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CONTENTS

Front Cover: Merlin *Falco columbarius*.
Photographer: Nirav Bhatt.
Back Cover: Blue Whistling-thrush *Myophonus caeruleus*.
Photographer: Atanu Mondal.

Notes on wintering Merlin *Falco columbarius* in the Little Rann of Kachchh, Gujarat

Prasad Ganpule & Nirav Bhatt

Ganpule, P., & Bhatt, N., 2013. Notes on wintering Merlin *Falco columbarius* in the Little Rann of Kachchh, Gujarat. *Indian BIRDS* 8 (6): 141–144.
Prasad Ganpule, C/o Parshuram Pottery Works, Nazarbaug, Morbi 363642, Gujarat, India. Email:*prasadganpule@gmail.com* [PG]
Nirav Bhatt, H-52, GIDC Residential Plots, Wadhwan 363035, Gujarat, India. Email:*birdwatchernrb@gmail.com* [NB]
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Abstract

The Merlin *Falco columbarius* has been poorly documented in India. We present below the results of a five-year study on the Merlin in the Little Rann of Kachchh, Gujarat. We recorded two subspecies. We also recorded some individuals that were intergrades between the two subspecies; this has not been previously reported in India. Prey and wintering ecology were also studied.

Introduction

The Merlin *Falco columbarius* is a rare winter migrant to northern India (Naoroji 2006). Two races are known to occur in India: *F. columbarius insignis* and *F. c. pallidus. F. c. insignis* is considered to be a widely distributed winter migrant, ranging from north-western India up to the Kachchh region of Gujarat, while *F. c. pallidus* is a scarce winter migrant in northern India; both subspecies are definitely recorded from as far south as Delhi (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Ali & Ripley (2007) state that *insignis* is a "scarce winter visitor/vagrant?" and that *pallidus* is "uncommon/vagrant." They give the distribution for *insignis* as, "W Pakistan, Sind, Punjab and N India," while for *pallidus*, "W Pakistan, Sind and Gilgit." Grimmett *et al.* (1998) give the Merlin's status as, "rare winter visitor."

In Gujarat, the Merlin is shown as a rare winter migrant to the Kachchh area, with one isolated record from the Great Rann of Kachchh (Naoroji 2006). Grimmett *et al.* (2011) also show an isolated record from Kachchh, while Kazmierczak (2000) shows two records from the Kachchh region.

Wintering Merlins have not been studied in India. Most aspects of the Merlin's wintering ecology are not known and its occurrence and distribution in the Little Rann of Kachchh is also not reported in texts for the region (Naoroji 2006; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).

Study area

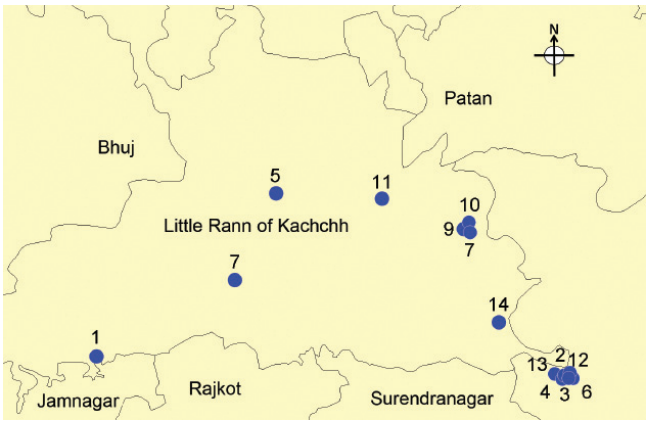
The Little Rann of Kachchh is situated in Gujarat, India (23°07′–23°42′N, 70°50′–71°40′E). It spans a vast area of *c.* 4950 km². It consists of salt/mud flats surrounded by extensive grassland and thorn scrub. Raised mounds on the mud flats, with scrub ground vegetation, locally called *byet*, become islands during the monsoon when the rann is inundated. By November, the rann dries up, becoming accessible; some parts remain inaccessible till late February–March. The lower winter temperatures in the area, during November–March, range from 13°C to 29°C (www.weatherbase.com). The Little Rann is a protected area, known as The Wild Ass Sanctuary, and supports high densities of wintering raptors (Naoroji 2006).

Observations

An adult male Merlin was observed by one of us (PG) in the western part of the Little Rann of Kachchh on 15 January 2006 (Ganpule 2008). There have been regular observations of Merlins since 2008 in the Little Rann of Kachchh (Table 1; Fig. 1). A majority of the birds observed in the area were photographed using high-resolution digital cameras and telephoto lenses, to keep a record of plumage variations; the dates, and areas of sighting were also recorded. Some of the individuals mentioned

Table 1. Merlin records from the Little Rann of Kachchh

Reference No. (Fig. 1)	Year (Winter)	Individuals		Number of sightings by authors and others	Photograph Number	Remarks
		Adult male	Juvenile			
1	2005–2006	1		PG (1)	–	Ganpule 2008
2	2008–2009	1		NB (2)	–	
3	2009–2010	1		NB & PG (5)	164	
4	2010–2011	1		NB (2)	158	
5		1		Y. Shah (1)	–	Sub–adult male
6	2011–2012	1		NB (3)	–	
7		1		NB & PG (2)	160	
8		1		NB (1)	–	
9	2012–2013	1		NB (2)	–	
10		1		NB (1)	161	Heavily streaked individual
11		1		NB (1)	159	Dark coloured individual
12			1	NB & PG (3)	162	Dark coloured juvenile
13			1	NB (1)	163	Light coloured juvenile
14			1	N. Mehta (1)	–	



Map: S. Subramanya

Fig. 1. Merlin records in the Little Rann of Kachchh, Gujarat.

in the table have been photographed multiple times by several bird photographers. We have carefully browsed through all the photographs of Merlin available in websites like (INW; OBI) and ensured from the locality and plumage that there are no definite new individuals which we have not covered in our table.

Merlins are usually seen from the first week of November till the first week of March. They are active early in the morning, and in the late evening, usually roosting on the ground in the afternoons, in the shade of a *Prosopis juliflora* bush, or that cast by stones (observed once). Adult males generally remain in a specific area throughout wintering months. Though adult male Merlins were seen regularly since 2008, juvenile birds were first observed only during the winter of 2012–2013. Juvenile Merlins were seen in the general vicinity of a male, but they were not seen together. One juvenile was seen regularly in a specific area for almost two months.

It is difficult to separately identify juvenile / adult female Merlins, and it is important to note that perched juveniles may not be visually separable from females (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Forsman (2006) states that adult females and juveniles are rather similar, especially in flight. Grimmett *et al.* (1998) note that juveniles and females are similar except that juveniles typically show a white nape patch.

Important identification characteristics in separation of juveniles and adult female Merlins are the pattern of central and outer tail feathers, and the pattern on axillaries and underwing/ upperwing markings.

Separation of juvenile male / juvenile female Merlins is even more difficult and is based on subtle differences in under wing markings, pattern of barring on outer and central tail feathers, head pattern, and pattern of breast streaking (www.ibercajalav.net). We have not attempted to separate male and female in juvenile birds, except for one individual, which was probably a juvenile male, based on the pattern of its outer tail feathers, head markings, and pattern on axillaries.

It is possible that due to their similarity to the female Common Kestrel *F. tinnunculus,* juvenile/female Merlins may have been overlooked. However, the dark brownish upper parts along with evenly barred (four or five equally wide pale and dark bars) tail, bars on the dorsal side of primaries, rufous under wing coverts and pale collar on hind neck in a female/juvenile Merlin separate them from a female Common Kestrel.

Our estimate is that around 11–12 individuals were observed in the last five years. It is also worth noting that they are more regular in the eastern part of the Little Rann of Kachchh, than in the western part. We have not recorded Merlins in the northern part of the Little Rann of Kachchh; which is comparatively less explored, and often remains inaccessible till February. But looking at its distribution and the habitat in which it has been observed in the western and eastern parts of the Little Rann of Kachchh, it is possible that it may occur in the northern areas also as the northern parts have a similar habitat.

In the winter of 2012–2013, six different individuals were recorded; the highest number recorded in a single winter season in the last five years. The area covered, and the number of visits made, was approximately same during the last five years.

Site fidelity

Almost no data is available regarding the winter site fidelity and winter residency of Merlins in India. From studying the head and body markings of individuals we have photographed during repeated field sightings, we feel confident in claiming that one or two birds have been regular migrants during the last five years. One particular individual, an adult male, was probably seen annually for four years from 2008–2009 to 2011–2012. A detailed study of the images was made and individual markings on the birds were noted. In a study carried out in England, male, as well as female Merlins showed site fidelity during breeding (Wright 2003) while in a study in Sweden, fidelity to breeding areas was higher in males than in females (Wiklund 1996). Migrating raptors are known to show wintering site fidelity for specific areas (Shiu *et al.* 2006; Meyburg *et al.* 2011). Thus it is likely that wintering Merlins too show site fidelity, though this requires further study.

Hunting and prey

The Merlin is known to prey, almost exclusively, on small birds of open habitats such as larks (Alaudidae), pipits and wagtails (Motacillidae), and small waders (Charadriidae) (Forsman 2006). Scant data is available on prey taken during winter, but it mainly comprises small birds, and insects like locusts, and dragonflies (Naoroji 2006). In the Little Rann of Kachchh, it has been observed hunting and feeding on Crested Lark *Galerida cristata* (Y. Shah, *verbally, April 2013*). We have many times observed adult male, and juvenile, Merlins chasing flocks of Greater Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla*, which are abundant in the area, at sunset and even after sunset. **[160]** shows an adult male with a bird in its claws, but the prey cannot be identified. Thus it can be inferred that its prey in the Little Rann of Kachchh mainly comprises small birds.

Vocalisation

Merlins are said to be silent in winter (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). We have not heard any calls from birds observed here.

Discussion

There is lot of individual variation in the plumages of adult male Merlins observed in the area. The dorsal plumage colours range from pale blue-grey to dark slaty-blue; the ventral plumage colours range from a very pale/white base with sparse, fine blackish shaft-streaks, to an almost dark rufous base with thicker black/ brownish streaks, drop shaped on the flanks. Pattern, colour, and streaking on the head are also different.

Four examples are given below to show the plumage variations

in adult males:

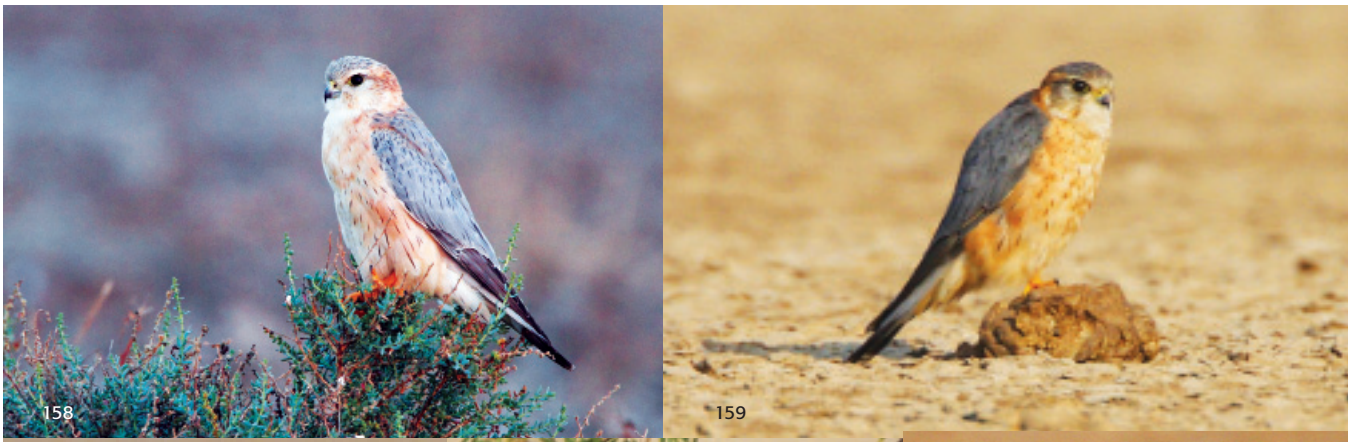
a) A bird seen on 23 November 2011, a typical adult male usually seen in the Little Rann of Kachchh (**158**; Map reference no. 4) had very pale blue-gray upper parts, and white, sparsely streaked under parts.
b) An adult male (**159**; Map reference no. 11) was noted by NB on 3 January 2013 with dark slaty-blue upper parts and orange-brown under parts with fine dark-brownish shaft-streaks and dark head markings with prominent black-streaked ear coverts. This individual, with dark slate coloured upper parts, and prominent head markings, was unlike adult males usually seen in the Little Rann.
c) An adult male (**160**; Map reference no. 7), observed by both of us on 11 February 2012 in the western part of the Little Rann, had bluish upper parts with black shaft streaks, rufous on crown and pale rufous, completely fine brownish-streaked under parts and rufous under-tail coverts.
d) An adult male seen by NB (**161**; Map reference no. 10) on 3 January 2013 had thick brownish streaking on its under parts (heaviest on flanks), bluish upper parts, and a diffuse face pattern.

Similarly, juveniles also show individual variation. Two examples are given below:

a) One bird (**162**; Map reference no. 12), observed by both of us on 3 January 2013, was noted with dark brownish upper parts, heavily streaked under parts, and a prominent supercilium. It was probably a male based on the pattern and markings on its tail feathers, which were photographed and studied.
b) Another bird, seen by NB (**163**; Map reference no. 13) on 28 January 2013, was noted with comparatively sparsely streaked under parts, dark brownish upper parts spotted rufous, with barring on secondaries.

An adult male in fresh moult was observed in December 2009 with upper parts showing fine rufous fringes to feather margins (**164**; Map reference no. 3), which are usually abraded by February.

It is difficult to identify which subspecies occur in the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162

Photo: Prasad Ganpule


163


164

Photos: Nirav Bhatt

Table 2. Identification pointers to races of Merlin *Falco columbarius*

	F. c. pallidus	*F. c. insignis*	*F. c. aesalon*
Head markings and nape colour	Small white supercilium above eye, blackish streaked crown; crown and nape show extensive rufous, whitish cheeks with faint black streaks	White supercilium, creamish sides of head with black streaks; Rufous and black on nape; more white on forehead, indistinct moustache	Grey crown with rusty nape, thin white prominent supercilium, dark moustache and black streaked cheeks
Upper parts	Very pale bluish-gray with black shafts	Blue to bluish-slaty with black shafts	Blue-gray with black shafts
Under parts colour and markings	White to pale rufous, streaked sparsely with thin black shaft streaks	Off-white to rufous and boldly streaked blackish; often drop-shaped on flanks, Thighs and under-tail coverts darker rufous	Orange-brown, streaked with fine black longitudinal streaks
Colour of bare parts	Pale yellow cere	Feet and cere yellow	Feet and cere deeper yellow

Note: The above details have been taken from Forsman (2006), Naoroji (2006), Ali & Ripley (2007), and van Duivendijk (2011).

Little Rann. It is usually not possible to identify individuals to subspecies levels, in the field, except classic *pallidus* (van Duivendijk 2011). *F. c. aesalon* is not known to occur in India, but is widely distributed (from northern Europe to western Siberia); the northern population is migratory and winters in the Middle-East, and north-western Africa (Forsman 2006). We saw some individuals whose features did not match with either *insignis* or *pallidus*. General identification pointers, given by accepted authorities (Forsman 2006; Naoroji 2006; Ali & Ripley 2007; van Duivendijk 2011), for adult males of three subspecies are given in Table 2. These characteristics are useful in identification of 'typical' adult males. However, between *aesalon* and *pallidus*, there are many intermediates, and intergrades between *insignis* and *aesalon* also occur (van Duivendijk 2011). Hence field identification of such intergrades is especially difficult, as they show some characteristics of two different sub-species.

We sent our Merlin images to Arend Wassink, (http://birdsofkazakhstan.com), who has extensive knowledge of the birds of Kazakhstan, where four sub-species of Merlins occur, to get an expert opinion on the races occurring in the Little Rann of Kachchh.

As per his opinion:
"Bird nos. **[158]** and **[164]** are adult male *pallidus*. Male **[159]** is certainly not a *pallidus* and probably not an *aesalon* but most likely an intergrade *aesalon/insignis* or even *insignis*. Male **[161]** is not an *aesalon* but an adult male *insignis* or *insignis/aesalon* intergrade." For adult male **[160]**, "On the basis of these record shots, I would not dare to make any conclusions, other than that it does not seem to be (pure) *aesalon.*"
For bird nos. **[162]** and **[163]**, his opinion was:
"Both are juveniles, based on the combination of overall rufous wash on these birds and oval spotted greater coverts, remiges, and scapulars (in females there would be more bars instead of spots) and the outer tail feather is more regularly barred (in female, outer tail feather would be more irregular)." As for race, he said, "individual in **[162]** is juvenile of *pallidus* or *insignis* while the individual in **[163]** is not an *aesalon,* but either *pallidus* or *insignis* juvenile."

Conclusion

The Merlin is a rare but regular winter migrant to the Little Rann of Kachchh; two races being reported in literature, *F. c. pallidus* and *F. c. Insignis*. We have not positively identified *insignis* during our stury. The occurrence of *pallidus* here extends its wintering range up to Gujarat. The occurrence of *insignis* is to be expected since it is a widely occurring winter migrant in north-western India. However it is pertinent to note that *pallidus type* birds are more common in the Little Rann than *insignis* type individuals. This is surprising since *pallidus* is known to be scarcer. Also some birds seen here do not fit either *pallidus* or *insignis.* It seems like some intergrades also occur in the Little Rann of Kachchh, and further morphological study is required to confirm this.

We recommend that some of these wintering Merlins be trapped, samples taken for DNA analysis, and the birds tagged (preferably satellite tagged) to ascertain the breeding area of birds wintering in the Little Rann of Kachchh; also to confirm wintering site fidelity and sub-species identity. Many aspects of the Merlin's wintering ecology are also not yet fully known and further research is required. A study of skins in various museums would be helpful in sub-species identification of Merlins, as there is still a lot of uncertainty regarding criteria for identification, especially for birds in areas where two sub-species have overlapping breeding territories and where intergrades could occur.

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Status of Indian Peafowl *Pavo cristatus* in Nepal

Hem Sagar Baral & Carol Inskipp

Baral, H. S., & Inskipp, C., 2013. Status of Indian Peafowl *Pavo cristatus* in Nepal. *Indian BIRDS* 8 (6): 145–147.
Hem Sagar Baral, Zoological Society of London-Nepal Office, C/o National Trust for Nature Conservation, Khumaltar, Lalitpur, Nepal. Email: *hem.baral@zsl.org*
Carol Inskipp, 1 Herneside, March Road, Welney, Wisbech, Cambs PE14 9SB, United Kingdom. Email: *inskipp@btinternet.com*

Indian Peafowl *Pavo cristatus*, known as *mayura* in Sanskrit, and *mujur* or *mayur* in Nepali, is one of the most strikingly beautiful birds found in lowland Nepal. Its colourful plumage, and long tail feathers containing hundreds of ocelli are an unforgettable sight. It is the largest of galliforms occurring in Nepal (Ali & Ripley 1987). Peafowl are widely revered amongst the Hindu community as the carrier of Karthikeya, the god of war, and the son of Shiva, a member of the Hindu holy trinity. They are also effective in controlling populations of snakes and other 'vermin' causing damage to agriculture.

Indian Peafowl is found only in the Indian Subcontinent: Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh (del Hoyo *et al.* 1994; Madge & McGowan 2002). Its IUCN global red list status is 'Least Concern' (BirdLife International 2013). The species is the national bird of India and has a high profile throughout that country.

The species is found in forest edges, grasslands, and in lightly wooded forests. It is said to also inhabit undergrowth in deciduous forests near water (Grimmett *et al.* 1998), and *Zizyphus* species thorn bushes (Fleming *et al.* 1976). The species is gregarious and roosts in tall trees (Grimmett *et al.* 1998). Indian Peafowl is shy, immediately escaping into bushes or flying away upon the slightest hint of danger (Pandey 1984). It feeds on seeds, grain, lentils, groundnuts, tender shoots of crops, flower-buds, berries, drupes, wild figs, centipedes, scorpions, lizards, small snakes, insects, worms, and grubs (Ali & Ripley 1987).

Inexplicably, Indian Peafowl was not reported from Nepal by B. H. Hodgson in the nineteenth century (Inskipp & Inskipp 1991). It was first recorded for the country, from the central lowlands in 1877 by Scully (1879). Fleming *et al.* (1976) described the species as 'fairly common'. Its distribution was mapped for the first time in Nepal by Inskipp & Inskipp (1991) (Fig. 1) who reported it as a 'locally common resident'; mainly found below 500 m. It also occurred at 1280 m in the Kathmandu Valley where it was introduced, although it has since died out in the Valley (Inskipp & Inskipp 1991). The only other recent higher altitude records are of single birds recorded at Dobhan, Taplejung District at 650 m in April 1994 (Halberg 1994), and at Naya Pul, Dolakha district at *c.* 1200 m, in 1999 (Yadav Ghimirey *pers. comm.*, October 2012).

The peafowl's status, post 1990s, in protected areas is as follows: a common breeding resident in the Sukla Phanta Wildlife Reserve (Baral & Inskipp 2009) and in the Chitwan National Park (Baral & Upadhyay 2006), a rare breeding resident in the Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve (Baral 2005), a common resident in the Bardia National Park (Inskipp 2001), recorded in the Banke National Park (Baral *et al.* 2012), and resident in the Parsa Wildlife Reserve (Todd 2001).

Indian Peafowl has also been recorded from the Chitwan National Park's buffer zone in the Barandabhar Important Bird Area (Adhikari *et al.* 2000; Baral 1996), and from the Janakauli Community Forest, Chitwan district (Giri 2008).

Although an attractive and visible bird, often talked about and revered in culture and religion, there has been only one autecological study of the species in Nepal (Pandey 1984). Other than its distribution, there is little information on its national status. Since 1990, it has been recorded in six protected areas in lowland Nepal, varying in status in each of these. For example, its population may be increasing in Banke National Park, established in 2010, because of increased protection. On the other hand, Indian Peafowl has declined drastically in Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve, which was established in 1976. The reserve is one of the few localities in Nepal where the species was recorded breeding (Inskipp & Inskipp 1991); however there are no such recent breeding records from there; in fact it was absent during a recent comprehensive survey of birds in the reserve and surrounding areas (Baral *et al.* 2013).

There have not been any noticeable changes in its population in Chitwan-, and Bardia- National Parks; nor in Sukla Phanta-, and Parsa- Wildlife Reserves. Pandey (1984) reported that two or three decades previously the species was abundant, occurring up to the low-lying foothills of the outer Himalayan range, but by 1984 it was chiefly restricted to parks and reserves below 330 m and rare outside the protected area system.

Recent research for the forthcoming Red Data book of birds of Nepal, has revealed that compared to pre-1990 records, there have been relatively few records of the species from outside the protected areas' system since 1990 despite increased ornithological activity and recording over the last two decades. Known records comprise the following: the Dang Deukhuri foothills forests Important Bird Area, Dang district (Thakuri 2009a, b); three in January 2003 from Lumbini Development Area, Rupandehi district (Giri 2003); up to eight in Nawalparasi district in 2005 (Poorneshwor Subedi & Kapil Pokharel *pers. comm.*, October 2012); one at Naya Pul, Dolakha district in 1999 (Yadav Ghimirey *pers. comm.,* October 2012); one heard along the Sunkoshi River system on the border between Okhaldunga, Udayapur- and Sindhuli- districts at approximately 500 m in

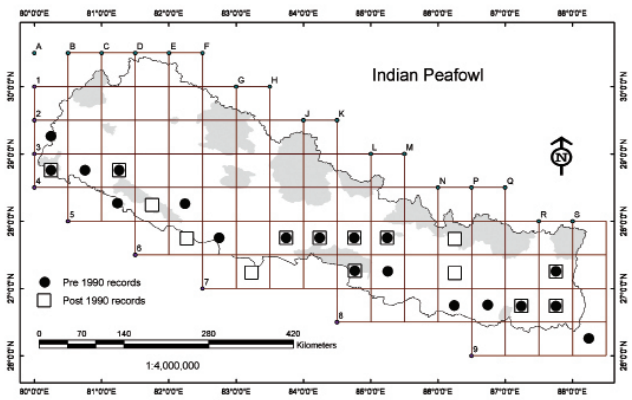

Fig. 1. Distribution of Indian Peafowl in Nepal *after* Inskipp & Inskipp (1991).

March 2008 (Haris Chandra Rai *pers. comm.,* October 2012); recorded from Katahare Community Forest (CF), Ladabhir Village Development Committee (VDC), and Durga CF of Kakurthakur VDC, Sindhuli district (Phuyal & Dhoubhadel 2007); Dharan forests Important Bird Area, Sunsari district (Basnet & Sapkota 2008); one at Dobhan, Taplejung district in April 1994 (Halberg 1994); recorded in Raja Rani Community Forest, Morang district (Basnet 2002; Basnet *et al.* 2005); the lower Mai valley in Mai valley Important Bird Area, Jhapa district (Basnet & Sapkota 2006) ; Sukhani, Jhapa district in November 1992 (Cox 1992); and Garuwa, Jhapa district in March 2008 (Robson *et al.* 2008).

The current major threats to the peafowl, especially outside protected areas are, hunting, trapping, habitat loss through encroachment, illicit tree-felling, and heavy grazing (Pandey 1984). Hunting and trapping for meat and feathers is reported to be widely practiced in the Morang Siwalk hills in far eastern Nepal (Basnet 2003). Meat is believed to generate heat and is often eaten as a delicacy in winter to cope with the cold; however, this has no proven scientific basis. Feathers are made into hand-fans, used in religious ceremonies, in traditional attire, such as worn by the Tharu people, in daily- and various traditional- ceremonies. People also keep individual birds in a cage, as 'guard' birds, because of their loud call. Indian Peafowl also suffers from the collection of its eggs, and probably from the effects of pesticides. Invasive alien plant species, notably *Mikania micrantha* is having an impact on its habitats, especially in Chitwan National Park, where the plant is rampant. The effects of fire may be quite significant in the breeding of the peafowl species, as with all other galliforms, but this has not yet been assessed. Grass- and firewood- collection in Nepal's lowland protected areas may impact its ecology. Similarly the collection of edible ferns, bamboo shoots, and wild fruits and vegetables from all protected areas are also additional threats to this species. Such activities disturb breeding birds, which may result in higher mortality due to exposure to predators.

Research for the Nepal Red Data Book revealed that although Indian Peafowl populations may seem stable in some protected areas, its numbers have depleted, and it has a reduced range outside the protected areas' system. It is threatened by habitat loss and deterioration. It is seriously threatened by hunting and trapping, at least in a few areas including Koshi Tappu and the Morang Siwalik hills, from where the species may have been extirpated. Based on above, assessment we concluded that the species qualifies for a 'Near Threatened' status. This means that it may be considered threatened with extinction in the near future, although it does not currently qualify for said status. If the present threats continue in the foreseeable future the Indian Peafowl may qualify for the 'Vulnerable' category.

To conserve the Indian Peafowl over the long term in Nepal, law should ban hunting, snaring, and trapping of the species. Population monitoring should be conducted throughout the country, both inside and outside protected areas. Systematic studies on impacts of *M. micrantha* and grass burning on the species are recommended.

Conservation awareness programmes should be carried out to alert local people to the species' current situation and to engage their support and involvement. Popular media should be used to reach out to the wider public.

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We would like to thank Ambika Khatiwada, National Trust for Nature Conservation for producing a distribution map of Indian Peafowl in Nepal. We are grateful to Dr. Rajan Amin, Zoological Society of London for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper. This paper is partially the result of ongoing work on the National Red List for Birds of Nepal, a joint initiative of the National Trust for Nature Conservation, Zoological Society of London, and Himalayan Nature, to fulfill the objective of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation, to assess all major animal taxa of Nepal.

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Notes on the breeding of the Brown Fish Owl *Ketupa zeylonensis*

Raju Vyas, Kartik Upadhayay, Mital R. Patel, Rahul D. Bhatt & Pritesh Patel

Vyas, R., Upadhayay, K., Patel, M. R., Bhatt, R. D., & Patel, P., 2013. Notes on the breeding of the Brown Fish Owl *Ketupa zeylonensis*. *Indian BIRDS* 8 (6): 147–151.
Raju Vyas, 505, Krishnadeep Tower, Mission Road, Fatehganj, Vadodara-390002, Gujarat, India. Email: *razoovyas@hotmail.com*
Kartik Upadhayay, 104, PremSagar Apartment, Nr. Rameshwar Temple, Elora Park, Vadodara, Gujarat, India. Email: *kartick_upadhayay35@yahoo.com*
Mital R. Patel, D-199 Girdhar Park Society, B/h Makarpura Bus Depot, Makarpura, Vadodara, Gujarat, India. Email: *mital.jsp@gmail.com*
Rahul D. Bhatt, C-123 Girdhar Park Society, B/h Makarpura Bus Depot, Makarpura, Vadodara, Gujarat, India.
Pritesh Patel, Near Pramukh Hospital, Atladara, Vadodara, Gujarat, India. Email: *pritesh_gis7@yahoo.com*
Manuscript received on 1 February 2013.

165. The Brown Fish Owl (*Ketupa zeylonensis leschenaultii*), found in few forests of the Gujarat. Photo: Kartik Upadhayay

Abstract

During March–April 2012, a nesting pair, and two chicks, of the Brown Fish Owl *Ketupa zeylonensis* were monitored, with the help of 'night vision cameras,' to study their food habits, and feeding behaviour. 192 feeding-flights of the parents were recorded within 23 nights. In this study, we identified 18 types of animals in their diet, including invertebrates, and vertebrates. Threat and status of the species were evaluated by a rapid habitat assessment along with a vigilant watch on each of the selected waterbodies; the presence of birds was then checked at night by repeated playback of pre-recorded calls of the species. Four active pairs were noted within the study area.

Introduction

Owls are one of the least researched groups of birds, not only due to their nocturnal and secretive lifestyle, but also because of their misconceived association with taboo and stigma in myth, folklore, and superstition. 36 species of owls [Tytonidae, and Strigidae] inhabit India (Grimmett *et al.* 1998; Rasmussen & Anderton 2005), 17 of which are recorded from Gujarat (Parasharya *et al.* 2004; Joshua *et. al.,* 2005), including the Brown Fish Owl *Ketupa zeylonensis.* [**165**].

All *Ketupa* species are large, powerful, and exclusively piscivorous nocturnal birds. Fish owls occur in a wide range of environments, from hot, humid, equatorial forests, to the cold boreal forest near the Arctic; they live by lakes, rivers, and streams with well-wooded banks, and feed mainly on relatively large fish, and other small aquatic, and terrestrial animals. The Brown Fish Owl is widely distributed, from the Mediterranean coast to the Indo-China region (van den Berg *et al.* 2010).

Slaght & Surmach (2008) stated that, in totality, very scanty and limited published literature is available on the *Ketupa* species. Published information is particularly insufficient on the ecology, and breeding biology, of *K. zeylonensis* (Dharmakumarsinhji 1955; Butler 1897). Published literature from its geographical range includes; Turkey (Megnin 1991; Yontem 2007), Middle-eastern countries (Benson 1970; Andrews 1995; Shirihai 1996), Pakistan (Eates 1939), India (Shashidhara 1989; Singh 2002), and Sri Lanka (Legge 1875).

The Brown Fish Owl *K. z. leschenaultii* is distributed widely in the forests of Gujarat, except Kachchh (Ali 1954; Dharmakumarsinhji 1955). Dharmakumarsinhji (1955) provided breeding information and stated it to be common in Gir forest, Gujarat.

We monitored a breeding pair of Brown Fish Owls and their nest for a month, from 28 March to 30 April 2012, and were able to record some new, and interesting information, especially the behavior of the breeding pair, and the food spectrum of the fledglings; we also assessed the status of the species in and around Jambughoda Wildlife Sanctuary and its reserved forest areas.

Study area

Our study area comprised Jambughoda Wildlife Sanctuary (hereafter JWS), and the surrounding reserved forests of Sukhhi dam, and Pavagadh hills (Gujarat, India; Fig. 1).

Jambughoda Wildlife Sanctuary: JWS (22°20–20°33'N, 73°35'–73°45'E) is located in the Panchmahal and Vadodara districts of Gujarat, India. The hills where it lies are the southern-most extension of the Aravalli range, forming the western fringe of the Vindhya mountain ranges (Pandya & Oza 1998). The sanctuary encompasses 130.38 km^2 of forest with altitudes ranging from 230 m to 354 m asl. There are no perennial rivers traversing the sanctuary, but River Sukhi, a tributary of River Narmada, runs almost parallel to its eastern boundary. A few perennial springs are present at Jhand, Jabban, and Ranjitnagar, and few check-dams have been constructed at several places in the sanctuary, including Kada, Targol, Lafani, and Dharia, and on the edge of the sanctuary a large reservoir, Dev dam has been constructed.

Reserved forests: There are numerous reserved forests (hereafter RF), of varying sizes (0.15–52.96 km^2), surrounding JWS, especially in and around the Pavagadh hills and in between Sukhi Dam. These RF fall within the administration range of Halol and Jambughoda tehsils of Panchmahal district, whereas and Waghodiya and Pavi-jetpur tehsils lie in Vadodara district. The habitat comprises large boulders, thorny scrub, and scarce vegetation cover, containing few waterbodies, which is a potential habitat for the species.

Forest types: Champion & Seth (1968) classify this landscape, including JWS, as Southern Tropical Dry Deciduous, further classified into four sub-types, i.e. 5A/C 1b dry teak forest, 5A/C 2 southern dry mixed deciduous forest, 5/E 9 dry bamboo brakes, and 3B/C 2 southern moist mixed deciduous forest.

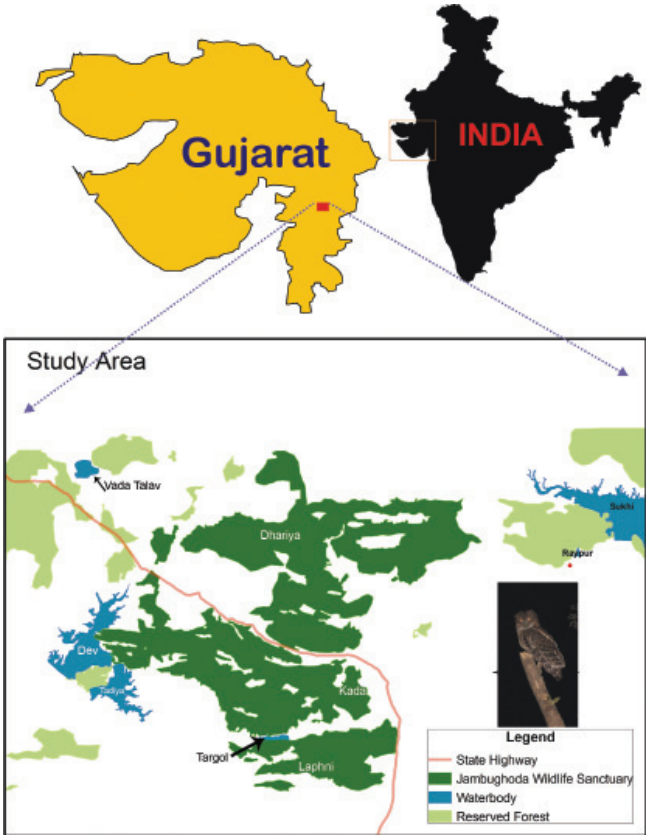


Photo: Kartik Upadhayay

Fig. 1. The map of study area showing the location site of nesting (red dot) of Brown Fish Owl *Ketupa zeylonensis leschenaultii* with waterbodies and reserved forests.

Methodology

We monitored a breeding pair of Brown Fish Owl, and a nest, at Raypur village (22°26'N, 73°49'E), from 28 March to 28 April 2012, in order to know the food spectrum and feeding behavior of the species. We also monitored the species for aspects of parental care. To evaluate the selection of prey, we identified the number and types of prey brought by the Brown Fish Owl.

The nest was monitored by using two automatic night vision cameras; one (Bushnell 119405) fixed at the top of the nest, and the other (Stealth Cam: STC-DVIRHDS1), level with the nest. Both cameras were fixed at distances of 2 and 2.5 m from the nest respectively.

Status of the species was evaluated by a reconnaissance assessment of the study area, involving a rapid survey of availability of the most potential habitat pockets available along the adjoining stable waterbodies. Thereafter, vigilance was maintained on each identified pocket and the bird's presence was then checked at night by repeated playback of its pre-recorded calls within the study area. The pre-recorded call (Sampling rate: 44100 Hz & Bit rates MP3 320000 bps) was download from the open source website: www.xenocanto.com. 22 nights (from March to June 2012), were spent for the assessment and about 20% area of total study area was covered.

Results

Nest and nest site: The nest was on a large 12 m '*mahuda*' tree (*Maduca indica*), with a girth of **c**. 3.85 m. It was located at a height of 3.30 m above ground level, in a small depression (30x25x8 cm), and was covered by three large branches [**166**]. The *mahuda* tree was at the edge of Sukhi RF and Raypur dam, surrounded by a few '*rathava-bhil*' tribal dwellings. The nest's dug out floor was covered with decayed bark dust, pieces of bark, along with a few thick twigs, dry leaves, and flight feathers.

Fledglings: We noticed two fledglings in the nest on 28 March 2012. They were about the size of an adult Spotted Owlet *Athene brama*, and almost a quarter of the size of their parents. We estimated the fledglings' age to be between 15 and 20 days [**167**]. They might have hatched during the second week, around 15 March 2012. The nestlings were very active, healthy, with their face disk covered with fluffy down, and body contour and wings covered with smaller feathers. One chick was slightly larger than the other [**168**].

Photos: Raju Vyas

166. The location and height of the nest of Brown Fish Owl *Ketupa zeylonensis* on the *Mahuda* tree *Madhuca indica* and an insat picture of the hatchlings with nest chamber.

168 & 169. The two nestlings of Brown Fish Owl *Ketupa zeylonensis* before and after one week of leaving of nest. Photos: Kartik Upadhayay & Raju Vyas

Both the nestlings remained calm and silent during the day, but at night, both were active after sunset, and continued screaming (*chih … chih … chhhhiiih*), and begging. The pitch of their screaming increased, and became louder, when a parent was around, or attended the nest. Between 12 and 14 April 2012, a small 'ear-tuft' was clearly visible on the head of the larger chick. On 21 April 2012 it had grown large and appeared absolutely distinct, with large bill bristles, similar to an adult. Both youngsters abandoned the nest within two days of each other. The first left on 23 April, and the second, on 25 April 2012. At that time, both fledgelings resembled the adults, and were almost their size [**169**]. Both spent 4–6 days on the same tree, in the upper canopy, and both were still being looked after by parents, who continued to fetch food for them. By the end of May 2012, the entire family disappeared from the site.

Feeding frequency: Both parents participated actively in feeding, and in taking care of the chicks. The first meal brought by an adult was between 1930 and 2000 hrs, and the last delivery was recorded between 0430 and 0530 hrs. An average of 8.34 feeding flights (n=192) were recorded nightly by the owls (both parents). The highest food delivery frequency was observed between 2200 and 0400 hrs (Fig. 2).

Food spectrum: Eighteen types of food items, belonging to various groups of invertebrates and vertebrates, were brought for the chicks by the parents, and were identified (Table 1). The parents made 192 feeding-flights within 23 nights of observations. The food items were identified as: 116 unidentified bugs, crabs, prawns, *etc*., 48 frogs and toads, 20 snakes, three lizards, four fishes, and one bird species. To do this we used images from the night vision cameras (both), collected pellets, and the remains of uneaten food from the nest cavity [**170**].

We noticed that snakes were always brought in decapitated. Both parents often regurgitated pellets under trees that were within a radius of 100 m of the nesting tree; usually used by them as staging points/posts before landing at, or leaving the nest.

Feeding behavior: Both parents attended the nest and chicks, and both were participated equally in activities of feeding and parental care. It was difficult to differentiate the adult male from the female, but often, both birds were at the nest together, or soon after one another; enabling us to tell apart the sexes on the basis of their sizes.

Both parents actively assisted in cutting prey into tiny pieces, so that hatchlings could swallow them easily. Whenever they brought a large prey item, a considerable amount of time was spent in cutting it up; especially when the prey comprised fishes, frogs, lizards, birds, or big snakes.

Photo: Kartik Upadhayay

167. First observation of 15-20 days old chicks *Ketupa zeylonensis* with common trinket snake *Colelognathus helena* for food.

Generally the parents brought food alternatively. Sometimes both came simultaneously, but fed the owlets one after the other. When one parent was busy feeding the chicks, the other perched on a nearby tree, and hooted; then they changed places, with the first adult inflating his/her throat, displaying the white patch on it, and hooting [**171**]. There were instances when both seemed to 'hoot' in duet. However, at such times, there was no audible sound, nor could it be heard on the video. Perhaps the Brown Fish Owl produces a low-frequency or low volume sound out of human aural range.

Status of species: The potential habitat of the species, within the study area, are water sources and water-logged areas, like perennial dams and ponds. Eight potential habitats / sites were selected and surveyed for the species. At six of these sites we detected the presence of the Brown Fish Owl, either by direct visual sighting, or heard their calls, or received indirect information of their presence (Table 2). Our rapid assessment, and habitat evaluation of the JWS area, and its surrounding reserved forests indicates the presence of four active pairs within the study area.

Threats: During the study, no direct threat to the species was observed. In May 2012 we received news, along with pictures, of a live owl entangled in fishing nets at Lafani dam, JWS [**172**]. This was evidence of an indirect threat to the species, as well as that of the presence of illegal fishing within a protected area. We also observed that all these water bodies are regularly used by a number of fishermen; either illegally or legally. Such fishing activities are higher in summer, which unfortunately, is when the species breed.

There are reports from official seizures/raids, about local tribes collecting eggs and birds for black magic, and also of an illegal trade in owls. But no fish owls were reported therein. Local '*Bhuva*' (shaman) usually use Barn Owls *Tyto alba*, Rock Eagle Owls *Bubo bengalensis*, Mottled Wood-owl *Strix occellata*, and Spotted Owlets, and *Glaucidium radiatum*, for traditional medicine and superstitious practices.

Discussion

The nocturnal and secretive lifestyle of the Brown Fish Owl has prevented people from studying it and so little information is available regarding its breeding and feeding biology. It is extremely difficult to study the owl without special night vision equipment. We could carry out our studies of the Brown Fish Owl only because we had access to electronic gadgets like sound recording equipment, and night vision cameras.

We observed the nesting biology of Brown Fish Owl from February to April, supporting Darmakumarsinhji's (1955) observations regarding its breeding season being from January

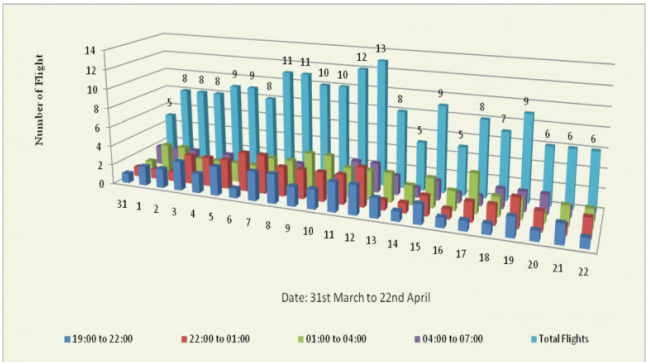


Fig. 2. The pictograph of flights frequency of Brown Fish Owl ***Ketupa zeylonensis*** in various timing slots of each nights.

to April. We observed newly hatched fledglings in May. The description of nests, and their locations also matched that of Darmakumarshinji (1955), who found the nests in the hollows of large trees on river banks in the Gir forest. We noted nests in the hollows of large mahuda tree on the edge of Sukhi reserved forest and Raypur dam.

Table 1. List of foods items of Brown Fish Owl *Ketupa zeylonensis* recorded during the study by the direct and indirect evidence

Animals	Class	Serial No	Common / Species name	
Invertebrates	Insect	1	Dung Beetle	Nest
		2	Unknown insect remains	Pellets
	Crustaceans	3	Prawn	Remains in nest Pellets
		4	Crab	Pellets, nest
Vertebrates	Fishes	5	*Channa punctatus*	Observed
		6	Unidentified fish species	Pellets
	Amphibians	7	*Duttaphrynus melanostictus*	Remains in nest, Observed
		8	*Euphlyctis cyanophlyctis*	Observed
		9	*Hoplobatrachus tigerinus*	Remains in nest, Observed
		10	*Kaloula tebrobanica*	Observed
		11	Unidentified frog species	Observed
	Reptiles	12	*Calotes versicolor*	Observed
		13	Unidentified lizard species	Observed
		14	*Colelognathus helena*	Observed
		15	*Xenochrophis piscator*	Observed
		16	Unidentified snake species	Observed
	Birds	17	Babbler (*Turdoides* sp.)	Remains in nest
		18	Unidentified bird species	Observed

On 28 March, we located a nest with two–three weeks' old fledglings in it; which left the nest after 23 and 25 April. This shows that the young spent almost five–six weeks in the nest, during which period, they were fed by only by the adult birds. The parents fed over 18 types of animals including invertebrates and vertebrates. It is perhaps noteworthy that fish comprised a very small proportion of the food that was brought to the nest for the young birds; this is in light of the species being a 'fishing' owl. However, a high number of the non-fish prey items were directly dependant on the wetlands. We did not observe any mammal in their dietary of the young birds, though Darmakumarsinhji (1955) included small mammals in their diet, and Mikkola (2012) includes small rodents. Small-sized primates also form a part of the dietary of Brown Fish Owl in Sri Lanka (Gamage *et al.* 2009).

Ali (1954) recorded the presence of Brown Fish Owl in most of the forests of Gujarat, except in Kachchh. There have been recent sight records of the species from a few protected areas of Gujarat, including Thol Wildlife Sanctuary (Anonymous 2002),

170. The types of prey items found in the nest chamber and pellets.

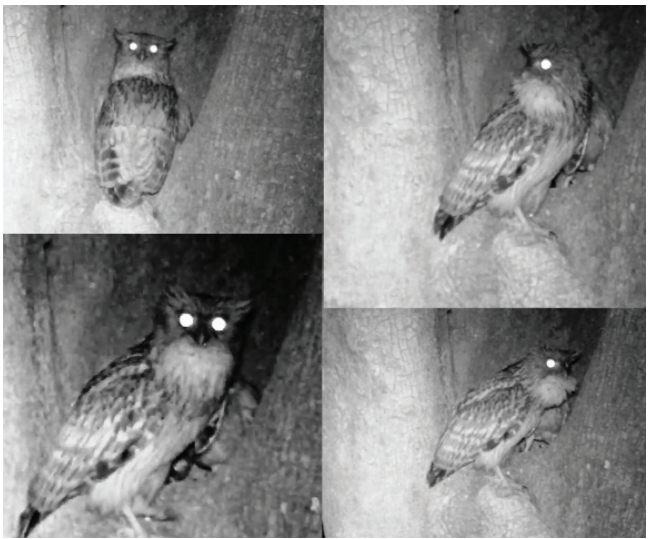
Photo: Raju Vyas

Ratnamahals Wildlife Sanctuary (Singh *et al.* 2002), Purna Wildlife Sanctuary (Pandey *et al.* 2004), and Barda Wildlife Sanctuary (Anonymous 2006). However, on the basis of this sketchy information, it is impossible to determine the status of the species in the state; this requires a long term study.

We recorded four active pairs of Brown Fish Owl in summer within the study area. This could be an underestimate, as we conducted a rapid habitat assessment survey.

The nest of the Brown Fish Owl was located on the edge of the forest and water body in proximity of human habitation, showing a unique choice of nesting site by the species. The birds have been using the same site for the past three years as per the local people, which is a noteworthy aspect as there have been reports of local forest dwellers/ tribes involved in illegal bird trade.

All owls face various threats, including the great demand for live birds and their body parts for superstitious rituals. Therefore these birds are never allowed to exist peacefully in the residential areas, and if nests are found, the local tribes destroy them. A small number of owls are trapped and sold in local markets for black magic (Devkar 2009; Ahmed 2010; Mikkola 2012). Fortuitously, in this case, the nest-site successfully protected



171. The incidence of parent Brown Fish Owl reciprocating the pre recorded calls.

Table 2. List of waterbodies surveyed during the studyfor the rapid assessment of the Brown FishOwl *Ketupa zeylonensis* and presence of the species by the direct and indirect evidences in the study area, Gujarat

Name of the waterbody	Location	Size of water-body (km)	Coordinates	No. of birds	Remarks
Kada Dam	Within JWS	2.6	22°22′N, 73°42′E	2	Sighting
Targol Dam	Within JWS	4.2	22°20′N, 73°39′E	1	Sighting
Lafani Dam	Within JWS	3.0	22°19′N, 73°41′E	1	Call +Report
Dharia Dam	Within JWS	3.6	22°27′N, 73°37′E	0	No
Dev-Tadiya	Edge of JWS	16.7	22°23′N, 73°33′E	1	Call
Sukhi Dam	Edge of RF	29.04	22°27′N, 73°52′E	1	Sighting
Raypur Dam	Edge of RF	2.1	22°26′N, 73°49′E	2	Nest Sight
VadaTalav	Edge of RF	4.4	22°23′N, 73°33′E	0	No

the chicks from the surrounding tribal population, indicating a remarkable choice of nesting site by the species.

Photo: Jigar Parmar

172. Evidence of direct threat on the Brown Fish Owl: fishing nets.

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Recovery of a Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris borealis* from Thaikadapuram beach, Kasaragod district, Kerala

Praveen J., Muhamed Jafer Palot, & Dipu Karuthedathu

Praveen J., Palot, M. J., Karuthedathu, D., 2013. Recovery of a Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris borealis* from Thaikadapuram beach, Kasaragod district, Kerala. *Indian BIRDS* 8 (6): 152–153.

Praveen J, B303, Shriram Spurthi, ITPL Main Road, Brookefields, Bengaluru 560037, Karanataka, India. Email: *paintedstork@gmail.com* [PJ]
Muhamed Jafer Palot, Zoological Survey of India, Western Ghats Research Centre, Jafer Khan Colony, Kozhikode 673006, Kerala. India. Email: *palot.zsi@gmail.com* [MJP]
Dipu Karuthedathu, #301, Jaya Emerald, Maruthinagar, Bengaluru 560075, Karnataka, India. Email: *dipu_k@yahoo.com* [DK]

Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris borealis* is a large seabird that breeds on islands and cliffs in the Mediterranean Sea, as well as in the Atlantic Ocean in the Canary Islands (Spain), and Berlengas Islands and the Azores (Portugal). After breeding, birds from the Atlantic colonies predominantly winter off the coast of South America and southern Africa, with some individuals from the Mediterranean wintering in the area of the Canary Current (Navarro & González-Solís 2009). Until recently, Cory's Shearwater was generally considered polytypic, with *C. d. diomedea* (Scopoli, 1769) in the Mediterranean, *C. d. borealis* (Cory, 1881) breeding in the eastern Atlantic, from the Berlengas in Portugal to the Azores and the Canary Islands, and a third subspecies, *C. d. edwardsii*, endemic to the Cape Verde Islands (del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). The bird has not been reported previously from South Asia (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012) or from Oriental Region (Inskipp *et al.* 1996).

This note describes a wind–blown specimen of Cory's Shearwater recovered from Thaikadappuram beach, Kasaragod district, Kerala (12°14'N, 76°06'E), which is *c.* 5 km from the nearest town of Nileshwaram.

On the morning of 21 September 2013, K. Praveen Kumar, of Nileshwaram, informed us about a seabird, which fishermen had been recovered the previous day (1100 hrs), from the turbulent waves on Thaikadappuram beach. The bird died later in evening and was buried. There was a low-pressure zone off the coast of south-western India during 19–20 September, with choppy seas, and a weather warning had been issued to fishermen.

173. Cory's Shearwater upper side.

174. Cory's Shearwater under side.

175. Cory's Shearwater beak.

Photos: M. J. Palot

175. Cory's Shearwater beak measurement.

Photographs taken by K. P. Kumar showed a tubenose with pale under parts; he suspected it was a Streaked Shearwater *C. leucomelas*. We requested the bird be exhumed so that other birders along with us could have a look at this, otherwise difficult to observe, species; which turned out to be more interesting than initially thought. It had no pale areas (contra Streaked Shearwater) on its face [**173-174**], and its thick pale beak, with a dark tip [**175**], eliminated an unlikely pale morph of a Wedge-tailed Shearwater *A. pacifica*. With little else to consider, the bird was safely identified as a Cory's Shearwater. The specimen was deposited in the collections of Zoological Survey of India, Kozhikode with reference number ZSI/WGRC/IR/V No. 2466.

After returning from the trip, during discussions, our correspondents indicated that the two erstwhile races of Cory's Shearwater, the Atlantic population of *C. d. borealis*, and the Mediterranean population of *C. d. diomedea*, had now been elevated to two distinct species: the latter, *C. diomedea*, known as Scopoli's Shearwater (Sangster *et al.* 2010). Though most of our correspondents agreed that the Kerala bird was definitely Cory's, at least some of them expressed the necessity to be absolutely sure by taking closer photographs and biometric measurements. The differences between the two species are subtle, Scopoli's Shearwater is known to show extensive pale bases to the under primaries, apart from being smaller (Cramp 1977; Gutiérrez 1998). One of us (MJP) re-examined the specimen and confirmed that the bird had no pale bases to the primaries on both the wings [**176-177**]. The bird was weighed (548 gms) and its biometrics taken (Table 1), being within the range of Cory's Shearwater (Table 2). Though the bird could not be definitely sexed, it is more likely to be a male rather than a large female.

Recent studies in southern Africa show that Cory's Shearwater out-number Scopoli's 6:1 on the continental shelf. In the offshore areas influenced by recently shed Agulhas Rings, Cory's was ten times more numerous than Scopoli's, with foraging flocks concentrating at the edges of the rings. Off Cape Town, where Cory's predominated, east- / south-east- bound migratory movements were observed (Campuysen & van den Meer 2001). The closest sightings of this species are from the Persian Gulf waters of UAE and Oman from where three recent sightings are reported (Campbell *et al.* 2013). Hence, it is more likely to expect Cory's Shearwater rather than Scopoli's in the Indian Ocean.

176. Cory's Shearwater showing primary coverts.

Photos: M. J. Palot

177. Cory's Shearwater showing primary coverts

Table 1: Biometrics of the specimen

Biometric	Measurement (in mm)
Length	550
Wingspan	1220
Wing	360
Culmen	56
Bill Depth	18
Tail	153
Tarsus	54
Foot	73
Claw	11

Table 2. Comparison of biometrics (in mm) of *C. diomedea* & *C. borealis* (Cramp 1977) with the Kerala specimen

	C. borealis (♂)	*C. borealis* (♀)	*C. diomedea* (♂)	*C. diomedea* (♀)	Kerala bird
Wing	361–367	347–363	339–351	330–347	360
Culmen	51–59	49–57	49–55	45–50	56

We wish to thank W. R. P. Bourne, Oscar Campbell, Neil Cheshire, Robert Flood, David James, Rajah Jayapal, Tim Inskipp, Krys Kazmierczak, John Martin, Aasheesh Pittie, Mike Prince, and Huw Roberts for help with identification and references. Many thanks to K. Praveen Kumar who informed us about the specimen, and C. Abhinand for taking the photographs.

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First record of Pallid Scops Owl *Otus brucei* in Rajasthan, India

Harkirat Singh Sangha & Surat Singh Poonia

Sangha, H. S., & Poonia, S. S., 2013. First record of Pallid Scops Owl *Otus brucei* in Rajasthan, India. *Indian BIRDS* 8 (6): 154–155.
Harkirat Singh Sangha, B-27, Gautam Marg, Hanuman Nagar, Jaipur 302021-9 India. Email:*harkirat.sangha@gmail.com* [HSS]
Surat Singh Poonia, ACF, Tal Chhapar Wildlife Sanctauary, Tal Chhapar, District Churu, Rajasthan 331502 India. Email: *suratpoonia@gmail.com* [SSP]
Manuscript received on 8 March 2012

The Pallid Scops Owl *Otus brucei* is a small, pale, and uniformly sandy-coloured owl, lacking horizontal streaks and vermiculation. Its plumage has been described as bark-like, and its colour varies from sandy to sandy-gray (Duncan 2003). It has often been considered a sub-species of *O. scops*, but it is doubtless a separate species living sympatrically with the latter in some regions without interbreeding (König & Weick 2008). The species is often said to be monotypic, but four species are listed by Mikkola (2012): nominate *brucei; O. b. obsoletus; O. b. semenowi, and O. b. exiguus.*

It is found from the Middle-East (south-central Turkey, northern Syria, Iraq, and eastern Arabia) to western and central Asia, south to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and north-western India. Although it is present all year round in south-eastern Arabia, and Iran, other populations are mostly migratory, wintering in the Levant region, north-eastern Egypt, Arabia, and in India south to Mumbai (König *et al.* 1999). Specimens of the nominate *brucei* (breeding in the northern Central Asia) have been collected in autumn, and winter, in Pakistan, and the Mumbai region of western India, but not elsewhere (Cramp 1985).

It is considered as an imperfectly known species within the Indian Subcontinent (Ali & Ripley 1981). In India it is a rare visitor (Grimmett *et al.* 1998). del Hoyo *et al.* (1999) describe it as a rare visitor in India. Baker (1927) described it as a straggler to India. It has been recorded only on few occasions from India and all the recent records are from northern and western India (Sangha & Malik 2010). Its distribution status in Pakistan is that of a scarce resident and local migrant, summering in the hills, with a few winter records from the plains (Roberts1991). Interestingly, in the latest work on the owls its wintering area in the Indian Subcontinent has been reduced to include only Punjab and Sind (Pakistan) and parts of Gujarat and northern littoral Maharashtra (König & Weick 2008), although König *et al.* (1999) included the whole of Pakistan, northern India from Kashmir to Madhya Pradesh, and in the east up to Bangladesh. Mikkola (2012) shows it summering in some parts of Pakistan and wintering in Sind, Kashmir, south-western Rajasthan, Gujarat and littoral Maharashtra south to Mumbai.

On 14 December 2011, one dead scops owl was found on the road at Tal Chhappar, Churu district, Rajasthan by SSP. On 17 December 2011 HSS carefully examined the specimen at Tal Chhappar. Overall the bird looked creamy-grey with fine sharp black streaks of variable size all over including feathers on the tarsi reaching the basal part of toes. Unfortunately, in the photograph [**178**] the bird looked rather sandy-rufous.

Coincidentally, a scops owl was photographed by Pradip Krishen, author of *Trees of Delhi*, in, "early February [2011] inside Rao Jodha Park," next to Mehrangarh, Jodhpur. At a chance

Photo: S. S. Poonia

178. Pallid Scops Owl at Tal Chhapar, Churu, Rajasthan.

Photo: Pradip Krishen

179. Pic 2. Pallid Scops Owl at Mehrangarh, Jodhpur, Rajasthan.

meeting with him that year, during the Jaipur Literature Festival, he informed me about this and later sent me the photograph. The bird in his photograph [**179**] was easily identified as a Pallid Scops Owl.

We are not aware of any previous records of the species from Rajasthan although in the surrounding states there have been a spate of sightings. It has been regularly recorded from Gujarat (Sangha & Malik 2010), and a specimen was collected from Ambala, Haryana (Roberts 1991). Recently one bird was flushed on 23 January 2013 from reed beds on an islet in the lake at Harike Bird Sanctuary, Punjab. (Narbir Singh Kahlon *in litt.*, vide email of 30 January 2013). Mohd Shahnavaz Khan (WWF-India team leader based at Harike) saw and photographed the species at Kirria check post (31°10′N, 74° 58′E) of Harike Bird Sanctuary, Punjab, on 28 December 2012. The owl was seen sitting in a, 'cliff-side hole of an elevated alluvial deposition,' on the bank of the Beas River (Shahnawaz *in litt.*, email of 7 March 2013).

Thus recent sightings of the Pallid Scops Owl in Rajasthan are not unexpected. Tal Chhapar and Mehrangarh birds constitute the first records of the species from Rajasthan. It is very likely that the species has been overlooked in the past.

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Occurrence of Black-capped Kingfisher *Halcyon pileata* in Satpura National Park, Madhya Pradesh

Anant Pande, Gaurang Patwardhan & Amol Kumbhar

Pande, A., Patwardhan, G., & Kumbhar, A., 2013. Occurrence of Black-capped Kingfisher *Halcyon pileata* in Satpura National Park, Madhya Pradesh. *Indian BIRDS* 8 (6): 155.

Anant Pande, Wildlife Institute of India, P.O Box no 18, Chandrabani, Dehradun 248001, Uttarakhand, India. Email: *anant@wii.gov.in*
Gaurang Patwardhan, Wildlife Institute of India, P.O Box no 18, Chandrabani, Dehradun 248001, Uttarakhand, India. Email: *gaupenster@gmail.com*
Amol Kumbhar, Wildlife Institute of India, P.O Box no 18, Chandrabani, Dehradun 248001, Uttarakhand, India. Email: *amolkumbhar13@gmail.com*
Manuscript received on 29 May 2011.

Black-capped Kingfisher *Halcyon pileata* is mainly a coastal kingfisher found in India along the coasts of Maharashtra in the west and up to the coasts of West Bengal in the east. It has been described to often move up-river, above tidal limits, and sometimes farther inland along larger rivers in forested habitats (Grimmett *et al.* 1998; Ali 2002; Rasmussen *et al.* 2005).

We present here the second sight record of the species from Satpura National Park. On a usual camera checking trip in the morning of 16 January 2011, we saw a Black-capped Kingfisher perched on a dry 'ghiria' tree *Chloroxylon swietenia* in Topideo beat of Kamti range (22°31′N, 78°17′E). The individual was quickly identified by the presence of a black cap on its head, distinctly separated from its body by a white collar on hind neck. Its beak was bright red, and the under parts rufous. However we could not take a picture as it flew away before the camera was ready. It showed the diagnostic white patch on the wings during flight. The aerial distance of the location was about 1.33 km from the nearest river, Nagdwari, one of the major perennial streams in the park. Earlier, Whattle (2000) sighted the bird in the park near Sonbhadra River in late October 1999. The bird was not seen again for the next one and half month we were inside the park.

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180. Birds were seen in an area of terraced fields on gentle slopes, with a thin cover of trees.

Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*, Brambling *F. montifringilla*, and Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella* in Himachal Pradesh, India

Manoj Sharma, C. Abhinav & Devinder Singh Dhadwal

Sharma, M., Abhinav, C., & Dhadwal, D. S., 2013. Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*, Brambling *F. montifringilla*, and Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella* in Himachal Pradesh, India. *Indian BIRDS* 8 (6): 156–157.

Manoj Sharma, Village Shankarpur, Ramnagar, District Nainital 244715, Uttrakhand, India. Email: *treeswift@gmail.com* [MS]
C. Abhinav, Village & P.O. Ghurkari, Kangra 176001, Himanchal Pradesh, India. Email: *drabhinav.c@gmail.com* [CA]
Devinder Singh Dhadwal, ACF, H. P. Forest Dept., Wildlife Circle, Dharamshala 176215, Himanchal Pradesh, India. Email: *dd123.singh@gmail.com* [DSD]

During the winter of 2011–2012 the areas above Dharamshala (Himachal Pradesh, India) saw frequent snowfall, and on 7 January 2012 there was very heavy snowfall in the upper regions of Ilaka, Ghallu, and Dharamkot, with light snowfall at elevations as low as *c.* 400–500 m asl around Dharamshala. Unusual bird activity was observed during January and February 2012 at Upper Barol (32°20'N, 76°33'E; *c.* 1165 m asl) located *c.* 3.5 km from Dharamshala, and the area was frequently visited during that period. The area is divided by a narrow boulder-strewn hill stream with terraced fields on gentle slopes having a thin cover of small to medium trees on the field edges. It is surrounded by numerous old and new houses, and several new dwellings were under construction on the terraced fields, or rather, where these had existed in the recent past [**180**]. Probably pushed down by severe cold, several unusual species were recorded, including large flocks of Snow Pigeon *Columba leuconota* (80–100 birds on 24 January 2012), Plain Mountain Finch *Leucosticte nemoricola* (a single flock of upto 400 birds on 22 January 2012), and flocks of 10–15 Pine Bunting *Emberiza leucocephalos*. Species of particular interest—Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*, Brambling *F. montifringilla*, and Yellowhammer *E. citrinella*—were observed on various occasions.

Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

On 22 January 2012, two male, and two–three female Chaffinches [**181-182**] were observed in a flock of Plain Mountain Finches (upto 400 birds) and Bramblings. On 24 January 2012 two males and upto four females were observed. The small flock was seen every day during 27–29 January 2012. On 18 February 2012 one male and two females were observed in the company of Brambling. All the Chaffinches were in non-breeding plumage. The Chaffinch is a buff-brown finch with two white wing-bars and a small white carpal patch on blackish wings. In non-breeding plumage the male has a dark brown crown, a broad buff supercilium, and a yellow bill tipped with black. The female is much duller, has browner sides of neck, dark bill, and a diagnostic wing and tail pattern (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).

The Chaffinch is a winter visitor to the Indian Subcontinent. Its status in Pakistan is given as, 'irregular but by no means uncommon,' and, 'in some years common in Baluchistan,' (Roberts 1992). It is recorded from Nepal on a few occasions (Inskipp & Inskipp 1985), and is a vagrant to Bhutan (Bishop 1999; Spirenburg 2005). The species was first recorded from India in December 1982 at Corbett National Park (Madge 1985). There are several records of the species thereafter, mostly from the Himalayas and north-western India: Garhwal Himalayas during 1991–1994 (Myers & Singh 2006), and during March 1999 (Robson 1999), Harike, Punjab in November 1997 (Robson 1998), Manali, Himachal Pradesh during1996–1997 (Prasad 2006), and as far east as Siang Valley in Arunachal Pradesh (Newton 2002). It was recorded at least on 33 occasions during 1996–2001 from areas around Dharamshala from 700–3300 m asl (Robson 2000; den Beston 2004a). It appears to be a regular visitor to areas around Dharamshala, and the present sightings strengthen the view that the area is its stronghold in India.

181. Male Chaffinch *F. coelebs*.

Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla*

About ten birds were observed on 22 January 2012 in the Chaffinch and Plain Mountain Finch flock mentioned above. There was one male in partial breeding plumage, three–four males in non-breeding plumage, and rest were females in non-breeding plumage. The male in partially breeding plumage showed much black on its head and mantle, a black-tipped yellow beak, brighter orange throat, breast, and scapulars. On 24 January 2012 we counted up to 20 birds comprising eight males, the remaining being females; all in non-breeding plumage. The same flock was observed till 28 January 2012. On 29 January 2012 CA counted at least 36 birds in trees, and later, feeding on terraced fields, of which only one male was in partial breeding plumage; the rest, 12–15 males, and the remaining, females, were in non-breeding plumage. This is the largest flock of Brambling [**183-184**] ever recorded in India. The birds were present in the area at least till 18 February 2012 when six–eight birds were recorded. According to Rasmussen & Anderton (2012), Brambling is a distinctive finch with orange breast and flanks, large white rump-patch, blackish wings, with white wing-bars, and carpal patch; peaked crown; notched tail lacking significant white. The breeding male has a black bill, head, and mantle, and brighter orange throat, breast,

182. Female Chaffinch *F. coelebs*. Photos: C. Abhinav

183. Male Brambling *F. montifringilla*

184. Female Brambling *F. montifringilla*.

upper sides, and shoulder. Non-breeding males have a black-tipped yellowish bill, the head and mantle being mostly pale-buff. The female is duller, with blackish crown-stripes on a pale grey-brown head.

The Brambling is a winter visitor to the Indian Subcontinent. It is common in winters in Baluchistan and on spring migration in NWFP and Chitral in Pakistan (Roberts 1992), has been recorded in Nepal on a few occasions (Inskipp & Inskipp 1985; Robson 2006), and is a vagrant to Bhutan (Spierenburg 2005). In India, Ward (1906) records the species migrating through Kashmir, and Pfister (2004) describes it from Ladakh as a rare vagrant. In Himachal Pradesh it is recorded from Manali (Robson 1997; Prasad 2006), and from Dharamshala, where it was recorded atleast on twelve occasions during 1997–2001 (Robson 2000; den Besten 2004a) from elevations above 1900 m asl, except one bird seen on 3 January 2000 at Kanyara (1300 m asl). The largest number of birds recorded being three, at Ilaka (3300 m asl) on 4 November 1997. Based on the present sightings, it seems that the areas around Dharamshala are this species' stronghold in India.

Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella*

At least two non-breeding Yellowhammer males were observed on various occasions amongst a flock of Pine Buntings. There is a strong possibility that there could have been some females that may have been overlooked, as there are subtle differences between Yellowhammer and Pine Bunting females. One bird was seen on 22 January 2012 in a flock of 12–15 Pine Buntings. Two birds were seen with a loose flock of Pine Buntings on 24 January 2012. A single bird was again sighted on 27 and 29 January 2012.

The Yellowhammer [**185**] is a winter vagrant to the Indian Subcontinent. It is a large bunting (Rasmussen and Anderton 2005) characterised by a combination of a relatively nondescript face pattern, yellow coloration on head and under parts, rufous rump, and some white in its outer tail feathers (Byers *et al*. 1995).

It is found over most of Europe (del Hoyo *et al*. 2011) and east of its distribution range in Asia, it winters in southern Kazakhstan (rare in Turkmenia and Tadzhikstan) and northern Mongolia, and is a vagrant in northern China (Cramp *et al*. 1994). The species was first recorded from the Indian Subcontinent from Kagbani, Nepal (2810 m asl) in February 1981, and has been subsequently recorded on a few occasions in Nepal (Inskipp & Inskipp 1985). It was first recorded from India when a single male was found at Tikse near Leh in the trans-Himalayan region of Ladakh in December 1981 (Williams & Delany 1986; Mallon 1987; Psister 2004). den Besten (2004b) gives unconfirmed and undated records of two birds at 1200–1300 m asl from the Dhauladhar range around Dharamshala, observed between 1997 and 2003. The present observations are the third record for India. These are the lowest elevation records of this species from the Indian Subcontinent and also the first photographic record from the region.

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185. Male Yellowhammer *E. citrinella*.
Photos: C. Abhinav

Sighting of Chinese Pond Heron *Ardeola bacchus* from Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

Samyak Kaninde

Kaninde, S., 2013. Sighting of Chinese Pond Heron *Ardeola bacchus* from Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India. *Indian BIRDS* 8 (6): 158.
Samyak Kaninde, #401, 3rd Block, Doshi Etopia-II, Perungudi, Chennai,600096. Email: samyakk@gmail.com
Manuscript received on 9 April 2013.

The Chinese Pond Heron *Ardeola bacchus,* which closely resembles the more widespread Indian Pond Heron *A. grayii,* is indistinguishable in the field from the latter except in its breeding plumage. Though it is slightly larger by 8–10 cm, this difference is difficult to judge in the field. The immature, and non-breeding plumages of the Chinese Pond Heron are similar to those of the Indian Pond Heron, and hence it is a very difficult to separate them in those plumages.

Mostly a resident of China and Eastern Asia, it is believed to migrate to the Andaman Islands in winter. Very few records exist from the Indian mainland, all from north-eastern India (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005). *A. bacchus* prefers marshes, paddies, and water bodies, for feeding. Only a couple of photographs of this species, in its breeding plumage, are known from the country. In its breeding plumage, it has a maroon-chestnut head and neck, and slaty-black scapulars / mantle. This note describes the first sighting of this species in southern India, at Kelambakkam Lake, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India (12°46'N, 80°14'E).

While birding at 0639 hrs on the cloudy morning of 30 March 2013 at Kelambakkam Backwaters, *c.* 30 km south of Chennai, I saw an unusual pond heron with a dark, chestnut-coloured head, neck and breast, *c.* 12–15 m from the shore [**198**]. I recognised that it was a lone Chinese Pond Heron, feeding in the backwaters. After reassuring myself of its identification, I clicked some record photographs of the species; taking more a little later, as it was at the same place till 0719 hrs. Subsequently it flew behind some bushes and was lost to sight. I visited the same place, in the evening, and on following subsequent days in the morning, but was unable to see the bird. A fellow birdwatcher, Gnanaskandan Keshav, also spotted it in the morning of 2 April 2013, at the very same place, but just for couple of minutes. It disappeared before he could take photographs. It is likely that the bird, on its return migration from the Andamans, might have been blown to the coast by high winds, or unfavorable conditions at sea.

The Chinese Pond Heron is a vagrant to Chennai's coast as there are no previous records of this species from the southern India. It has been reported breeding in Assam, based on birds seen there in partly breeding plumage, is a scarce spring passage migrant in Manipur and the Assam Valley, and is a scarce winter migrant to the Andamans (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005). The distribution maps in the bird guides indicate the Assam population as sedentary; there could be some local migration going on (Grimmett *et al.* 2011).

I wish to thank Praveen M., Praveen J., and Gnanaskandan Keshav for their help with identification, distribution, and searching the literature for me. I also thank them for helping me write this note.

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Photo: S. Kaninde

198. Chinese Pond Heron at Chennai.

Chinese Pond Heron *Ardeola bacchus* in Rajasthan, India

Surat Singh Poonia, Manoj Sharma & Harkirat Singh Sangha

Poonia, S.S., Sharma, M., & Sangha, H.S., 2013. Chinese Pond Heron *Ardeola bacchus* in Rajasthan, India. *Indian BIRDS* 8 (6): 159–160.
Surat Singh Poonia, ACF, Tal Chhapar Wildlife Sanctuary, Churu district 331502, Rajasthan, India. Email: *suratpoonia@gmail.com* [SSP]
Manoj Sharma, Village Shankarpur, Ramnagar, District Nainital 244715, Uttarakhand, India. Email: *treeswift@gmail.com* (Corresponding author) [MS]
Harkirat Singh Sangha, B-27, Gautam Marg, Hanuman Nagar, Jaipur 302021, Rajasthan, India. Email: *harkirat.sangha@gmail.com* [HSS]
Manuscript received on 10 June 2013.

On 1 June 2013 at 1310 hrs, a curious looking pond heron was seen and photographed by SSP at a small waterbody at Tal Chhapar Wildlife Sanctuary (27°48'N, 74°26'E; 301 m asl), Rajasthan, India. When approached, the bird flew and settled a little distance away in the company of three Indian Pond Herons *Ardeola grayii.* The image was sent to MS, HSS and Abhijit Menon-Sen for identification. The bird in the image was a pond heron with a chestnut head, neck and breast, long chestnut nape plumes, black mantle, white underparts, black-tipped yellow beak, and yellow orbital patch. As the plumage was unmistakable, MS identified it as a Chinese Pond Heron *A. bacchus* having seen the species previously in north-eastern India [**189**]. On 6 June 2013 at 1745 hrs, SSP saw a Chinese Pond Heron, probably the same bird, at Parihara pond (27°55'N, 74°33'E; 312 m asl), *c.*18–20 km north-east of Tal Chhapar.

Kazmierczak (2000) gives its status from the Indian Subcontinent as scarce or rare, localised or patchily distributed resident. In India it is found mainly in north-eastern India and the Andaman Islands (Grimmett *et al.* 1998, 2011). In Assam valley, it has been recorded from Kaziranga National Park (Choudhury 2003, 2004; Barua 2005), Gibbon Wildlife Sanctuary (Borthakur 2009) and Tingrai, Tinsukia district (Choudhury 2010). It has been reported from Manipur (Ali & Ripley 1978) and from Arunachal Pradesh at Itanagar (Singh 1995), and Namdapha National Park (Srinivasan *et al.* 2010). It has been collected from the Andamans (Butler 1900) with specimens from South Andaman and Narcondam Island (Abdulali 1976, 1980). Within the Indian Subcontinent, it is also known to occur in Bangladesh (Harvey 1990; Thompson & Johnson 1996; Siddiqui *et al.* 2008) and as a vagrant in Sri Lanka (Hoffmann 1996; Robson 1996). There is a record from Bhutan (Ali *et al.* 1996) but Rasmussen & Anderton (2005) doubt its validity as the ZSI specimen is not clearly identifiable. Globally it occurs in Mongolia, China, Japan, Indochina, Borneo, Sumatra, Sulawesi and Ryukyu Island (del Hoyo *et al.* 1992; Dickinson 2003; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). The species is known for a certain degree of vagrancy as it has occurred at Guam Islands (USA), and the Northern Mariana Islands (USA) in the Pacific Ocean (BirdLife International 2013).

Though the Chinese Pond Heron is not known to occur west of north-eastern India, there is a record of the bird in its breeding plumage from Bhavnagar, Gujarat, from May 1980 (Parasharya 1983; Parasharya *et al.* 2004), which all major works on Indian ornithology seem to have overlooked. The present records are the first photographic evidence of the occurrence of the species in areas far west of its known range in north-eastern India; its first records for the state of Rajasthan, and for northern India; and also, globally, its western-most records.

Photo: S. S. Poonia

189. Chinese Pond Heron at Tal Chhapar Wildlife Sanctuary.

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Mangrove Pitta *Pitta megarhyncha* from Sundarbans, West Bengal, India

Sujan Chatterjee

Chatterjee, S., 2013. Mangrove Pitta *Pitta megarhyncha* fro Sundarbans, West Bengal, India. *Indian BIRDS* 8 (6): 160–161.
Sujan Chatterjee, DB 75 Salt Lake City, Kolkata 700064, West Bengal, India. Email: sujan75@gmail.com

The Mangrove Pitta *Pitta megarhyncha* is a locally common resident of Myanmar, southern Thailand, peninsular Malaysia, and Singapore, apart from southern Bangladesh, and Sumatra (Robson 2005). Its range in South Asia is known to be restricted to the coast of Bangladesh (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Its natural habitat is specialised and restricted to subtropical or tropical mangrove forests and stands of nipa palm *Nypa fruticans* (Lok *et al.* 2009). It has a black head, a buff-coloured crown, white chin, and buff under-parts. The shoulders and mantle are greenish and the vent is reddish. Juveniles have a similar plumage but are duller. This pitta resembles the Blue-winged Pitta *P. moluccensis* but can be distinguished by its much heavier bill. Its call is transcribed as "*wieuw-wieuw*," has been noted to be 'more slurred' than that of a Blue-winged Pitta (Robson 2005). It tends to be vocal while breeding, but silent at other times (Lok *et al.* 2009).

Ali & Ripley (1987) list only a single specimen collected from Bangladesh in 1925. Kazmierczak (2000) maps two records from Bangladesh while Grimmett *et al.* (2011) map only a single record. Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) indicate its range as Sundarbans of Bangladesh, though they map the entire coast of Bangladesh as its range. Though all the regional guides considered this bird as absent from the Indian Sundarbans, I always had a hunch that it was there. We heard calls of this bird several times in the 1990s but there were no sightings because of the inaccessibility of the terrain. There was one unconfirmed record of the bird in September 1997 from Sundarbans but no photo evidence was gathered.

On 08 March 2009, I was leading a tour to Sundarbans and was heading towards Bali Island. Our boatman mentioned he has an injured bird in a box, which he wanted me to have a look

Photo: S. Chatterjee

190. Mangrove Pitta.

at. And there it was, a Mangrove Pitta! It sat in a corner of the box, with its eyes closed. The bird had apparently hit its head against the windowpane of one of the huts, and had collapsed. I moved it to a secure location, and took a few pictures [**190**], and let it rest in the box for a few hours. Later in the day, as the bird recovered from its shock, it was released in the mangroves.

This was perhaps the first photographic evidence of the bird from India. Since then, the bird has been seen, and photographed, several times in this area [**191**], especially from the Sudhanyakhali watchtower (22°06'N, 88°48'E) of the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve. At least two pairs of breeding birds reside there and have been seen feeding in the open grounds at dusk, or calling from the top of a tree along the edge of the freshwater pond.

The only other published record of this species from India is from Bhitarkanika National Park, where it is listed as a fairly common breeding resident (Gopi & Pandav 2007); however, no details of sightings or breeding are provided.

It is also suspected to be in moderately rapid decline as a result of habitat loss and degradation and hence listed as Near Threatened (BirdLife International 2013) and hence should figure in the list of threatened birds of India.

I wish to thank Help Tourism Staff for looking after the bird, which had injured itself within their Sundarbans Jungle Camp boundaries.

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Photo: S. Chatterjee

191. Mangrove Pitta.

Record of a Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* from Nagpur, India

Kartik Shukul

Shukul, K., 2013. Record of a Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* from Nagpur, India. *Indian BIRDS* 8 (6): 162.
Kartik Shukul, 538, Shankar Bhawan, Thapar Marg, Clarke Town, Nagpur 440004, Maharashtra, India. Email: *kartik.shukul@gmail.com*
Manuscript received on 17 March 2013.

The Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* is a widespread visitor to the plains in India, and breeds in Gujarat (Grimmett *et al.* 1999). Flocks may be seen at shallow brackish lakes, tidal mudflats, and saltpans (Ali & Ripley 1987; Grimmett *et al.* 1999; Kazmierczak 2000).

A single Greater Flamingo [**192**] was first sighted in the Saiki Lake (20°54'N, 79°11'E), approximately 20 km south-east of Nagpur (Maharashtra, India), on 31 December 2012 at 0800 hrs and at 1700 hrs. The lake is approximately 2.62 km^2 in area and has a 13.1 km perimeter. This individual was submerged to the point that its legs were invisible. The bird was seen again on 1 January 2013 at 1600 hrs on the opposite end of the lake. On this occasion the bird was in the shallow end of the water with most of its legs visible. I observed the individual for about 15 min., after which it abruptly flew off to the opposite end of the lake when a River Tern *Sterna aurantia* plunged into the water just a few feet from it. We followed the bird back to the other end of the lake where we watched it walking on a ploughed field.

Sightings of the Greater Flamingo, so far inland, around Nagpur, are rare. In 1912, flocks were seen occasionally in and around Nagpur (D'Abreu 1931). On 9 June 1912 a large flock was observed on the Ambajheri Tank and on 27 June 1912 a specimen was obtained in the Gorewara Tank near Nagpur (D'Abreu 1931, 1935). In July 1920, a flock of seven was seen resting on a mudflat in the Gorewara Tank near Nagpur (Osmaston 1921). Since 1921 there are no records of this species from Nagpur, until the present individual was sighted at the Saiki Lake.

Elsewhere in Maharashtra, it is recorded at the Sewri mudflats, South Mumbai, from October till March (Rahmani & Islam 2004). It is also known to be occasional, scarce or erratic in the south-western Maharashtra, e.g., at Bhigwan Lake (Bharucha & Gogte 1990).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Mr. Indraneel Dani and Mr. Udayan Patil for the information they provided. I am grateful to Mr. Anirudh Majumdar for his expert comments on this note. I am also grateful to Dr. Taej Mundkur for helping me write an earlier draft of this note.

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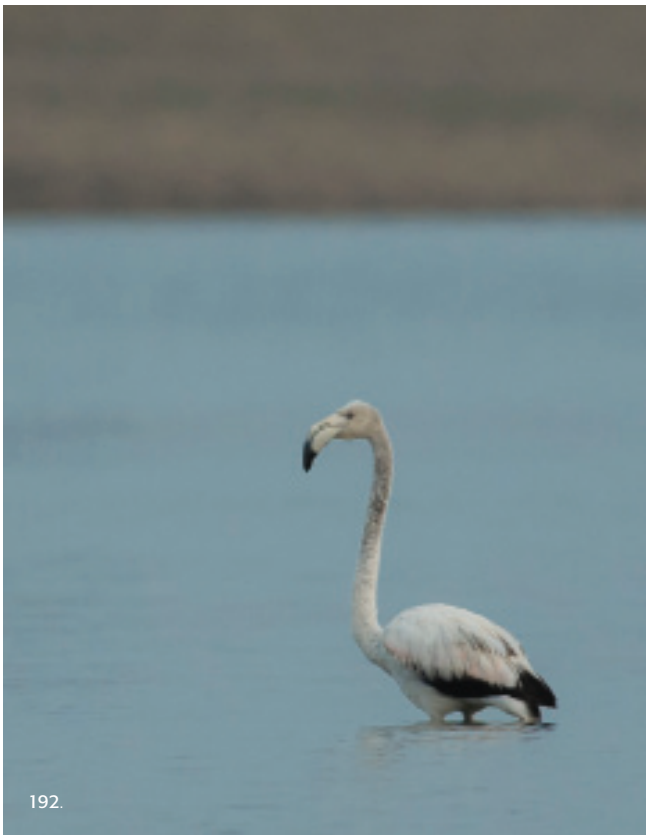

192.

Recovery of White Tern *Gygis alba* at Athirapilly, Kerala, India

Jayson E. A., Babu S. & Suresh K. Govind

Jayson E. A., Babu S., & Govind, S. K., 2013. Recovery of White Tern *Gygis alba* at Athirapilly, Kerala, India. *Indian BIRDS* 8 (6): 163.
Jayson E. A., Wildlife Department, Kerala Forest Research Institute, Peechi, Kerala, India - 680653. Email: *jayson.58@gmail.com*
Babu S., Sálim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History, Anaikatty Post, Coimbatore – 641108, Tamil Nadu. Email: *sanbabs@gmail.com*
Suresh K. Govind, Wildlife Department, Kerala Forest Research Institute, Peechi, Kerala, India - 680653. Email: *sureshavinissery@gmail.com*

White Tern *Gygis alba* is an unmistakeable medium-sized, snow-white bird with large black eyes, pointed black bill, and slightly forked tail (Grimmett *et al.* 2011; Grewal *et al.* 2011). In South Asia, it breeds on Addu and Seenu Atolls in Maldives and Chagos Islands (Phillips 1964; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). It is also known to disperse widely in the Indian Ocean (Ali & Ripley 1983), though very few records exist. Dussumier collected a specimen of this species from the Bay of Bengal (exact location not known) and the same was housed at Leyden Museum (Hume 1878). This is the only specimen record from South Asia. Recently, the species was sighted thrice: (1) twice along the coast of Narcondam Island in Andaman & Nicobar Islands (Yahya & Ahmad 2002), and (2) 100 miles west of Ratnagiri in Maharashtra (Prasad 2004). Besides these sight reports, there has been no specimen or photographic record of this species from Indian waters in recent times.

This note describes the sighting of a White Tern from Athirapilly (10°17'N, 76°33'E; c. 90m above MSL) in Thrissur District, Kerala, which is approximately 50 km south from Thrissur city and about 50 km east from the west coast [**193**]. The bird was sighted and photographed by Manoj George, a press reporter, on 25 July 2013 at 1100 hrs on the banks of Chalakudy River near human habitation. It was injured on its legs and the local people found it on the ground being mobbed by crows. After giving first-aid and taking photographs, the bird was released but the bird died on the same day. Subsequently, the photographs of the bird were sent to Kerala Forest Research Institute, Peechi for identification. Standard field guides (Grimmett *et al.* 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012) were examined for confirming the identity of the bird. Diagnostic morphological characters of the bird such as snow-white colour, black eyes, pointed black bill, forked tail and light brown barring on the wings were observed and it well matched with the characteristics of adult White Tern.

193. White Tern *Gygis alba* sighted at Athirapilly, Thrissur, Kerala, India

The photographs were also shared with leading naturalists and scientists, who confirmed our identification. This is the first photographic record of this species in the mainland of India. Given the ambiguity regarding the exact location of Dussumier's specimen record in Bay of Bengal waters (Hume 1878) and the fact that no photographs were taken during prior sight records (Yahya & Ahmad 2002; Prasad 2004), this may be the first confirmed record of White Tern for India.

Since the distribution range of the species is wide, it has been listed in the Least Concern (LC) category of BirdLife International (2012). Grewal *et al.* (2011) report that the species is known to be storm-blown to mainland. We suspect that this bird might have reached Athirapilly after being blown inland by the southwest monsoon winds along the course of Chalakudy River. Earlier too, straggling pelagic birds were sighted in Kerala during the monsoon between July and August (Jayson & Sivaperuman 2003).

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Manoj George C. for taking the photographs, and Rajah Jayapal, SACON, and Bikram Grewal for confirming the identification.

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186. Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator*.

Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator* from Alibaug, Maharashtra: A first record for India

Parag S. Nandgaonkar

Nandgaonkar, P. S., 2013. Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator* from Alibaug, Maharashtra: A first record for India. *Indian BIRDS* 8 (6): 164.
Parag S. Nandgaonkar, Lab Analyst, HPCL Refinery, Mumbai 400074, Maharashtra, India. Email: *parag_nandgaonkar@yahoo.com*

Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator* breeds from the south-western Palaearctic to south-western Asia, and winters in Africa. In South Asia, it is considered a passage migrant through south-western Afghanistan and southern Pakistan (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005).

While travelling on a motorcycle between Mumbai and Alibaug, on 7 September 2013, at 1100 hrs, I came across this shrike beside the road (18°38'N, 72°52'E) about 90 km from Mumbai and closer Alibaug. Initially, I mistook it to be a juvenile or a sub-species of some of the more likely shrikes that occur in this region, which I hoped to resolve once back from field. I approached the bird patiently and soon found that it was tame if I was cautious, allowing me within 2.5–3.0 m of itself, while it perched on a bush. However, due to repeated interruptions from passersby, it was repeatedly disturbed, and I could not manage a photograph to my liking [**186-188**]. However, the record shots obtained were circulated amongst the India Nature Watch (INW) online photographic forum (www.indianaturewatch.net) where birdwatchers readily identified it as a Woodchat Shrike.

187. Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator*.

188. Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator*.

Photos: P. S. Nandgaonkar

The bird was greyish-brown above and pure white below, and had a chestnut hind crown and nape. It had the trademark broad black eye-stripe of a shrike; broad white bars on dark wings, white rump, and dark tail. The photographed bird is a female of the eastern race *niloticus.* It is in almost complete adult plumage; except that the forecrown and forehead have remnants of juvenile / first winter.

Grimmett *et al.* (2011) treat it as a vagrant to Pakistan, while Kazmierczak (2000) indicates it as provisional with no reliable records with a doubtful mark around Baluchistan. The Baluchistan record is historically based on Sarudny (1911), who "lists it as a breeding bird of Persian Baluchistan," (Paludan 1959). Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) mention a sub-adult collected on 4 May from Seistan in south-western Afghanistan; however Paludan (1959) notes that a specimen of the race *L. s. niloticus* was collected from the "Estuary of Farah Rud, Seistan," on "4.iii.49." A single bird was seen and photographed on 28 June 1998 near Karachi, Pakistan (Sutton 2002; Roberts 2002) and is probably the bird mentioned in Rasmussen & Anderton (2005), and Grimmett *et al.* (2011). This seems to be a truly extraordinary instance of vagrancy, as the species barely reaches Iran and Baluchistan in Pakistan; a really rare bird in Asia. There are no records of this species from India and hence this record is of significance.

Acknowledgements

I sincerely thank Praveen J., for taking interest in my find, and also the birdwatchers from www.indianaturewatch.net for identifying the species from my photographs.

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Snapshot sightings

Smew from Gazaldoba, West Bengal

Some Subhra Patra

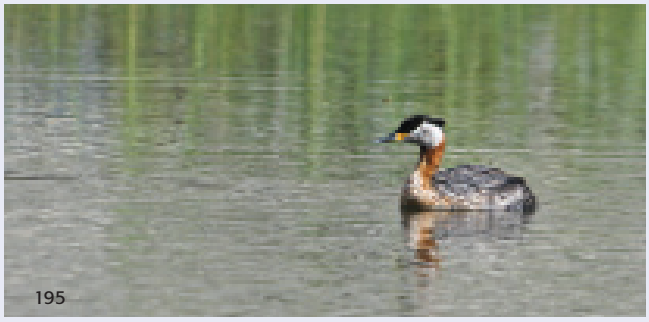
194

A female (or a first winter male) Smew *Mergellus albellus* was photographed on 3 March 2013 from Gazaldoba (26°45′N, 88°34′E), Siliguri in West Bengal. Grimmett *et al.* 2011 maps a total of 14 records from India, almost all are historical, and it is considered a rare winter visitor to the eastern part of the subcontinent (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005). This is perhaps the second photographic record from India, the previous one was also a similar plumage bird by Mike Prince from the same site in December 2010, and that bird stayed for almost a month and was photographed by others too.

Some Subhra Patra, Circus maiden, Ntanchati, Bankura 722101, West Bengal, India.
Email: patrasomesubhra@yahoo.com

Red-necked Grebe from Leh, Ladakh

Mandar Khadilkar



195

A Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena* in breeding plumage was observed on three consecutive days from 10 July 2013 onwards in a lake (34°08′N, 77°30′E) near Spituk, Leh, Ladakh. Apparently the same individual has been photographed by others during an extended period from 12 June till 18 August 2013. This is the first record for Ladakh (Pfister 2004) and the breeding adult is considered unlikely in the South Asian region; though winter plumage birds have been recorded from Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, western Gangetic plains and Assam. (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005).

Mandar Khadilkar, Flat no. 2, Blossom Apartments, LM Road, Kandarpada, Dahisar-West, Mumbai 400068, India. Email: mandar1773@gmail.com

Mew Gull from Bhuj, Gujarat

James Eaton

196

A first winter Mew (Common) Gull *Larus canus* was recorded amidst a mixed flock of Gulls on 30 January 2013 at Bhuj (22°45′N, 69°35′E), Gujarat during a tour of *Birdtour-Asia* that I was leading along with Frank Lambert. This is a winter vagrant to India with a handful of sight records from the north and west of India while there are neither documented specimens (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005) nor published photographs and hence of interest.

James Eaton, Birdtour Asia, 17 Keats Avenue, Littleover, Derby, DE23 4EE, United Kingdom. Email: james.birdtourasia@gmail.com

Indian White-rumped Spinetail from Maredumilli, Andhra Pradesh

Anand Kalinadhabhatla

197

A group of 4–5 Indian White-rumped Spinetails *Zoonavena sylvatica* were photographed in Maredumilli coffee plantation (17°36′N,81°42′E) in Eastern Ghats of Andhra Pradesh, at 0800hrs on 11 March 2013. This appears to be the first record of this species from Andhra Pradesh (Pittie 2012) though it occurs further north in the Eastern Ghats of Odisha.

Anand Kalinadhabhatla, 88 Vinayaka Nagar, Gachibowli, Hyderabad-500032, India. Email: anandk235@yahoo.com

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Letters to the Editor

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* feeding on five-striped palm squirrel *Funambulus pennantii*

On 22 January 2013, around 1800 hrs, I was photographing birds at Ranmal Lake (known popularly as Lakhota Lake), Jamnagar, when my attention was drawn towards a House Crow *Corvus splendens* chasing a Five-striped Palm Squirrel *Funambulus pennantii* on the walls surrounding the lake. The squirrel tried to evade its pursuer by trying to hide in possible gaps in the wall, but failed in doing so since the walls had recently been cemented afresh. The squirrel finally slipped and fell into the water where a Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* was quick to pounce on it before it could swim away.

Clasping the squirrel in its beak, the heron repeatedly plunged it in water in an attempt to drown it. When the squirrel finally stopped moving, the heron swallowed it whole. The Grey Heron is an opportunistic feeder and its diet is known to comprise molluscs, crustaceans, reptiles, small birds, plant matter, fish, eels, and occasionally, small mammals (Kushlan & Hancock 2004).

Hardy (1978) reports a similar incident from April 1976 wherein he found two newborn grey squirrels *Sciurus carolinensis* among prey taken by Grey Herons to their nest in Combermere, Chesire, England. The observation in this note could be the first such instance recorded from India.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Prasad Ganpule for his help with an earlier draft of this note.

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– Ashvin Trivedi

Jalani Jar, Bajaria Fali, Near Pancheshwar, Jamnagar, Gujarat, India.
Email: snapchaserashvintrivedi@yahoo.com

18 May 2013

Self-explanatory titles? Or more care required by authors, reviewers and editors? A reply to Kannan & James (2010).

Kannan & James (2010) provide an interesting, but unusual commentary on the appearance of errors in the literature, which they attribute, in part, to poorly-worded titles. Besides magnanimously assuming the responsibility for the failure of other authors to read their work properly (Kannan 1993; Sreekar & Srinivasulu 2010), they include the following statement:

"In this age of the information super highway with ready access to titles and citations, but often not whole documents, authors often yield to the temptation to cite from titles without reading the whole paper. Sometimes authors are unable (or simply too busy or lazy!) to look up the original papers and therefore resort to citing from secondary sources."

It is odd that Kannan & James (2010) interpret the age of the information super highway as one of difficult access to literature, when it seems quite clear that the opposite is true. There is a plethora of online sources of literature available to researchers (this journal being one of them!), not to mention the fact that citation databases, more often than not, provide contact details for authors even when the full document is not available for downloading. In addition to this, there is the tried and tested method of requesting documents from a local library, which worked for authors in the not too distant past, and even the use of social media, telephone books, snail mail, and a wealth of other means of telecommunications to contact the publishers, authors of the material, or even their associates in order to obtain a reference copy. Literature is more accessible than ever, and in the extremely rare cases when a thorough and properly-conducted search fails to locate a copy of a required paper, there is simply no valid excuse for authors citing a document that they have been unable to consult, without making it quite clear that this was the case. The suggestion that somebody may be "too busy" to properly check their sources, yet have enough time on their hands to dedicate to a practice that requires they do just that, stretches the boundaries of reasonability.

Whilst we are all capable of errors of interpretation, especially when dealing with documents written in a language that is not our own, it seems to me counter-productive in the extreme to justify the unscientific practice of authors who, "merely glance at a title and jump into egregiously erroneous conclusions," by even suggesting that the wording of titles is a causal factor in the errors resulting from this behaviour. In fact, it may be argued, rewording titles so as to appease those individuals that take such short cuts is a step towards justifying this unprofessional practice, and hence may be more likely to encourage its proliferation in ornithology rather than to eradicate it.

The examples provided by the authors as, "good titles," fail to convince me that they deliver the dubious benefits claimed. For example, even under the criteria that the authors promote, "Wild Great Hornbills do not use mud to seal nest cavities," (James & Kannan 2007) is not, to my mind, "much better," than, "On the nest sealing material used by wild Great Hornbills," as, in itself, it leaves the reader no closer to knowing what wild Great Hornbills actually do use to seal their cavities other than it not being mud. James & Kannan (2007) conclude that nest-sealing material is composed, "exclusively of fecal material," meaning that, "Wild Great Hornbills use fecal material and not mud to seal nest cavities," would surely have been the "best" title to use in this instance.

Alternatively, "House Sparrows associated with reduced Cliff Swallow nesting success" (Leasure *et al.* 2010), is not "much less likely to be misconstrued," than, "Effect of House Sparrows on the nesting success of Cliff Swallows." In fact it potentially encourages the "lazy" biologist who elects not to read more than a title to perhaps erroneously assume that ALL reduced nesting success in Cliff Swallows can be attributable to House Sparrows, whereas

in fact numerous additional factors have been postulated (Emlen 1952; Samuel 1969, 1971; Stewart 1972; Grant & Quay 1977; Brown & Brown 1987, 1991; Brown *et al.* 2000). The latter title enables the reader to draw no such sweeping conclusion and hence demands a thorough reading of the article, allowing the data to be analysed on its merits and resulting in a better understanding of the issues involved.

Clearly, choice and interpretation of titles involves an element of opinion, but this just demonstrates why any conclusion drawn from reading a title alone represents bad science and should never occur in lieu of a thorough reading of the text that follows it. Of course a title should aim to be informative, but the suggestion that it must attempt to encapsulate ALL of the text it introduces is absurd. As the aim of every scientist is for his or her work to be read by their peers, I struggle to understand why promoting the employment of titles designed to help people to avoid doing so is in any way desirable either for the author or for the reader.

The proper practice of scientific publication requires authors to assume the responsibility for the content of their manuscripts, including any unforeseen errors within them. The peer review method employed by scientific publications then acts as a form of quality control, where qualified individuals, who assess the methodology, examine a submission, conclusions AND literature cited by the authors before making a recommendation as to whether or not it is acceptable for publication. Thus, when this system is properly employed, such errors as those arising from reading a title and incorrectly assuming knowledge of the content will be detected.

Consequently I would contend that rather than blaming the corner-cutting behaviour of a minority of authors on those who see brevity of titles as a virtue, that the responsibility for these easily avoidable errors be properly cast where it belongs, at an unmethodical approach associated with obviating good practice, rushing to publish and a failure to properly research conclusions prior to submission.

I thank Kannan & James (2010) for bringing this unfortunate practice to light and hope that it will act as a warning to the editors of scientific journals that the quality of their publication is measured by the quality of the contents and not the quantity of papers it publishes. Though journal editors operate in an environment of ever-present deadlines and frequently must deal with tardy authors and reviewers, the correct and thorough implementation of the peer review process is an obligation that they are charged to fulfil.

For their part, authors and reviewers have a responsibility in facilitating the correct application of this process by thoroughly researching the work they submit or review, and drawing attention to the very rare instances when, despite all best efforts, they have been unable to personally consult a cited reference. Furthermore such instances should be considered acceptable only when the reference in question is a minor one, and for reasons that one would assume are obvious, not when it is key to the entire work.

Errors will still slip through the cracks from time to time, but ethical authors will assume full responsibility for them and correct them whenever necessary.

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—Paul Smith

Fauna Paraguay, Encarnación, Paraguay.
Para La Tierra, Reserva Natural Laguna Blanca,
Santa Rosa del Aguaray, San Pedro, Paraguay.
E-mail: faunaparaguay@gmail.com

Response to Paul Smith's letter

We fully agree with Smith that more care should be exercised by authors, reviewers, and editors; that was never in dispute. Nowhere in our article did we even insinuate that authors can "get away" with using titles only. Smith seems to believe that self-explanatory titles and diligent care are mutually exclusive. We contend that both should go hand-in-hand to enable scientific articles serve their purpose, which is the advancement of scientific knowledge and communication of this information efficiently for the global scientific community.

Smith wrongly feels that in this age of the information super highway, scientific articles are readily available. Anyone who has worked on major literature compilations will have been stymied by papers being available only as titles or abstracts. While it is incumbent upon authors to read all the papers they cite, the realistic truth is that authors often resort to citing only by looking at titles. Some authors (especially students) would rather cite from titles than pay up to $50 for an article! If the editor of *Indian BIRDS* had not posted the entire Kannan & James (2010) article on the website, Smith could not have accessed it with ease. He might have had to pay for it and/or wait for it to come via an interlibrary loan. This is true especially for many "gray literature" sources, which are not indexed, but carry substantial information of scientific value. In the U.S.A., many state-level bird journals do not post their contents on the web in their entirety, or if they do, their contents are available only for subscribers. One of the best-used online databases, BioOne, is available only by subscription at quite a formidable rate, often affordable only to organizations like universities.

We do not understand Smith's tortuous argument that self-explanatory titles may need to convey even more information for them to be of any value, and that no title can be self-explanatory enough. Titles, by their very nature, should be terse. Any attempt to convey the various nuances and all of the information will require titles to get too verbose and unwieldy. There is no

need for authors to pack titles with the plethora of information contained in the main text. We reiterate that, as far as possible, the gist of the information must be in the title. We made sound arguments with examples to support why that is necessary.

—Ragupathy Kannan & Douglas A. James
E-mail: ragupathy.kannan@gmail.com
djames@uark.edu

Response to Dr Santharam's letter in *Indian BIRDS* vol. 8 no. 4.

We thank Santharam (2013) for drawing attention to Prasad (2004). Prasad (2004) reported that the Grey-headed Fish Eagle was recorded from Bombay (Abdulali 1981). However our record is for the Western Ghats of Maharashtra, and Bombay cannot be considered as part of the Western Ghats. We documented the presence of the Grey-headed Fish Eagle from inland at Chandoli Reservoir, which is located in the Western Ghats. The birds were recorded at 600 m, which adds to information on its distribution, since Naoroji (2006) mentions they are seldom found above 300–400 m in its northern range.

Regarding the records of Flame-throated Bulbul, we observed two individuals at Amba in Kolhapur district and three individuals from Talkat in Sindhudurg district. Since Santharam has reported it earlier from Talkat, our observation at Amba extends its range since Amba is 126 km north of Talkat and is located on the crest-line of the Western Ghats at 629 m, while Talkat is in the plains at 128 m.

Considering the above, we believe that both our observations add to our knowledge of these two species.

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—Prachi Mehta & Jayant Kulkarni
19 August 2013

Erroneous record of Lord Derby's Parakeet *Psittacula derbiana* from Assam, published in *Indian BIRDS* Vol. 8 No. 5

While going through the article 'Birding in Lohit Valley, Arunachal Pradesh' by Neeta Gode, I realised that the author had claimed a record of Lord Derby's Parakeet from Lekhapani, Assam, based on a picture published with the article. The picture undoubtedly is of a Red-breasted Parakeet *Psittacula alexandri*. Lord Derby's Parakeet occurs usually above 2500 m (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), whereas Lekhapani is located in lowland Assam at *c.* 150 m. Red-breasted Parakeet is a lowland species occurring below 1500 m (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).

Lord Derby's Parakeet is a larger version of Red-breasted Parakeet with which it can be confused except for the fact that their altitudinal range does not overlap. Adult Red-breasted Parakeet has a pink breast, as hinted in the picture of the bird from Lekhapani, whereas Lord Derby's Parakeet shows a purple breast as seen in the picture of this species by Arun P. Singh, published in the same issue on page 133. Moreover, Red-breasted Parakeet has a fairly short tail with short central tail projection as seen in the picture by the author (notice very long tail in Arun P. Singh's picture).

The claim of occurrence of Lord Derby's Parakeet in Assam is erroneous and must be withdrawn.

– Manoj Sharma
Village Shankarpur, Ramnagar, District Nainital 244715, Uttarakhand, India. E-mail: treeswift@gmail.com

Tom Roberts

I have had the privilege of knowing Tom Roberts since 1948 when he returned to Pakistan after completing his studies at the University of Iowa. He joined his father who represented British Cotton Growers Association in Pakistan based in Khanewal having set up the Roberts Cotton Association to gin cotton and market it in Pakistan and abroad.

Tom Roberts' real interest was in wildlife, specifically in ornithology. He was a gifted artist, almost self-taught. He mentored and encouraged me to take interest in the setting up of the Pakistan Wildlife Appeal to be the local chapter of the World Wildlife Appeal headquartered in Switzerland founded by Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands and among others by Sir Peter Scott. These two organizations are today WWF-International in Switzerland and WWF-Pakistan.

It have had the honour to be Tom's friend for sixty-five years. He was a keen naturalist and an authority on Pakistani birds and mammals. His books, 'Birds of Pakistan', Vol. 1 and 2 and 'Mammals of Pakistan', Vol. 1 and 2 are testimony to his knowledge about various species of animals and birds of Pakistan. In these voluminous books he has done all the sketching of animals and birds himself.

He was a keen bird watcher. When he lived in Karachi, there was a group of people interested in birds. In one day from dawn to dusk, they identified over 350 species of birds! Such was the sense of enquiry in Tom.

I have lost a friend, and the world is poorer without a great naturalist and a unique human being.

– Babar Ali, Pakistan
E-mail: C/o. Sahil Zaheer, sahil.zaheer@packages.com.pk

In memoriam
Thomas Jones Roberts
1924 — 2013

"AMATEUR NATURALIST TRAINING (ANT)" PROGRAMME FOR FOREST RANGERS

WWF-India's Andhra Pradesh State Office (APSO) conducted a two day "Amateur Naturalist Training (ANT)" Programme for 90 newly-recruited forest rangers from States of Goa and Andhra Pradesh in the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department Academy [AFDA], Dulapally on 6–7 September, 2013. Dr. P. Raghuveer, Director, AFDA, had invited WWF-APSO to conduct the training.

An 18-month course for the Forest Rangers offers them a variety of theoretical lessons, including field visits to the forest areas that encompassed principles of forest management. As a part of their orientation to understanding wildlife, the training programme was planned with a focus on awareness about nature, environment, wildlife, and climate and biodiversity conservation. The course included an introduction to nature & wildlife, understanding wildlife census techniques, interpretation census data, an introduction to plant world, mammals, birds and reptiles, jungle survival, stargazing at night and nature trails.

Sessions held during ANT:

- Treasure Hunt game for Flora
- Nature Trail- Campus Biodiversity Watch
- Mysterious Insect World – PowerPoint Session
- Movie Screening
- Birds and Bird Watching – PowerPoint session
- Nature Watch- A Study of Indirect and Direct Signs
- Night Trail – Herpetofauna Study
- Star-Gazing
- Bird Watching
- Wild Wisdom Quiz
- Champions of the Cause: Community and Group Understanding
- 'U' Present and 'V' Observe

The program ended with the trainees thanking the WWF staff for organising the programme, and with a few Range Officers sharing their experiences over the past two days. They asserted that while this training gave them an overview of wildlife and biodiversity conservation, it also provided them a platform to develop their skills on relaying information to others through logical debate, impassioned speech and insightful presentations. The trainees who performed their best in the two days of training were recognised and gifted WWF prizes by Dr. Raghuveer.

WWF-India, A.P. State Office, 818, Castle Hills, Rd.No. 2, Vijayanagar Colony, Hyderabad -500057 Andhra Pradesh. India.