

Incubation period of Thick-billed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum agile*

Vishwas Katdare¹, Vishwas Joshi and Sachin Palkar

¹Sahyadri Nisarga Mitra, Near Laxminarayan Temple, Chiplun, District Ratnagiri, Maharashtra 415605.

¹Email: sahyadricpn@rediffmail.com

The Thick-billed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum agile* is a common resident of Ratnagiri district, Maharashtra. Ali and Ripley (1999) state that its incubation period "undetermined". On the 7th of February 2002 we saw this bird building its nest. The nest was located on a *Nyctanthes arbortristis* tree, at the height of 6.4m.

Two birds were seen engaged in nest building. We could not differentiate between male and female, but many times two birds were observed working together on the nest. They started work early in the morning and around 11:00hrs they almost stopped. Construction activity started again at 16:00hrs and stopped when it became dark.

On the 18th of February the nest was completed. For regular observations we fixed a bamboo ladder under the nest. We started to check the nest every morning and evening. A small mirror on a bent handle was used to look inside the nest.

On the 23rd of February at 07:00hrs the first egg was seen in the nest and on the next day at 08:30hrs there was another.

On the 3rd of March we observed the nest continuously for eight hours and sixteen minutes (09:21hrs to 17:37hrs). During this period, the bird incubated for just four hours and nine minutes. It left the nest 40 times. The longest stretch of time it incubated was for 46 minutes. From 09:21hrs to 10:45hrs and again from 16:56hrs to 17:37hrs incubation lasted only 0.5 to 1 minute. From 10:45hrs to 16:56hrs it was for a longer time.

On the 8th of March at 19:10hrs, a chick was seen inside the nest. On the same day at 20:30hrs we saw that the nest was completely covered by tree ants. With torchlight we observed that the entire nest was full of ants and it was not easy to clear them. We cut the branch on which the nest was attached and took it down to clear all the ants. The newly hatched nestling was dead but fortunately the second egg was intact. With great difficulty we cleared the ants, removing each one of them without disturbing or damaging the nest. It took us about two hours to clear the entire nest of ants. We replaced the egg inside the nest and re-attached the cut branch in its original place with the help of a stick and wire.

We also spread some insecticide on the edge of the branch to prevent another ant attack. We completed the entire work by 22:30hrs.

Early next morning (9 March) one parent was seen inside the nest (incubating?). At 12:00hrs the egg was seen in the nest. At 17:00hrs it had hatched and a chick was visible in the nest.

From next day both parents fed the chick regularly. On the 27th of March at 09:30hrs the young bird fledged. Its parents were seen feeding it near the nest. The chick was last seen on the campus at 11:00hrs.

Our study revealed that the Thick-billed flowerpecker incubates its eggs for 13 days and 18 days is the time taken to fledge. The incubation and fledging periods are calculated as per Skutch (1954), from last egg to last hatching and from last hatching to fledging, respectively.

Acknowledgement

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References

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[**Editors' observations:** This note raises an ethical issue. An active nest should never be handled even when the aim is to do good. This is a cardinal rule in the birdwatchers' 'code of conduct.' It is not clear whether the ants killed the first chick. Ali & Ripley (1999) actually say, "Frequently builds among the leaf nests of the vicious red ant (*Oecophylla*) without apparent harm, and possibly for protection." We wonder what happened to the ants and what disarray the insecticide caused.]

Recoveries from Newsletter for Birdwatchers – 3.

Zafar Futehally

2205 Oakwood Apartment, Jakkasandra Layout, Koramangala, 3rd Block, 8th Main, Bangalore 560034, India. Email: zafar123@vsnl.net

N.L.B.W. March 1961: Letters of encouragement continued to come in about our *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* and the proposed Indian Ornithological Society. Wilbur G. Downes, Trinidad Regional Virus Society, wrote, "It will certainly be desirable to have an active group coordinating efforts to preserve Indian bird life, and stimulating the interest of the coming generation in birds." He also sent a brief note about his delight at seeing our birds for the first time, "These novelties are among the commonest birds of India, but evoke a real thrill with each one seen. First noted possibly are the bulbuls in every town and park. What a thrill to see the first one, and then in short order to see three or four species."

Lt. Gen. Sir Harold Williams of the Central Building Research Institute in Roorkee said, "I have just seen No. 1 Newsletter, and hope you will succeed in getting it started. Keep it at a little less technical level than the BNHS Journal, and I am sure you will have plenty of members in due course." I might mention here that Sir Harold played a very important part in our conservation movement. At a meeting convened in Delhi to consider the possibility of establishing an Indian Wildlife Service, at the instance of some members of the BNHS and other Societies, Sir Harold pointed out the impracticability of having two officials of the central government, the territorial D.F.O. of the Forest Department, and

one from the Wildlife Service operating in the same geographical area. The Forester was expected to produce the maximum revenue from forestry operations, while the other would be expected to preserve every tree and shrub in the interest of wildlife. There would be endless conflict. The better option, he said, would be to train selected members of the existing service, in ecology and wildlife management, and ultimately it would result in a synthesis of the two disciplines.

This suggestion led to the development of the wildlife-training course for Foresters in the Wildlife Institute of India, and I believe that the scheme has been of great benefit to our country. S. G. Neginhal was one of the members of the Indian Forest Service who undertook this Diploma Course, and we have seen from his writings and action how much good he has done for protecting our natural environment.

In this March 1961 issue of the *N.L.B.W.* there is an article by Dr Joseph George, then at the Forest Research Institute in Dehra Dun, on the morning calls of the Himalayan Whistling Thrush (*Myiophonus caeruleus*) which I am sure motivated the nascent birdwatching community, specially in the hills, to take a greater interest in the wonderful birds of their locality. I know that George did influence the eleven year old Ram Guha who is now a world famous environmentalist and historian. I quote, "The call of the Himalayan Whistling Thrush is one of the most prominent bird sounds of Dehra Dun on winter mornings... With the cooperation of observers the time of first call of about 50 whistling thrushes was recorded whenever conveniently possible during the last nine winter seasons, The birds under observation occupied territories in an area approximately 175 hectares in extent." The data analysed revealed a very close connection between the time of sunrise, and the time of the first call. It was noted that in the event of the sky being totally overcast, the timings of all birds was delayed. I wrote a few years ago about my experience with the resident White-breasted Kingfisher (*Halcyon smyrnensis*) in our garden in Kihim. Its first call on several successive days in March was at exactly 10

minutes past 6 in the morning.

In the 1960s the M.S. University of Baroda was perhaps one of the few centres of learning, which gave any importance to ornithology. A group of students led by R. M. Ajmeri of the Zoology Department got interested in checking the nests of birds in their campus and found one of the Ashy Prinia (*Prinia socialis*) on a *Duranta plumieri* which was constructed somewhat differently from the normal ones made on broad leaved shrubs. Because of the small sized leaves of *Duranta*, the birds had to attach the nest firmly to the stems of the shrub. On reading this, the indefatigable Serrao soon found references confirming that the architecture of bird nests varied considerably according to the needs of the environment. He found EHA's note dated, Dilyar, Sind, 1904, about a Tailor Bird's nest at the end of a pendent branch of *Salvadora olioides* in open sand hill country. It was woven like the nest of a Fantail Warbler (*Cisticola*) of various kinds of vegetable down, a number of the narrow leaves being sewn to it at the sides as supports. He also found a similar nest in a rose bush in Karachi.

Salim Ali was then the Chairman of the Indian National Section of the International Council for Bird Preservation (I.C.B.P.), which has now evolved into the International Ornithological Committee of which Dominique Homberger is the Secretary General. The I.C.B.P. at its meeting in Tokyo in May 1960 had recommended that every country should designate a National Bird to pinpoint public interest and attention on a particular bird which was in need of the greatest protection. Salim Ali was annoyed at the Indian Board for Wildlife selecting the Peacock as our National Bird. Responding in characteristic manner he wrote, "I submit that the selection of the Peacock by the I.B.W.L. is totally misconceived and meaningless. It was not at all obligatory for India, as a Member of the I.C.B.P. to adopt a National Bird, but if it is conceded that doing so would further the ends for which the step was recommended then it is obvious that the Great Indian Bustard is the species which merits this distinction."

Crustacea in the dietary of Rosy Pastor *Sturnus roseus*

Thejaswi Shivanand¹ & M. Mohan Kumar²

¹639, 'Sibia House', 16th Cross, 'B' Block, Vijayanagar III Stage, Mysore 570017, India. Email: dumaketu@rediffmail.com

²413, 3rd Cross, 9th Main, 'H' Block, Ramakrishna Nagar, Mysore 570022, India.

On 16.xi.2000, while on a birdwatching trip to the Yelandur Tank complex in Chamarajnagar district of Karnataka, large flocks of Rosy Pastors *Sturnus roseus* were observed in paddy and ragi fields near the Kesthur Tank (12°5'N, 77°1'E). The Rosy Pastor is a common winter visitor to the area, but it was especially numerous in that year and the next, with 'swarms' exceeding 20,000 at many places (Thejaswi 2001), wrecking standing ragi and jowar crop at many areas that featured prominently in the local press.

Many flocks were present on the bund of the Kesthur Tank, with a large proportion of juveniles in them. Several birds, chiefly juveniles joined by a few adults, were observed feeding on crustaceans laid out to dry by fishermen on large plastic sheets. The crustaceans, largely freshwater shrimp known locally as "Seegdi" in Kannada, were picked up and swallowed whole by the birds.

Crustacea are not reported in the dietary of the Rosy Pastor by Ali and Ripley (1987) who otherwise include a large list of food

items including fruits and berries of several species of plants, flower nectar, a variety of insects and cereal grains, chiefly bajra and jowar. Crustaceans may not be an important component of the Rosy Pastor's diet but could be included as a result of opportunistic feeding when large 'sieges' of birds are present leading to pressure on food sources and food availability.

References

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