

did not search for the nest, fearing it would disturb the birds. In the following months, we visited the site once every week. We saw the birds on all these visits, but they were silent; perhaps they were nesting. This was confirmed when we saw the adults carrying larvae, and insects to the nest site, a sure indication of chicks having hatched [140]. Our visits became less frequent from August 2014 onwards, mainly due to inclement weather. We were able to observe broken eggshells at the nest site in September, which we assumed were of the grassbird. However, we do not have images of the same, nor did we see any juveniles, and hence we are uncertain about whether the birds nested successfully. The birds were last seen on 10 September 2014.



Photo: Siddhesh Brahmanekar

140. Broad-tailed Grassbird carrying insect to nest.

The species has been known to occur in the Western Ghats, mainly in Kerala, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu (BirdLife International 2016) though there are isolated records from Point Calimere (Hussain 1977), and the Vishakapatnam Ghats

(Price 1979), both the latter being queried by Rasmussen & Anderton (2012). The previous records from Maharashtra are from Bopdeo Ghat, Lonavla, and Rajgurunagar in Pune District; Ramshej Ghat in Nashik District, Amba Ghat in Kolhapur District, and Dhule District (Prasad 2004, 2005). All these sites, apart from the ones in Nashik, lie south of the present site. Raha and others, from Nashik, reported that the birds sang from regular perches and were quite bold; they have also regularly reported displaying birds, but haven't reported nesting in Nashik (Rahmani *et al.* 2014). We believe that the Sinhgad location is a new, and possibly, a breeding location for this species, and that it requires urgent protection measures in light of its IUCN status. Given our finding, it is quite possible the species breeds in similar habitat in the Western Ghats of Maharashtra. Since the grassbird is vocal, and active, in the monsoon, it would be useful to visit similar habitats, especially in the northern Western Ghats, to find out if these birds are present. More studies are required to ascertain the population estimate of this species at Sinhgad.

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Letters to the Editor

An intriguing bird sighting from the Kanchenjunga Conservation Area, east Nepal

In April 2008 I participated in a survey of the Kanchenjunga Conservation Area (27.34°N, 87.54°E) in eastern Nepal (Fig. 1); an area that borders the Sikkim region of India, and is not too far from the extensive forests of Bhutan. Kanchenjunga is the third highest peak in the world (8586 m). Its lower approaches are deep, steeply sided, and often, wooded valleys separated by high ridges.

Recent ornithological data from the region is lacking. Our expedition was to assess forest habitats in this remote region, record bird species, and identify key areas for birds and potential conservation threats. A full report of the trek is available separately (Inskipp & Inskipp 2008).

The expedition involved a 21-day trek from Basantpur, following the Tamur and Ghunsa Khola rivers northward, to the high altitude village of Ghunsa. From there we crossed over the Silele Pass to Tseram, and followed the Simbula Khola southward

to Toragden. We then crossed over into the Amji Khola, following this southward to the Kabeli Khola, and on down to the town of Taplejung.

On 21 April 2008 we descended from Tseram (3870 m), following the Simbula Kola southward to Torangden (3000 m), arriving at Torangden, our campsite (a single teahouse at roughly 27.55°N, 87.95°E), at 1530hrs. After some refreshments the team drifted off in different directions to explore the surrounding forest habitat.

Throughout the day we had passed through some of the best, and oldest, forest that we had encountered. Himalayan fir *Abies spectabilis* dominated at higher altitudes and gave way to hemlock *Tsuga dumosa* admixed with broadleaved forests at lower altitudes, with an understory of rhododendron *Rhododendron* species, and stands of bamboo *Bambusa* species in parts. The forest comprised many ancient trees with a high percentage of dead wood—both fallen, and standing. The valley had virtually no human residences.



Fig. 1. Map of the Kanchenjunga Conservation Area, East Nepal, and surroundings. Red arrow marks the location of the mystery bird (c. 27.55°N, 87.95°E). xxxx marks our survey route.

From the campsite / teahouse at Torangden, I wandered back north up the trail only 200 m or so. The valley fell away steeply to the south-east, and a small stream, no more than a trickle of water, crossed the trail before falling 100 m or so into the river below. I noticed a pair of *Yuhinas* preening in a small stand of bamboo, having obviously just bathed in the stream. I continued for a few hundred yards: Being late afternoon the forest was quiet, I returned to the bathing area.

From there, I looked down a small gully. It passed between two dense stands of bamboo. Perched just at the edge of the bamboo, behind, and partially obscured by two moss-covered boulders, was the bird in question. I instantly knew this bird was not only new to me but I could not place it in any category or indeed recall ever seeing it in any field guide. It appeared to have stopped whatever it was doing and just perched quietly watching me. To steady myself, and to obtain the best views, I sat down, and we watched each other for probably no more than a couple of minutes. The bird was no more than eight metres away from me, observation conditions were excellent, and the parts of the bird that were visible were seen extremely well. The bird didn't look as though it were agitated; it appeared calm but cautious, almost frozen (much as a woodcock *Scolopax rusticola* would be when it thought it had not been detected). It moved slowly and cautiously, probably trying to avoid detection. Finally the bird slowly lowered its head, and skulked away into the cover of the dense stand of bamboo. It was not seen again.

The bird was side-on, facing right, and slightly away from me. Its back, upper wings, head, and upper breast were in clear view. The lower belly, legs, distal part of the wings, and tail were hidden by boulders. It was larger than a Common Blackbird *Turdus merula* but smaller than a Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*. It sat quite upright, and had a relatively large head

reminiscent of a pitta (*Pitta* species). It appeared, initially, to be completely black like a blackbird. The eye was very dark and quite large (reminiscent of that of Woodcock), as one would expect for a crepuscular bird, or one that inhabits dark dense undergrowth. The indistinct eye-ring was dull grey. The most strikingly odd part of the bird was its bill, which was two-thirds the overall length of the head. It was absolutely straight, with no hint of any down curve, and was dark grey in colour. The bill was very narrow with an enlarged tip, most reminiscent of that of a Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus*, without the tubular nostrils.

The bird, finally, slowly turned its head towards me. At this point it showed a few dark brown (dark umber) feathers in its cheeks, and some more extensive similar brown markings on the throat. The extent of these was restricted to the central throat area forming four panels separated by black. These areas of brown were highly iridescent, appearing at certain angles, and disappearing at others, giving a bronzed coppery metallic glow when the bird was head-on but completely disappearing when sideways. These panels ranged from warm bronze to deep dark umber, iridescent as in any hummingbird. Sketches were made shortly after the sighting, depicting the same bird in both postures, head-on, and sideways [141].



141. Illustration of the mystery bird taken from field sketches made shortly after the sighting showing bird side on and the same bird head on, with a rough sketch of the walking posture.

The bird finally became a bit more alert, leaned forward, lowered its head, and slowly skulked off with a long striding motion. Its posture and gait was similar to that of a Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus*. It was lost from view no sooner it entered the dense bamboo stand. The bird appeared entirely black except for the bronzed panels on the throat.

The overall impression was of a bird that was quite bulky and compact, with an upright stance, large head and eye like a pitta. It was short-tailed, completely black, except for a few dark brown /coppery iridescent feathers around the face, and forming more extensive highly iridescent panels on the throat.

It gave the impression of being a ground-living bird, which walked and ran rather than hopped. It seemed to associate closely with dense cover offered by the stand of bamboo. It may be crepuscular, and was most similar to the crane and rail families in character, although different in appearance, being large-headed.

Initially, Tim and Carol Inskipp (who were also a part of this expedition) suggested the Long-billed Thrush *Zoothera*

monticola as a possibility, probably the closest it can get to any known species, but was fully discounted on a number of points—its overall jet black colouration, and highly iridescent panels about the throat.

Once the bird had disappeared I tried to relocate it, which proved impossible on the sheer steep incline leading into a stand of bamboo mixed with young conifers. Finally, I returned to the campsite to summon the rest of the team to look for the bird. As we approached the area, one of the team members saw a black-coloured bird run very fast across the forest floor, and disappear into the same stand of bamboo. It may well have been the bird seen earlier. We surrounded the upper side of the bamboo stand and watched and waited to no avail. Attempts to flush out the bird also failed. The only other bird to be located on this return visit was a White-tailed Robin *Myiomela leucura*.

Our itinerary was tight and we had to leave early the next morning. This note is principally to draw attention to the presence of this unknown, potentially new, species so that other groups heading to Kanchenjunga, or the neighbouring regions of Sikkim, or Bhutan, can look for it.

The bird survey was organised by Bird Conservation Nepal as a contribution to the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund initiative in Nepal. Survey team members were: Paul Collin (RSPB), Tim Inskipp, Carol Inskipp, Mitra Pandey (who works for CEPF in eastern Nepal), Angus Robin (also the team doctor), Jyotendra Thakuri (from Bird Conservation Nepal), and Richard Winspear (RSPB).

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At a nest of Crested Treeswifts *Hemiprocne coronata*

On 16 January 2015, during the Pongal Bird Count in Tamil Nadu state, members of the Wildlife Association of Rajapalayam (WAR) visited Srivilliputhur (Grizzled Squirrel) Wildlife Sanctuary (9.57°N, 77.55°E) for birding. Though Crested Treeswifts *Hemiprocne coronata* were regularly seen here during all our prior outings, we saw, for the first time, a pair perched on a bare branch, close to each other, at a height of about three to four meters high above the pathway [142]. We did not realise



Photos: Sharan Venkatesh

142. Crested Tree Swift pair at nest.

they were sitting on a nest till it was pointed out to me, from the photographs, by Vinobha Anand, who also accompanied us during this visit.

When we re-visited the sanctuary on 31 January 2015, there was a single nestling [143] in the nest. We took great care not to disturb the breeding birds and hid ourselves in bushes.



143. A single nestling in the nest.

The pair was also seen sitting on the nest; we saw the male parent bird [144] adjusting its legs over a single nestling to safeguard it.



144. Male brooding.

On a subsequent visit on 08 March 2015, the nestling was seen on the small cup shaped nest [145]. We were able to observe both the adult birds brooding the young one. While the male brooded, the female was away, perhaps searching of food, and when the female came to feed the chick, the male flew off.



145. Closeup of nestling of Crested Tree Swift.

On 13 March 2015, both birds were away from the nest when we reached the spot. The young one was seen moving restlessly within the nest, maybe waiting for its parents to bring food. We watched the pair feeding the youngster [146-149] more than five to six times in the span of 25 min. When an adult came

with food, mostly flying insects, it fed the chick first, then brooded it for a few minutes before flying off.

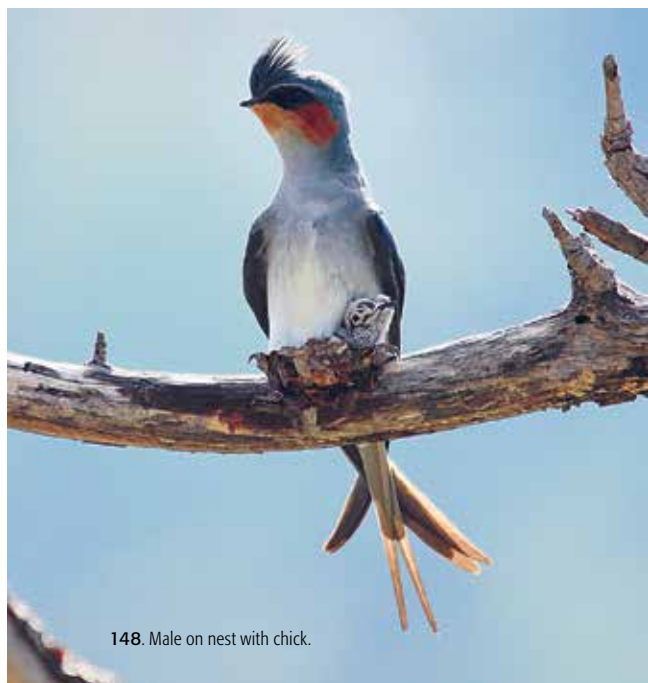
While we watching this domestic scene, a Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* flew in and hovered above the nest; all of a sudden around 15–20 Treeswifts, which were probably perched, unnoticed, in nearby trees, came out, started circling over the area where the chick was present, and gave out alarm calls. This prompted the kestrel to leave. When this happened, the excited youngster had raised its little crest, which was still growing. During this entire episode, the chick stayed on the nest, and showed no inclination to leave it.



146. Female feeding the chick.



147. Male feeding the chick.



148. Male on nest with chick.



149. Male Crested Tree Swift.

On a subsequent visit on 25 March 2015, we observed the chick flying with the male. Unfortunately, we did not have a camera then, and so could not document its plumage. It was well camouflaged within the tree branches, but had not developed into adult plumage. It was similar to the male, with a bit of an orange patch on its face, while most of its feathers, particularly its wings, seemed to be still growing. Our last visit to the spot was on 27 March 2015, when I found the nest abandoned. I hope the chick has fledged successfully.

We discovered a nest on the same branch on 21 February 2016 [150], placed a few centimetres away from last year's nest. We could not, however, follow the breeding cycle this time.



150. Nest in 2016 (R), placed a few cm away from that of 2015 (L).

Baker (1934) stated that a Crested Treeswift's nest is usually placed seven to eight meters above the ground, whereas this one was much lower. Whistler (1930) however mentioned that the lower limit of a Treeswift's *Hemiprocne* sp. nest could even be three to four meters. Ingahalikar & Dharap (1979) reported a nest from Maharashtra at a similar height (c. 3 m). Lowther (1936), amongst six nests, saw one at a similar height (c. 3.5 m) in Manbhum, West Bengal. The number of eggs (one), structure and size of the nest, and behaviour of the birds at the nest generally matched with Baker's summaries. The earliest nest with eggs was taken on 12 February by W. A. A. Philips in Ceylon (=Sri Lanka) (Baker 1934); our birds seem to have hatched a nestling by 31 January, and hence it is the earlier of the two. However, Ali & Ripley (1983) state that their breeding season is from December to July, with regional variations, and peak activity in the Indian Subcontinent is from January to April. The periods of incubation, and fledgling are hitherto unrecorded, but the latter is believed to be more than four weeks. Ingahalikar & Dharap (1979) indicated that though the young bird left the nest after three–four weeks, it

used to return even after that, and completely abandoned it only after five–six weeks. I can make no comment on the length of the incubation period, as eggs were not observed, but the chick was definitely in the nest for 42 days.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my fellow bird-watchers Vishnu Sankar and Pranav who accompanied me on all the trips. My thanks to Vinobha Anand who was present during the very first trip and concluded that the bird was on its nest from its photographs.

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Chestnut Thrush *Turdus rubrocanus* from Buxa Tiger Reserve

On 02 February 2014 a Chestnut Thrush *Turdus rubrocanus* was recorded in Buxa Tiger Reserve, Alipurduar, West Bengal [151]. It was seen at 1420 hrs at Pampu-basti, Raja Bhat Khawa (26.61°N, 89.53°E; c. 215 m asl), on the main road connecting Alipurduar to Buxaduar. The lone bird was on ground, and on the roadside



Photo: Dhritiman Hore

151. Chestnut Thrush *Turdus rubrocanus*.

hedges, leisurely hopping and searching for food. Subsequently it moved from the hedges to higher perches in trees. We spotted it close to a busy road that coursed through a landscape of paddy fields, arecanut plantations, and human settlements. Though the bird is a resident from the north-western Himalayas till Nepal, and Sikkim, and also in north-eastern India in winter (Ali & Ripley 1998; Grimmett *et al.* 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), it has not been recorded till date from Buxa. There are no records in published literature from northern Bengal, though it could very well occur there as the area lies well within its known range.

The authors would like to thank the officials and field staff of Buxa Tiger Reserve. Special thanks to Mr. Sachin P. Ranade, BNHS and Soumya Sunder Chakraborty at Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre at Raja bhat khawa.

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A lutino Plum-headed Parakeet *Psittacula cynocephala* sighted in Corbett Tiger Reserve

I was on a Diwali birding trip with my family to Jim Corbett National Park, Uttarakhand, India on 18 November 2015, and we were staying at Dhikala (29.54°N, 79.05°E) for two days. During a post-noon elephant safari, from Dhikala, on 19 November 2015, at about 1600 hrs, a flock of Plum-headed Parakeets *Psittacula cynocephala* flew onto a tree.



Photo: Rishit Shroff

152. A lutino bird in a flock of Plum-headed Parakeet *Psittacula cynocephala*.

Photo: Rishit Shroff



153. A close-up of the lutino bird.

In that flock, one particular individual stood out from the rest in being completely yellow in plumage. I managed to photograph it, along with the flock [152, 153]. The bird seemed to be an adult, as it appeared fully grown, and was of the same size, and proportions, as the other parakeets in this flock.

On checking the photos later, the bird appears to be a lutino Plum-headed Parakeet—a case of rare recessive gene surfacing. I understand that lutino Plum-headed Parakeets were popular in the pet trade in India; but stringent laws have forced most aviculturists into abandoning native species. The fact that it was seen deep inside the forests of Corbett Tiger Reserve also points to a likely wild mutant, and hence a rare occurrence indeed.

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Some interesting bird observations from Kota, south-eastern Rajasthan, India

Kota (25.17°N, 75.87°E) is situated in south-eastern Rajasthan, India. In this note I report some interesting range extensions, or first sightings, of bird species for this dry region—as these are birds usually found in moister areas. The Chambal River, and the series of large dams on it, with their canals, has changed the face of this plateau. The backwaters of the dams, and seepage marshes have given rise to habitats of moist deciduous forests, wet scrub, and reeds. This change in habitat has, most probably, resulted in the arrival of 'new' bird species to the region.

The Asian Brown Flycatcher *Muscicapa dauurica* was first reported from southern Rajasthan in 2004 (Sangha & Devarshi 2004). Then in 2009, this species was reported breeding in Sitamata Sanctuary in southern Rajasthan (Sangha *et al.* 2009). I have been repeatedly seeing, and photographing, this species in and around Kota, since the winter of 2008 [154]. On 05 May 2011, I photographed an individual at Kadab-ki-Khal, near Kota, in a forested area surrounding the backwaters of Jawahar Sagar Dam. Following that sighting, I recorded about 15 birds in the area. The birds seem to have stayed back that summer, and I

154. Asian Brown Flycatcher *Muscicapa dauurica*.

wonder whether the species breeds in these parts? During 2012 I could not return to that place, as it is regularly submerged; it also harbours crocodiles.

Since the winter of 2009, I have regularly recorded, and photographed a flock of five to ten Tricoloured Munias *Loncura malaca* [155] amongst the reeds, and thorny scrub near the ashpond of Kota Super Thermal Power Station. Flocks are regularly sighted from August to May 2011. There seem to be more than 100 birds in the area, including juveniles. This is perhaps the first instance of its regular occurrence in Rajasthan.



Photos: Sunil Singhal

155. Tricoloured Munia *Loncura malaca*.

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Manuscript received on 29 May 2011.