

Infanticide (egg destruction) by male House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* and Great Tit *Parus major* feeding on the same egg

Sachin Anpat & Girish Jathar

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Sachin Anpat & Girish Jathar: Watershed Organization Trust, 2nd floor, The Forum, Padmavati Corner, Pune-Satara Road, Pune 411009, Maharashtra, India.

Corresponding Author: girishjathar@gmail.com

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On 13 October 2011 we visited Borban village to initiate a 'Peoples Biodiversity Register' programme. Borban is situated on the banks of River Mula (19°20'28"N, 74°09'19"E; 635 m asl), in Ahmednagar district, Maharashtra. In the village we recorded 20 species of birds, and ten of butterflies. House Sparrows *Passer domesticus* appeared abundant. Being a typical rural village most of the houses in it have tiled rooftops, with ample space for the sparrows to nest. House Sparrows were also found nesting in open wells, and dilapidated and abandoned houses.

Our attention was drawn to a community well in which we observed a large number of sparrows. This well had four active nests on its inner wall. At 1130 hrs we observed a male House Sparrow perched near a nest, calling continuously [47]. After ten minutes he went inside the nest and came out with an intact egg in his beak. He flew with it to the parapet of well and placed the egg on it. It seemed that he got distracted by our presence and kept silent for some time. Later he returned to the egg and pecked it till its contents came out [48]. Interestingly, at the same moment a Great Tit *Parus major* rushed to the spot. The sparrow hopped away to the other side of the well. The Great Tit pecked the egg, and consumed some of its contents. However, due to our presence it flew away with some egg in its beak. The sparrow did not react to the Great Tit. It flew to the nest and was in it for almost ten minutes, after which it came out and flew away.

We watched the nest for two hours but could not see any activity. The next day we observed a House Sparrow pair at the nest but could not follow this up due to lack of time. Behaviour

of both the species was photographed and videotaped. During a literature survey about this behavior we came across some interesting information.

This incident indicates two possible scenarios with regard to the male sparrow's behaviour. First: an intruder male could have destroyed the egg of a widowed female or after he had chased off the original male. Second: an intruder pair of sparrows might have chased off the owners of the nest and destroyed their eggs.

However, we could rule out the second scenario since the hen was not present or involved in the act, which was a purely male sparrow behavior. Patil & Jathar (2008) report infanticide by a female House Sparrow, where the male was inactive. On this premise we assume that the first scenario was appropriate to the situation. Several studies (Hrdy 1979; Sherman 1981; Packer & Pusey 1983; Hausfater & Hrdy 1984; van Schaik 2000) suggest, and Veiga (2004) proclaims, "The killing of unrelated young has been typically considered a male behavior because it represents a sexual strategy." In addition to this, most of the reported cases of infanticide (Crook & Shields 1985; Møller 1988) support the first scenario where an intruder male is involved in the infanticide.

The second incident of egg being eaten by Great Tit appears a purely opportunistic behaviour on part of the tit. House Wrens *Troglodytes aedon* were observed feeding on clutches of the other birds to consume contents of broken eggs (Pribal & Picman 1991).

Interspecific and intraspecific interaction among birds is a very interesting subject. However, it needs a long-term study to understand behavioural patterns and their ecological significance to a species.



47. Male House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* at nest hole inside well.



48. Male House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* distracted by authors' presence.

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In memoriam: S. M. Osman (1925–2013)



Undated photo of S. M. Osman. Photo courtesy: Raghvendra Singh.

Sirdar Mohamed Osman passed away in Dehra Dun at the age of 87 on 12 January 2013. A keen naturalist, his life was spent studying the Himalayan foothills of the Doon Valley, and in pursuing his passion for falconry, a legacy that was passed down to him through generations of his family, for whom it was a royal sport. Osman was a descendant of the erstwhile emperor of Afghanistan, Amir Dost Mohamed Khan. Exiled by the British, his family came to live in Dehra Dun where Osman grew up, studying at St. Joseph's Academy. Though he went to Afghanistan for a few years in the interim, he came back in 1953 to Dehra Dun, where he later worked as a geophysicist at the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Limited.

In Dehra Dun, Osman and his father kept up with falconry. With their birds on their fists and their dogs beside them, they were a recognised part of the life and landscape of Dehra Dun, and a source of great curiosity to generations of children of the many schools that dotted the then green and quiet neighbourhood of their home at Dalanwala.

In many ways, his life was marked by overwhelming changes. He saw the changing and passing away of many things, both in his personal life as well as in the social and natural environment around him. But the one constant that accompanied him all along was his love for the “monarchs of the air,” as he referred to raptors, and the art of falconry. He had a great love for nature and his deep study of raptors and knowledge of falconry was tremendous.

His love for falconry was underlined by his first and abiding love, that of the birds themselves, and his awe of them and the splendours of nature. He would remember with great affection

the different species he observed closely in the wild and birds he trained with over the years—from Eurasian Sparrowhawks *Accipiter nisus*, Northern Goshawks *A. gentilis*, to Merlins *Falco columbarius*, and Peregrine Falcons *F. peregrinus*; Changeable Hawk-Eagles *Nisaetus/Spizaetus cirrhatus*, vociferous birds yet which would flit past noiselessly as “shadowy ghosts” of the forest, Bonelli's Eagles *Hieraetus fasciatus*, a majestic Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* named “Monarch,” “Kohistani,” a beautiful Mountain Hawk-Eagle *Nisaetus nipalensis* he encountered in the hills near Mussoorie, and “Kali Rani,” a ‘shaheen’ Peregrine Falcon he had for several years.

He had an intimate knowledge not only of the birds he kept but also of birds as they were in their natural environment. He often described with deep feeling, the Doon Valley, its rich wildlife and its many rivers, forests, and grasslands where he spent thousands of hours quietly observing and marvelling at birds of prey on the wing and at rest, hunting, feeding, courting, and nesting. He recorded in detail, aspects of their behaviour, moulting, plumage, hunting habits, and the styles and speeds of different species in the wild and in captivity.

He would explain in minute detail how to differentiate one species from another, point out what was special in its behaviour in the wild and elucidate its form and function. For those who had a chance to observe the birds he trained with, it was a great opportunity - especially in those days, before the advent of the digital and super-magnification age, to see at close quarters what the ‘tomial tooth’ or notched beak of a falcon was, compare ‘moustachial’ stripes of a falcon to the heavy ‘eyebrow’/supraorbital ridge of an eagle, witness the astounding accuracy and velocity of the stoop of a Peregrine or just observe the varied plumages and patterns of different birds.

In the minds of the people of Dehra Dun, he was firmly associated with birds and would often be sent an SOS by friends and local residents to help rescue a buzzard, a Black Kite or an owl, and at times even a Peregrine Falcon that had been shot at or had fallen injured.

After the death of his father and the decree of wildlife laws and regulations, he gave up falconry while he recognised both, the role that knowledge of falconry played in the understanding of raptor biology and conservation, and its possible perils. Falconry was last year recognised by UNESCO as an ‘intangible cultural heritage.’

He may have given up keeping falcons, but Osman continued to write about them. He was inspired to write down his experiences after meeting Sálím Ali in 1965; Ali himself had lived in Dehra Dun for several years in the 1930s. He wrote many articles for the *Journal of the Bombay Natural History*