds; one of them had got hold of a bagworm, and again it took it into a thick bush. This time we could see the actions of the bird. It grabbed one of the thorns shielding the worm and started pulling it off the bagworm. While it was doing this, another bird approached it, and started begging for food, like most young birds do. The two birds disappeared deeper into the thick bush, and we could not complete the observation.

Later Mr Jugal Tiwari opined that this record could add the bagworm to the dietary of White-naped Tit, as it clearly showed the bird's ability to handle this prey. Usually, White-naped Tits feeds on small insects on the leaves, and under the bark of a tree, and some small fruits; but more such observations will confirm the presence of bagworm in its dietary.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Jugal Tiwari of CEDO for guiding, and helping us to explore the area, Lakshmanbhai our driver-cum-guide, and Rakeshbhai, and Samir Dixit our friends and birdwatchers, for their company.

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