

Rufous Treepie *Dendrocitta vagabunda* extinguishing and swallowing lamp wick

On 16 December 2017, we were birding at Jassore Wildlife Sanctuary, Banaskantha, Gujarat, on our way to the Ganesh temple (a small temple complex with one dozen shrines). As part of his morning rituals the temple caretaker was offering mixed grains to the birds, while cleaning and washing the premises, and lighting of lamps for prayers. These lamps are usually earthen cups filled with oil/ghee (clarified butter) to fuel the cotton wick, which is lit as part of a praying ritual. The caretaker lit up a few of these holy lamps and placed them in front of each of the twelve shrines. Within no time, a few Rufous Treepies *Dendrocitta vagabunda* flew from across the temple premises and perched near the lit lamps. One of the birds entered a shrine and returned with a lamp in its beak; the lamp still held a burning wick [78]. The bird first played with the oil lamp [79], and then suddenly it picked up the flaring wick from the lamp [80], and tried to extinguish the wick by jerking its head. As soon as the flame was extinguished the treepie swallowed the wick [81]. We noted this behaviour in three other Rufous Treepies! The temple priest informed us that a few months ago he'd begun using pure ghee as fuel for these wicks. Ever since, he has observed this feeding frenzy amongst the treepies.

Usually, this species is an omnivorous and opportunistic feeder. There are numerous items recorded in a treepie's diet (Ali & Reply 1987; Bharucha 1988; Sharma 1993; Krishnakumar & Sudha 2002; Chhangani 2004; Basheer 2010). However, lamp wicks immersed in ghee are not on the list, and this is a first of its kind observation for the species.



78. Rufous Treepie carrying a lit oil lamp in its beak. Pic.



Pics: Raju Vyas

79.



80. Rufous Treepie making efforts to extinguish the lit wick.



81. Rufous Treepie swallowing the extinguished wick.

There seem to be no earlier records of corvids handling fire while foraging for food, leave alone extinguishing a flame and consumed the object that was burning. There is evidence (Bird *et al.* 2008; Gosford 2015) of the fire-spreading behaviour of a few raptors, especially Black Kite *Milvus migrans*, Whistling Kite *Haliastur sphenurus*, and Brown Falcon *Falco berigora* wherein these raptors were observed flying with burning sticks held in their talons, or beaks, and spreading bushfires in the savanna of northern Australia (Bonta *et al.* 2017). This was interpreted as a deliberate attempt to spread wildfires in order to flush out prey. But such an innovative foraging tactic is a definite sign of intelligence, a fact that holds true for most members of the Corvidae (Marzluff & Angell 2005; Seed *et al.* 2009).

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Sighting of Northern Long-eared Owl *Asio otus* in the Teesta grasslands, Jalpaiguri, West Bengal

On 16 February 2018, during the hot midday at the Teesta grasslands (26.52°N, 88.73°E) near Jalpaiguri, West Bengal, I found an owl roosting approximately one meter above the ground, on a branch of a small, almost naked, tree that stood under the shade of a three meter high *Zizyphus* tree surrounded by tall thick grasses and thorny bushes. As I had no camera with me, I returned to the spot on 18 February at 1615 hrs and found

the owl exactly at the same spot. Without disturbing it, I was able to take some photos of the bird [82]. On 25 February, I again visited the place with Biswapriya Rahut and at 1730 hrs found the owl perched about two and a half meters above the ground, on a branch of the *Zizyphus* tree. However, it flushed and disappeared into the tall thick 'kash' *Saccharum* sp., grasses c. 100 m away. I made no further visits to the area to avoid disturbing its roost.

On comparing the photograph with standard references (Grimmett *et al.* 2011) and photographs on websites like <http://orientalbirdimages.org/>, it was clear that this was a Northern Long-eared Owl *Asio otus*. Its long, slim, heavily streaked body, orange eyes, very long black ear tufts with pale edges, two black lines between the eyes and the white lines beside the bill eliminated all other species.

The Northern Long-eared Owl is a rare, and apparently erratic winter visitor to north-western India. It has rarely reached Gujarat, western Uttaranchal, the Delhi area, Nepal, and Bhutan (Ali & Ripley 1987; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). More recently, it has been photographed in Sikkim (Ash *et al.* 2017), and further eastwards in the Mishmi Hills, Arunachal Pradesh (Kalita & Bhuyan 2015). This is the first record of this species from West Bengal, though not unexpected, given the recent observations from the eastern parts of the country.

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Jerdon's Bushlark *Mirafra affinis* in Midnapore, West Bengal

On 09 February 2018 we were birding in the Salua forest range (22.23°N, 87.28°E), Paschim Midnapore District, West Bengal when, at 1536 hrs, we spotted a lark (Alaudidae) near some bushes. Initially we thought it was a Bengal Bushlark *Mirafra assamica*. But its continuous call was quite different from that bird—with which we were familiar. We shot some pictures [83, 84] and also video-graphed the bird calling <https://www.hbw.com/ibc/video/jerdons-bushlark-mirafra-affinis/jerdons-bushlark-west-bengal-video-graphic-record-sourav>. There were two to three birds in the vicinity, with the same set of field features.

Back from the field, we worked on the identification. The pointed thick bill, spotted breast, a comparatively smaller tail and, most important, a call that was a dry metallic rattle, helped us confirm it as a Jerdon's Bushlark *M. affinis*. Next day we visited the same area, and could locate more than ten individuals of the species.

We discussed this observation with several birders like Sujan Chatterjee, Kanad Baidya, and Santanu Manna, who agreed with our identification, and confirmed its rarity in West Bengal. Jerdon's Bushlark is considered a resident in southern India and Sri Lanka extending till eastern Odisha (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Its



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82. Northern Long-eared Owl in the Teesta grasslands, Jalpaiguri, West Bengal.