

## *Aquila* eagles in Kerala, India

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Ali (1969), Neelakantan et al. (1993), or any other earlier ornithologists have not reported the presence of any species of *Aquila* eagles in Kerala, India. This note compiles the recent records and apparent status of four species of *Aquila* eagles in this State. After spending ten days at Keoladeo Ghana Bird Sanctuary, Bharatpur attending the Raptor Identification Workshop organized by Bombay Natural History Society and conducted by William S. Clarke and Dr Vibhu Prakash in November 1993, I became rather familiar with some species of the *Aquila* eagles. Since then, I had been on the look out for them in the wetlands of Kerala, especially Kattampally, Kannur District, where I have watched birds regularly since 1980.

### **Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga***

The first published record, of the Greater Spotted Eagle from Kerala, was by Srivastava et al. (1995), who reported a sighting at Periyar Tiger Reserve. The first sighting of this eagle at Kattampally was on the 11<sup>th</sup> of January 2001 (Sashikumar 2004). Subsequently, I found that *A. clanga* was a regular winter visitor in this area. Its earliest date of arrival was the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September and the last sighting before it left was the 21<sup>st</sup> of April. The maximum number seen was on 16 on 9.xii.2003. Most of these were immature birds. Only one or two adults were usually present. On 15.xii.2002, an immature Greater Spotted Eagle was observed at Ezhome, a wetland about 20km north of Kannur; one or two birds have been seen here occasionally since then (Rajeevan P. C. *pers. comm.*). On 29.i.2003, Jafer Palot saw one at Biyyam Kettu, part of the Kole wetland, Malappuram District.

At Kattampally a good number of waterfowl are usually present in winter. Apart from open and reed-covered water-spreads, a grassy swamp – mostly abandoned paddies - is also present here. While not soaring, the eagles were seen sitting on the grassy swamp or perched on coconut fronds. I have seen the eagles flying at ducks and teals occasionally, scattering the flocks; actual capture was never witnessed. I have also seen them chasing Western Marsh-Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* and White-bellied Sea-Eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster*, apparently instances of attempted kleptoparasitism.

In India this species winters widely, especially in the northern parts, but is rare in the peninsula (Grimmett et al. 1998, Kazmierczak 2000). There are a few records from Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Goa. There is one reliable recent report of it breeding in Rajasthan, India (Prakash 1988). "There is anecdotal evidence that this species' small population is declining, at a rate likely to exceed 10% in three generations, which qualifies it as Vulnerable. It has suffered from extensive habitat loss and persistent persecution," (BirdLife International 2003).

### **Indian Spotted Eagle *Aquila hastata***

Till recently considered as the Indian race *hastata* of Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina*, it is now regarded as an independent species, the Indian Spotted Eagle *Aquila hastata*, endemic to India (Parry et al. 2002). Though I had seen this eagle at Kattampally on several occasions since the winter of 2001, it was only on the 7<sup>th</sup> of November 2002 that I could positively identify an individual of

this species. This eagle was distinct: compared to the Greater Spotted Eagle, it was warmer brown in colour and had narrower wings and a longer tail. The spots on the upper wing were smaller appearing as a thin line. The darker flight feathers and pale under wing-coverts clinched the identification; the inner primaries were very pale in some individuals. On the upper parts, the white base of inner primaries was prominent, so was the U-shaped white upper tail coverts. On several occasions, it was possible to compare the soaring Indian Spotted Eagle with the Greater Spotted Eagle directly as both the eagles came within the same frame through the binoculars. 1-3 individuals, all immature birds, were usually present here from October to April in the last three winters.

On four occasions, I have seen the possible hunting of this eagle. It would soar high in circles above the swamp; once it gained a height of about 300 m, it would swoop vertically with folded wings into the grass. Greater Spotted Eagles, Western Marsh-Harriers and Black Kites *Milvus migrans* would immediately fly towards the eagle perched on the ground and mob it.

A rare resident in the Indian Subcontinent, the Indian Spotted Eagle appears to be a widespread species that has always been recorded at very low density throughout the lowlands of the northern half of the Indian subcontinent, occurring in Pakistan, Nepal, India and Bangladesh (Birdlife International 2003). Mysore (Karnataka) is the nearest place to Kannur District from where this eagle has been recently reported (Thejaswi *pres. comm.*).

### **Eastern Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca***

The Eastern Imperial Eagle has a large range, breeding mainly in the Palearctic from Central Europe east to the Russian Far East, and wintering in the African and Oriental regions. The species formerly nested in very small numbers in Pakistan and northern India. It is considered "uncommon" in India now (Kazmierczak 2000); the only recent records are from Nandur-Madhameshwar, Maharashtra, in December 1983 (Goenka et al. 1985) and Vedanthangal Sanctuary, Tamil Nadu, in January 1991 (Anon. 1991). Category: Vulnerable (BirdLife International 2003).

The only sighting of this eagle was that of an adult at Kattampally on the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 2003. I observed it for about one hour from 15:50 hours, in bright sunlight. Even as the eagle soared high, the buff-white patch at the back of its head and neck extending towards shoulder in contrast with its dark brown body was strikingly visible. The two-toned long tail with the distal 1/3 as a dark band was also clearly visible in flight. The wing pattern was different from that of the Greater Spotted Eagle – longer and broader with almost parallel edges. As the eagle alighted on a coconut frond nearby, the diagnostic, pure white scapular patches could be clearly seen. Rajeevan P. C. was also with me on that day.

When I mentioned about this sighting to, Dr Pramod P. of the Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON), he told me that he had seen an eagle soaring over a valley at Eravikulam National Park on 29.iii.1996, which he thought was an Eastern Imperial Eagle. E. Kunhikrishnan (University College, Thiruvananthapuram) was with him during that sighting. They could see the buffy-white patch on the head of the large dark brown eagle.

### Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis*

Steppe Eagles are winter visitors to the Indian subcontinent. They seem to be the most numerous *Aquila* eagle at present, at least in most parts of northern India. With the decline in vulture population, Steppe Eagles can now be seen in large numbers at carcasses and garbage dumps. But in the peninsula, they are still rare.

The first sighting of the Steppe Eagle in Kerala was by K. V. Eldhose at a wetland near Eranakulam in December 2002 (Dr Sreekumar, *pers. comm.*). The photograph of the perched eagle he took clearly showed it was an immature bird. During the annual Vembanad Bird Survey, on 19.xi.2003, I identified an immature Steppe Eagle soaring above Kumarakom. There were some more sightings of this species at Kumarakom the same winter (Manoj P., *pers. comm.*). At Kattampally, on 28.ii.2004, I saw a Steppe Eagle. This was also an immature bird. During a bird survey at Kanniyakumari Forest Division, at Kunnimuthucholai, Mahendragiri Reserve Forest, on 6.ii.2004, I saw a large eagle perched on a tree at the edge of a shola. Two Booted Eagles *Hieraetus pennatus* were incessantly mobbing it. When it took off, I instantly identified it as an immature Steppe Eagle. This could probably be the southernmost record of this species in India. Co-ordinates of this site are 08°20.648'N, 77°033.247'E, and altitude, 796m.

### Status of *Aquila* eagles in Kerala

At Kattampally, the Greater Spotted Eagle and Indian Spotted Eagle appear to be regular winter visitors. The Eastern Imperial Eagle could be a straggler to our area. Is the Steppe Eagle extending its wintering range to the southern parts of the subcontinent? Observations in the coming years might give us an answer.

### Identification problems

As is well known, identifying the *Aquila* eagles presents a real problem. During each visit to the Kattampally wetlands, I had to leave behind some eagles without identifying to the species level.

In the case of Spotted Eagles, many individuals show no contrast between under wing-coverts and flight feathers; light conditions also can be tricky.

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## Indian Blue Robin *Luscinia brunnea* winters at Chamundi Hill and Ranganathittu Bird Sanctuary, Mysore, South India

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This is a report on the occurrence of the Indian Blue Robin *Luscinia brunnea* as a winter visitor to two locations in and near Mysore, in thick dry deciduous hill scrub at Chamundi Hill, and in riparian bamboo vegetation at Ranganathittu Bird Sanctuary. The record at the former location assumes significance as the Indian Blue Robin is reported here to winter in a dry deciduous thorn scrub habitat.

### Chamundi Hill

Chamundi Hill (12°18'N, 76°33'E) is an isolated hill running longitudinally in a north-south direction to the east of Mysore city (12°18'N, 76°39'E) in southern Karnataka. It covers an area of c.17km<sup>2</sup> with the highest point at 1,100m above MSL. The hill area is a typical tropical deciduous thorn scrub forest with large sections

of rather "evergreen" scrub at higher elevations (Rao and Razi 1981). This forest was designated as a reserve forest by the Karnataka state forest department in 2001. The hills are chiefly uninhabited but the hilltop is populated and a popular destination of religious importance.

A one thousand step stone stairway leads from the bottom of the hill on the eastern face to the temple at the top. Most of the stairway after the 200<sup>th</sup> step is bordered by evergreen scrub consisting chiefly of large thorny shrubs of *Canthium parviflorum*, *C. dicoccum*, and *Xeromphis spinosa* interrupted by thickets of *Lantana camara* and *Tecoma stans*, straggling lianas of *Plectospermum spinosum* and *Acacia coccinea* and trees of *Plectronia didyma*, *Gliricidia sepium* and *Ficus virens*. A bull ('Nandi') monolith of religious significance is located at the 700<sup>th</sup>