

NEWSLETTER FOR ORNITHOLOGISTS

Vol. 1 No. 6, November-December 2004.

ISSN 0972-9933

URL: www.geocities.com/ashpittie/nlo.html

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Newsletter for Ornithologists

Publishes notes and observations on birds of the Indian region. We welcome articles, papers, annotated checklists, trip reports, notes on the behaviour and biology of one or more species, book reviews, audio-recording reviews, letters, announcements, notices, news from the birding world, etc. Also welcome is material for the cover (art, transparencies, photographs) and line drawings for the text pages. Papers should be typewritten with double spacing, clearly handwritten, or form part of an email. Please send all material to the Editor at the address given below. Whilst every care is taken, *Newsletter for Ornithologists* cannot be held responsible for accidental loss or damage of any material sent for publication or for their return whether they are accepted for publication or not. Material published in *Newsletter for Ornithologists* reflects the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the publishers.

Subscription information

Six issues will be published annually in February, April, June, August, October, and December.

Type	Annual	3-year
Individual	Rs. 100	Rs. 300
Student (Up to 10 th)	Rs. 75	Rs. 225
Institution	Rs. 300	Rs. 900
Foreign Individual	\$10	\$30
Foreign Institution	\$50	\$150

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Editorial

Personal and national IBAs

For almost two decades I have been visiting Shamirpet, a small wetland near Hyderabad. To many it may seem the same as thousands of similar wetlands across agrarian, peninsular India: a man-made bund thrown across a depression in the land, to collect rainwater, with agriculture on the margins and below the artificial obstruction. Shamirpet's gently undulating countryside is strewn with extraordinary rock formations: weather-worn granite, in myriad shapes and sizes, piled haphazardly on top of each other, seemingly defying gravity. Low-lying areas, easily inundated through channels, are cultivated. Buffalos graze the uncultivated 'waste' areas, large swathes of which are flooded during overenthusiastic monsoons, spawning spontaneous ephemeral plant and animal life. Ignoring human perception of land-use or disuse, nature populates every available niche. I have spent several hours here, watching birds, soaking in the sense of the place.

It was here that I saw a Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* perched bolt upright on a rock in the middle of the water, its chest glistening white in the morning sun, eyeing the waterfowl as they swam all around. Once, a tentative Indian Courser *Cursorius coromandelicus* stepped gingerly across some fallow fields on the opposite shore, giving delightful views through the scope. Scores of Cliff Swallows *Hirundo fluviicola* dot the sky in frenzied pursuit of nutritious specks, or perched in the fashion of musical notes on telegraph wires, scattering at the least provocation. Graceful Small Pratincoles *Glareola lactea* perch on a large bare rock island in the water, flying hither and thither, flashing their milky-white belly as they twist and turn in mid-flight. On a chilly winter morning, the stillness of the water echoes the fluty whistle of a Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* or reflects a Eurasian Wigeon's *Anas penelope* cry. On land, the handsome Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius* stands silhouetted on boulders. As the sun rises higher in the firmament, lark-song permeates the air. At least six species use the 'wasteland' surrounding the waters. Red-winged Bush-Lark *Mirafra erythroptera* and Jerdon's Bush-Lark *M. affinis* shoot up into the sky and pour forth their melodies from whirled, hovering wings, parachuting down to a rock or into the grass stubble. Dapper Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark *Eremopterix grisea* males court diminutive females with impressive roller coaster flights and drawn out, haunting whistles. Rufous-tailed Finch-Lark *Ammomanes phoenicurus* rise like sods of earth into the sky, uttering their characteristic calls, flying from one place to another. The song of the Eastern Skylark *Alauda gulgula* washes down onto those who have the ears for it, in cascades of 'un-premeditated' melody. The rufous coloured peninsular endemic, Sykes's Crested Lark *Galerida deva*, moves around in exaltations of three or more, uttering its tremulous "trew-trew" call in flight, appearing suddenly from nowhere, alighting nearby and instantly engrossed in its search for food as though it was always there. What a wonderfully captivating place! For me it is my own important bird area. I am sure that each one of you has such a place that you visit repeatedly for what it contains, what it gives you and what you are able to bring back to enrich your daily lives. Shamirpet has of course fallen on bad times. Development and tourism have caught up with it and construction activity is rampant. Rock formations are disappearing under the hammer and chisel and the water is inexorably drying up, victim of failed monsoons and perhaps, base human greed for land. This situation is present throughout the country.

The rapid and rash destruction of viable bird habitats across the earth prompted BirdLife International to formulate various criteria, based on rarity of taxa, significant populations of species, etc., to identify and document what are called "Important Bird Areas" (IBA). IBAs highlight critical areas to the people and governments of countries and recommend that they be conserved for posterity. The Bombay Natural History Society has successfully compiled a list of IBAs for India and published a veritable tome containing this information (see review elsewhere in this issue). The cause of bird conservation would be furthered if relevant sections of this work were translated into regional languages, for wider dissemination at grass-roots level, among people and administrators.

At the end of our first year of publication we would like to place on record our gratitude to those who have helped us make the *Newsletter for Ornithologists* what it is. Sachin Jaltare for the magnificent cover of the inaugural issue and along with Anwar Hussain for layout; Clement Francis, Atanu Mondal, Harkirat S. Sangha, Rishad Naoraji, Niranjana R. Sant, Nikhil Devasar and Jawed Ashraf for use of their excellent photographs; ITC Limited's Paperboards and Speciality Papers Division for generously donating paper to cover six issues; Oxford University Press, Secon Surveys Pvt Ltd., Pitti Laminations Ltd. and G. B. K. Charitable Trust for taking advertisement space; Bombay Natural History Society and other donors for financial support; P. Rambabu for handling subscriptions, printing and posting; all our readers for their spontaneous and enthusiastic support and encouragement. Wishing all of you a wonderful 2005!

Aasheesh Pittie