

## —Correspondence—

### *Departure of Grey Wagtail Motacilla cinerea from Kodagu*

With reference to my letter published in vol. 3 no. 4 July–August 2007 issue of Indian Birds, regarding the arrival of the Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* in Kodagu (12°27'N 75°43'E; 1,310 m a.s.l.), the departure dates are very difficult to gather.

Below is my notebook record of when the birds were last seen in my garden.

Date	Time	Date	Time
24 April 199	0645 hrs	03 April 2004	1530 hrs
16 April 2000	1630 hrs	18 April 2005	1800 hrs
12 April 2001	0730 hrs	25 March 2006	0745 hrs
14 April 2002	0830 hrs	06 April 2007	0730 hrs
20 March 2003	1700 hrs	06 April 2008	1230 hrs

Lt.-Gen. B. C. Nanda PVSM, AVSM, IA (RETD)  
Hebbettgiri, K. Nidugane P.O.  
Madikeri 571201, Kodagu, Karnataka, India

## —Editorial—

### *Will we force the Narcondam Hornbill Aceros narcondami into extinction?*

Human actions, whether direct or indirect, are nowadays almost singularly responsible for nudging species towards their doom. Redemption from such a, potentially, lost cause lies in the adroit harnessing of resources, an assessment of the situation, the application of rigorous science, and hopefully, the forestalling of a threatened species careening towards extinction.

In India, vultures have been the hapless victims of a seemingly innocuous human act—that of using a drug as a painkiller for cattle—resulting in a population crash that teeters on the verge of extinction. Just ten years ago, who would have believed that E. H. Aitken's laudatory "unsalaried public servants"<sup>1</sup>, would come to this? In the nick of time, the culprit that caused the vultures' drooping death was identified. If the drug were to be banned, its usage completely stopped, the vultures would have a slim chance of recovery. Banning a drug is difficult, enforcing that ban, a nightmare. A tug-of-war between players only erodes resolve into time-fed laxity—all at the expense of the vultures' future.

The Edible-nest Swiftlet *Collocalia fuciphaga* is found throughout southeastern Asia, but in India, it inhabits only the Andaman & Nicobar Islands. Its pure 'saliva' nest is a virtual delicacy in southeastern Asian cuisine, wherein lies its nemesis. Protecting the bird in the wild is impossible, given its preferred breeding terrain. The conservation solution is to ranch it in such a way that its eggs are slipped under surrogate Glossy Swiftlets *C. esculenta*, and its nest, harvested. A misinformed government order placed the Edible-nest Swiftlet in Schedule I of The Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, thereby protecting it totally, and paradoxically, blocking the only scientific solution that would

ensure its continued survival on the islands. The only way forward was to remove the bird from Schedule I, allow its nest to be harvested, and prevent the species from becoming extinct (in India) by protection!

The third scenario is centered on the 6.82 km<sup>2</sup>, volcanic, Narcondam Island—home to the endemic Narcondam Hornbill *Aceros narcondami*. In 1905 the population of hornbills on Narcondam was c200, in 1972 c400, in 1998 c360<sup>2</sup>, in 2000 c432<sup>3</sup>, and in 2003 c340<sup>4</sup>. Why is this bird at a cul-de-sac, when its population has been more-or-less stable over one hundred years? The simple one-word answer is—goats. Lavkumar Khachar's article highlights this issue and the urgent need for action. Will we allow goats to eat an island from under the Narcondam Hornbill? Indeed, will we allow them to do what we sent a posse of policemen to prevent Myanmar from doing—take the island away from India? Without vegetation holding it together, the volcanic rock will erode over time. Today it may sound fatalistic to say that an island devoid of vegetation might not survive the vagaries of tropical weather, but water and wind are an unstoppably potent force of erosion—and this, a one-way street to environmental disaster.

Island natural histories are mortally susceptible to invasions of flora and fauna and the introduction of goats on Narcondam is an act of criminal negligence, a slap in the face of our cognitive intelligence. The immediate solution is to remove all the goats, both captive and feral, from Narcondam, by whatever means necessary—delay would be catastrophic; implementation might restore equilibrium over time.

Paradoxically we only learn about a critically threatened species when it is already slipping downhill. Narcondam, however, is a situation that can be rectified easily. Yet, it is more than a decade since the late Ravi Sankaran of SACON raised these concerns and alarms in a report published by the institution, as did the late S. A. Hussain of BNHS, in several publications. The Indian government has taken no corrective action up till now. It is still not too late in the day to salvage the situation. If there is quick action, the magnificent Narcondam Hornbill will certainly survive, in splendid isolation, on a wild volcanic outcrop jutting above the storm-tossed waters of the Bay of Bengal—the unquestioned icon of a potential Peace Park between India and Myanmar and a symbol of successful conservation.

—Aasheesh Pittie

- 1 Aitken, E. H. 1947. *The common birds of India*. 3rd ed. Bombay: Thacker & Co. Ltd.
- 2 Vijayan, L. & Sankaran, R. 2000. A study on the ecology, status and conservation perspectives of certain rare endemic avifauna of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Final report. Coimbatore: SACON.
- 3 Yahya, H. S. A. & Zarri, A. A. 2003. Status, ecology and behaviour of Narcondam Hornbill, (*Aceros narcondami*) in Narcondam Island, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, India. *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* 99 (3): 434–445 (2002).
- 4 Vivek, R. & Vijayan, V. S. 2003. Ecology and conservation of the Narcondam Hornbill *Aceros narcondami* at Narcondam Island Sanctuary, India. Coimbatore: SACON.