

Letters to the Editor

Sighting of a Lesser Adjutant *Leptoptilos javanicus* from Solapur, Maharashtra

During a visit to the marshes near Degaon village (17.67°N, 75.85°E), Mangalwedha Road, Solapur, on 09 January 2015, we spotted a Lesser Adjutant *Leptoptilos javanicus* [159]. It was again seen on 16, 23, and 26 January, and 18 and 27 February 2015. It was foraging in a marsh covered with tall grass *Typha latifolia* that is managed as food for livestock by the local people.



The Lesser Adjutant is a 'Vulnerable' species (BirdLife International 2015) with a few records from Maharashtra (Rahmani *et al.* 2014). It was recorded at Ujani Dam in Pune (Prasad 2004), Sanjay Gandhi National Park, Mumbai (Andheria 2003), and there exists an old record, from further east, in Vidharbha (D'Abreu 1923). Although the Lesser Adjutant was recorded by Gaikwad *et al.* (1997), there are no other published reports on this species till date from south-western Maharashtra; hence this note.

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Observation of sunning by Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* in Blackbuck National Park, Velavadar, Gujarat

Sunning, the act of spreading out in full sunshine to expose plumage to direct sunlight, is a widespread phenomenon among birds (Simmons 1986). It is particularly prevalent in species that lack water repellent plumage (Rijke 1968). There is little information in the literature regarding sunning by harriers; just one published record of sunning in Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* from Senegal, on its African wintering ground (Villers *et al.* 2014). Here we report an observation of sunbathing in Montagu's Harrier at Blackbuck National Park in Gujarat.

On 12 October 2014, at 1134 hrs, while returning from Blackbuck National Park (22.05°N, 72.05°E), we observed an adult female Montagu's Harrier sitting on the cemented base of an electric pole. It was at a distance of about 15–18 m from the roadside. After spending few seconds sitting there it moved down and stood on the ground nearby. Thereafter it settled on the ground, fully spreading its wings on ground surface, and lifting its fanned tail vertically to an 80°–90° angle to its body [160]. In this position, its back and the fanned tail were directly exposed to the sun. Except for turning its head sideways, it did not show any other movement during this sunning activity. The bird seemed quite alert, and kept an eye on the surroundings. After few seconds the vertical tail was dropped, but the wings remained spread out. This typical sunning posture was held for nearly two minutes. Following this, it stood up, and preened—both under wings, under its tail, and belly—for about one minute. The bird then flew up and sat on the cemented base of the electric pole in the same pose as earlier, with its right side directly exposed to sunlight. A few seconds later, it changed position, so that its back and tail were exposed to the sun. During this entire observation the bird called intermittently. After this it flew to perch on the top of electric pole, and finally flew away. Since then, we have visited this park many times, but have not observed sunning in any harrier species roosting here.



160. Montagu's Harrier sunning.

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A Western Reef Egret *Egretta gularis* record from Jalore District, Rajasthan

This is with reference to the report of a Western Reef Egret *Egretta gularis* from Sirohi District, Rajasthan (Sharma *et al.* 2015). We would like to report another instance of the occurrence of this species from the state.

During our CAIRN Project's biodiversity survey on 03 February 2014, at 1050 hrs, we were observing and counting birds around a waterbody at *Sayar ka kaseta* (24.95°N, 71.35°E; 35 m asl) near Sanchole in Jalore District, Rajasthan, India. While taking a head count of the birds, the first author saw a dark grey coloured egret, which we photographed [161]. It was the size of a Little Egret *E. garzetta*, its overall body colour was slate gray, with a prominent white chin and throat, the white area extending back to its mid-neck, and to five centimeters below the base of its bill; lemon-yellow eyes, blackish upper mandible, yellowish lower mandible dark grayish, somewhat lighter (whitish) on belly, bluish gray wings with a brownish cast, black legs, and yellow feet. On the basis of these characters, and after consulting field guides (Kazmierczak 2000; Grimmett *et al.* 2011), we identified the bird as a Western Reef Egret.

Photo: A. K. Chhangani



161. Western Reef Egret *Egretta gularis*.

The Narmada Canal, which now passes through parts of Jalore District, has created some wetlands in the low-lying areas that are suitable for birds, and we may expect reports of more species of waterbirds including Western Reef Heron from here in future.

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Purple Sunbird *Nectarinia asiatica* feeding on sugary syrup exuding from 'jalebis'

While on an official visit to Piploo (26.03°N, 75.72°E), Tonk District, Rajasthan, on 01 April 2013 I noticed some birds feeding on 'jalebis' (a deep fried sweet made from 'maida' flour and then soaked in sugar syrup) outside a sweetmeat shop in the crowded main bazaar. Initially, due to the distance, I expected the birds to be House Sparrows *Passer domesticus*, being a commensal, and common in small towns. However, when I walked closer to the shop I was surprised to see four adult Purple Sunbirds *Nectarinia asiatica*. They were nonchalantly sucking the sugary syrup exuding from *jalebis* while perched on the pile of the sweetmeat. The birds did not seem to be troubled by the presence of the shopkeeper, nor his one or two customers, nor was the shopkeeper unduly concerned with the petty thievery under his nose! I watched the birds for a couple of minutes before they flew away.

Nectar is the most important product in the diet of sunbirds, being recorded for 93 species, with a further 21 species suspected of nectarivory (del Hoyo *et al.* 2008). Purple Sunbirds feed on the nectar of loranthus, and many other flowers, being especially fond of the fleshy blossoms of mhowa *Madhuca indica*, and sugary exudation from *Borassus* palms tapped for toddy (Ali & Ripley 1999). In the Punjab (Pakistan) they are very fond of the nectar of akh *Calotropis procera* but there they are probably more insectivorous and less dependent upon nectar than members of the Nectarinidae (Roberts 1992). The species is also known to feed on grapes, which it damages by piercing and sucking out juice in orchards around Hyderabad (India), where it is considered a pest (Kumar *et al.* 1981, 1984; Cheke & Mann 2001). In Bihar, the stomachs (gizzards) of 14 birds were examined from February to March, and besides traces of nectar (very rapidly digested), a number of small geometrid caterpillars, small spiders, small flies, Jassids, the caterpillar of a Heterocera, one Pentatomid bug, and one weevil (*Myloccerus* sp.) were found (Mason & Maxwell-Lefroy 1912).

However, in the available literature I was not able to find any information on the above foraging behaviour.

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A strange display by Vernal Hanging-parrots *Loriculus vernalis*

While on a bird survey at the Biligiriranga Temple Sanctuary (now also a Tiger Reserve) located in the Chamrajnagar District of Karnataka, I was put up at the old forest bungalow at Burude, of 1940 vintage. The delightful bungalow is located within a moist-deciduous forest. Just at the periphery of the bungalow, outside an elephant trench, on all sides is a row of quite tall and mature *Eucalyptus* sp. trees. At the time of our visit, between 30 November and 03 December 2012, these trees were in bloom and had a constant flow of visitors, mostly Gold-fronted Leafbird *Chloropsis aurifrons* and Vernal Hanging-parrots *Loriculus vernalis*, especially in the morning hours.

Before sunrise, around 0615 hrs, I noticed some strange display behaviour of the Hanging-parrots on 01 and 02 December. This dawn ritual consisted of 50–60 birds bunching up in a tight flock, and perching on the topmost branch of the tallest tree, all of them facing eastwards. A few birds were even seen hanging upside down by one leg as though roosting. At some point, without warning, the birds suddenly burst out of the tree, scattering in all directions synchronously, and thereafter came together as a tight mass, flying and weaving about the canopy in an undulating fashion. As the flock circled about and moved closer to the tree from where they took off, a few birds would settle down on its branches while the rest would continue to circle and fly around. The birds were rather quiet during the flight, and when settled on the trees. This went on till about 0645 hrs, by which time the sun was up, lighting the top-most branches. Once this happened, the birds would scatter, and begin feeding on nectar from the flowers on the trees.

Strangely, on the morning of 03 January, which happened to be cloudy, though the parrots were about, no bunching up or display flight was seen. Was it because the sun was not out that the birds did not perform their ritual?

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Common lora *Aegithina tiphia* preying on a bush frog

The Common lora *Aegithina tiphia* is bird of gardens and orchards and is distributed across most of the Indian Subcontinent, except in its north-west (Grimmett *et al.* 2011). It is usually seen on the

outskirts of villages, cultivated lands, and the edges of forests and scrub-jungle. It is described as an insectivorous bird, usually feeding on insects, their eggs, and larvae (Ali & Ripley 1996; Ali 2002)—the prey items range up to the size of large mantids—including spiders (Araneae), ants (Hymenoptera), beetles (Coleoptera), caterpillars, and occasional adult lepidopterans (Wells 2005).

On the morning of 09 November 2012, at approximately 0800 hrs, I was photographing birds in the suburbs of Gudalur town (11.51°N, 76.50°E) when I spotted a female Common lora foraging amidst garden plants. The bird was hopping from branch to branch among the bushes and trees and I watched it catch and eat several caterpillars from a hibiscus plant. It was constantly hopping around the branches, disappearing within the foliage, and appearing back into sight, often with a prey item in its beak. On one such occasion, it resurfaced from amongst the leaves of a mango tree *Mangifera indica* with a frog in its beak [162]. The frog appeared to be a *Raorchestes* sp. (Gururaja K. V., verbally), was approximately 38 mm long, and appeared a rather large prey item for the bird. It appeared to be lifeless as the bird placed it upon the branch of the tree. The lora proceeded to thrash it against the branch, and kept tossing it in its beak, apparently attempting to swallow it—sometimes holding the frog by its leg, and sometimes by its head. However, the bird was unsuccessful in swallowing the frog, probably because it was too large, and after several failed attempts, it flew away after about five minutes. To the best of my knowledge, there has been no report, yet, of an lora attempting to feed upon amphibians.



162. The Common lora appeared with a frog in its beak.

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Comments on birds of Dharwad

This is with reference to the checklist of birds presented in the paper on urban birds of Dharwad by Ghorpade (2015). I would like to bring to the attention of readers, a few interesting historical records from the Dharwad area that are accessible on the website: portal.vertnet.org. There are specimens of Brown Fish Owl *Ketupa zeylonensis* (FMNH #230128), Streak-throated Swallow *Petrochelidon fluvicola* (FMNH #233412-15), Clamorous (=Indian) Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus brunnescens* (FMNH #239651), Indian Bushlark *Mirafra erythroptera* (UMMZ #145249-51), and Singing Bushlark *M. cantillans* (UMMZ #232468-77) from Hubli/Dharwad. Some of these were definitely collected by Walter Koelz, while others were too, based on their dates of collection. The Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix* is listed in Ghorpade's checklist, but the more likely Rain Quail *C. coromandelica* is missing, but a specimen of which has been collected from Dharwad (FMNH #420521). There are also several specimens of the Large Grey Babbler *Turdoides malcomi* (FMNH #235166, #235187-190) in Koelz's collection from this locality. Readers are also advised to check the list of birds of Dharwad District in www.ebird.org, which comprises 196 species as on 06 October 2015. I would request the author to review his entry of Tytler's Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus tytleri* in the checklist. Though this species may occur, the most likely leaf warbler in Dharwad, per eBird bar charts, is the Greenish Warbler *P. trochiloides*, which is not listed by the author.

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Marshall's lora *Aegithina nigrolutea* in India and Sri Lanka

I carried out a six-year study on the breeding plumage, vocalisations, and distribution of the Marshall's lora *Aegithina nigrolutea* in Gujarat, India. Though the study area was a scrub forest near Morbi (22.82°N, 70.97°E), Gujarat. The results of the study were presented elsewhere (Ganpule 2014), through this letter, I would like to bring into focus certain details of the study that may be of interest to Indian birdwatchers.

A Marshall's lora does not show white-tipped tail, and tertials in newly acquired breeding plumage, which makes it difficult to separate it from a Common lora *A. tiphia*, but consistent vocal differences from Common lora were noted. Many different types of songs / calls were recorded, which included two types of level, drawn out songs, which were not known earlier. Moulting strategy is different than previously thought, with a complete moult before breeding.

Some individuals recorded from Sri Lanka are different in plumage (being greener-backed, and showing reduced black on head in breeding plumage), and there could be potential for sub-specific differentiation since vocalisations are also different, but further study is needed.

Recently, a Marshall's lora that had a green-coloured back, and appeared to have nearly completed moulting into breeding

plumage, was photographed in Sivalapperi, southern Tamil Nadu, in October 2014 (Sajna 2014). This individual was similar to the 'green-backed' birds recorded in Sri Lanka. A 'green-backed' Marshall's lora has been recorded from Coimbatore District, Tamil Nadu (BMNH 1938.8.10.1), and is described by Wells *et al.* (2003), as showing a different tone of dorsal green, and is similar to the 'green-backed' birds from Sri Lanka. Hence it is possible that a small population of the darker, 'green-backed' Marshall's lora may be distributed in southern India, and Sri Lanka.

Through this letter, I urge birdwatchers to photograph, and record vocalisations of Marshall's lora from everywhere in its range, and especially of 'green-backed' birds in Tamil Nadu, and Sri Lanka. When compared with the calls and songs of Marshall's lora from the study area in Gujarat, it was apparent that the calls of the birds from Sri Lanka were harsher, and more 'scolding' sounding, and the songs also differed. Recording vocalisations would help in further study as these differences in calls / songs that were noted between birds from Gujarat, and Sri Lanka (Ganpule 2014), can be elucidated.

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