

### 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 *Hieraaetus 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°33.247'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-covets 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>

step. A derelict road is present behind this monolith and has excellent scrub habitat of a similar nature as mentioned above, but in addition, has shrubs of *Chomelia* sp., *Capparis grandis*, *Lantana camara*, *Ixora notoniana*, *Ardisia solanacea*, *Dichrostachys cinerea*, *Pterolobium hexapetalum*, and *Tecoma stans* interspersed by trees like *Ficus benghalensis*, *Schefflera venulosa*, *Grewia tiliaefolia*, *Atlantia monophylla*, *Pongamia pinnata* and others. A few open areas that occur along this road are clothed by clumps of the lemon grass, *Cymbopogon flexuosus*.

The common winter visitors encountered in these locations include Blue-headed Rock-Thrush *Monticola cinclorhynchus*, Blue Rock-Thrush *Monticola solitarius*, Eurasian Blackbird *Turdus merula*, Indian Pitta *Pitta brachyura* and several warblers including, occasionally the Large-billed Leaf-Warbler *Phylloscopus magnirostris*. The Black-naped Oriole *Oriolus chinensis* has also been recorded twice from this area.

The first sighting of the bird on Chamundi Hill in Mysore was on the 28th of October 2001, when a male was observed skulking in shade, in a thick clump of *Randia* sp., *Gmelina asiatica* and other shrubs, right next to the stairway, at around the 150<sup>th</sup> step. Even in the dark, the bright colours of the bird were distinctive, especially the conspicuous, brilliant white supercilium. The bird was resighted from the same location on subsequent years and would unfailingly be present in the vicinity of the bush or across the stairway in another tangle which included among other plants, the thorny *Plecosperrum* sp. Lianas (Table 1), despite the fact that hundreds and sometimes thousands of people use the stairway on a daily basis. Other sightings have been from similar 'dark' spots with plenty of bushes around, in the old road behind the Nandi monolith mentioned above. Incidentally, a location in this area where the bird was regularly seen is near a pipeline that leads from a pump house, where there is a permanent water leak that keeps the area moist. One male was observed to take a 'dip' at a small rain puddle on the Nandi road on 7.xii.2002 (Praveen Jayadevan, *pers. comm.*). Another locality is a large *Canthium-Zizyphus* snarl, festooned by creepers of *Cissampelos pariera* and *Pachygone ovata*, along a derelict stairway bordered by thick bushes and tangles, on the eastern face of the hill. Solitary males occupied all the locations. Females were sighted only twice, and both times it was observed that they were apparently more retiring than the males.

The males apparently remain throughout the winter season as indicated by the dates of observation (Table 1) and are very parochial to their favoured sites. All the three sites are shaded localities, with one being relatively moist. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of April 2003, tentatively among the latest dates by which the birds depart the area as they have not been sighted a week after on all years, the male by the main stairway was observed singing. The song was a melodious, 'tsee-tsee-tsee...', beginning with a low note but succeeded by notes with increasing pitch and finally followed and finished by a few fast and undecipherable notes. The song was repeated continuously for ten minutes. The birds observed were otherwise rather quiet, especially the females, except for the occasional loud 'chuck' or 'chack' when moving through the bushes.

## Ranganathittu

The Indian Blue Robin was first observed at the Ranganathittu Bird Sanctuary, situated 17km northeast of Mysore, on the 25<sup>th</sup> of October 2002, hunting in a bamboo (*Dendrocalamus strictus*) clump on the banks of a stream inlet that emptied into the Kaveri River a few meters away. The bird was carefully observed and notes made by one of the observers (AA), and though it turned out to be a male, caution was required as the Tickell's Blue Flycatcher *Cyornis tickelliae* is an extremely common species at Ranganathittu, favouring bamboo growth for both foraging and nesting. [Future observers to Ranganathittu need to be aware of this fact, as there could remain a possibility of confusion despite both birds being distinct in details of colour and behaviour.] Visits subsequent to the first only rarely turned up the species, each time not far from the locality where first seen (Table 1). Habits of the bird did not differ in any detail as those noted for the Chamundi birds.

## Discussion

The records of the Indian Blue Robin in the Chamundi Hills are important as they represent one of the two recorded instances of the birds wintering in a tropical scrub habitat. Ali and Ripley (1987) record that the species "In winter frequents almost exclusively evergreen forest: partial to *Rubus*, *Pandanus* and *Calamus* brakes along shady forest streams and dark ravines; also cardamom and coffee plantations." Prasad et al. (1995) mention the existence of "a small patch of evergreen forest with coffee plantations" on hill-top plateau of the Nandi Hills near Bangalore, and record the wintering of this species from coffee plantations, a horticultural nursery and at water's edge with the "evergreen patch", although they do not rigorously record the vegetation that can be encountered in the patch of "evergreen forest". Prasanna et al (1994) record the sighting of a male wintering between November and February 1992-93 from Valley School near Bangalore, as well as a female in December 1992. In a subsequent article (Prasanna et al 1997), the birds were described as uncommon winter visitors. Details of the habitat where the birds were seen was given (p. 76) and it indicated a thick scrub habitat with *Zizyphus oenopila*, *Toddalia asiatica*, *Canthium parviflorum* and *Cocculus hirsutus*, many trees like *Syzygium operculatum*, *F. benghalensis* and planted species like *F. religiosa*, *Tamarindus indica*, *Milletia ovalifolia*, *Delonix regia*, *Peltophorum pterocarpum*, *Mangifera indica* and *Pongamia pinnata*. This was probably the first record of the species wintering in a scrub habitat. The significant aspect of these observations as well as ours from Chamundi Hills in Mysore is the presence of the birds in scrub habitat during winter, in addition to previous observances from evergreen forests (Ali and Ripley 1987).

Our observations from Chamundi Hills and Ranganathittu indicate that the bird is a regular but local winter visitor, perhaps in small numbers to the Mysore area. Whether they have been so in the past is unclear, since we have no observations to this regard but at the same time, cannot dismiss it as the species is rather reserved in its habits and could have escaped notice.

Another aspect of our observations indicates that males are recorded far more often than females on the Chamundi Hills. There could be several reasons for this observation including the

possibilities of sampling errors, limited sample size, of the males and females wintering in different areas or elevations and the like. Although sampling error is distinctly possible, there is some apparent evidence to the latter possibility. Recent observations and bird ringing done in certain pockets of the Nilgiris have indicated that males far outnumber the females in the upper Nilgiris plateau above 2,000m (A. A. Zarri, *pers. comm.*). Khan (1980) claimed that the males and females wintered at different areas but the argument appears to be erroneous, as our observations, together with those by Prasanna et al. (1994) and Prasad et al. (1995) indicate the contrary. In fact, Prasad et al. (1995) mention as much in their short article (p. 269). But the more recent observations from the Nilgiris indicate that an elevation difference in wintering males and females remains plausible, albeit restricted to distinct pockets of the Western Ghats and is open to further observations. Otherwise, the fewer number of females sighted could simply be because they are dull coloured birds and appear to be more retiring and silent vis-à-vis males, thus keeping them away from the prying eyes of the birdwatcher!

#### Acknowledgements

We express our thanks to Praveen Jayadevan and Job K. Joseph, Bangalore, for details of their observations of the Indian Blue Robin in Chamundi Hill and to Ashfaq Ahmed Zarri, research scholar at

the Bombay Natural History Society, Mumbai, for invigorating discussions and information on the status of the species in the Nilgiris.

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**Table 1. Sightings of *Luscinia brunnea* at Chamundi Hill, Mysore and Ranganathittu Bird Sanctuary**

Date	Location	Habitat	Number of birds observed	Observers
28.10.2001	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub*	1M	TS, AS <sup>1</sup>
18.11.2002	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	1M	TS, YS
25.11.2002	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	1F	TS, AS, MKM
07.12.2002	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	2M	JP, JJ <sup>2</sup>
09.12.2002	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	1M	TS, MKM
11.12.2002	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	1M	AS, GS
02.01.2003	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	1M	AS, GS, AST
16.01.2003	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	2M	TS
04.02.2003	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	1M	TS, AS
13.02.2003	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	1M, 1F	TS, MKM, KRK
06.03.2003	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	2M	TS, AS, KRK
12.04.2003	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	1M	TS, MKM
11.10.2003	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	1M	MKM
12.10.2003	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	2M	TS, MKM
01.02.2004	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	2M	TS, MKM
02.02.2004	Chamundi Hill	DD Scrub	2M	TS
25.10.2002	Ranganathittu	DD Scrub	1M	AA, AST <sup>3</sup>
03.02.2002	Ranganathittu	Bamboo	1M	TS, YS, MKM
02.02.2004	Ranganathittu	Bamboo	1M	MKM, YS

#### Legend:

\* = Dry Deciduous Thorn Scrub.

1 = Others present on the day included Deapesh Misra (DM), Yashaswi Shivanand (YS), M. Mohan Kumar (MKM), A. A. Chinmayi, Rohini Mehta, K. R. Kishan Das (KRK) and Girija Shivaprakash (GS).

2 = Praveen Jayadevan (JP) and Job K. Joseph (JJ).

3 = A. Abhilash (AA) and A. Sharath (AST).