

Editors' note: This taxon was earlier treated in *Acrocephalus*. The change to *Phragmaticola* is following the molecular findings of Helbig, A. & I. Seibold. 1999. Molecular phylogeny of Palearctic-African *Acrocephalus* and *Hippolais* warblers (Aves: Sylviidae). *Molec. Phylogen. Evol.* 11: 246-260.

We realised that this species was new for us. Though one of us (DIA) is familiar with several *Acrocephalus* species from the marshes of the U.K. and Europe, the habitat at Pasarani Ghat was hot, dry and scrubby and the possibility of an *Acrocephalus* did not cross his mind at the time. RP is familiar with most of the birds of Maharashtra, and he tried and failed to think of a large wren-warbler fitting the description. The books that we carried (Ali 1996; Ali and Ripley 1989) did not have a good illustration for 100% accurate identification and so it remained unidentified for over a week.

However, on 2.ii.1998, DIA was reading a book he had brought with him from the U. K. (Lewington, et. al. 1992). The birds it covers are those that are extralimital to Europe but for which stray records have occurred. European birdwatchers are fortunate to have a wide range of field-guides with extremely good illustrations and very detailed text, and DIA had brought this one with him on his business trip to Pune precisely for this reason, considering that many of these vagrants to Europe are regular wintering species in India. Field marks are especially carefully described in this book, so that bird-watchers, believing they have observed an extralimital vagrant in Europe, can be absolutely sure of the species before notifying a records committee and alerting other bird watchers. While flicking idly through the pages of this book, DIA suddenly saw an exact illustration of the head of the bird we had seen at Pasarani Ghat, with the loreal patch clearly shown. DIA was absolutely certain that the bird we had seen was the Thick-billed Warbler *Phragmaticola aedon*. Further perusal of the text and the illustrations confirmed

the identification, since size, coloration, proportions of wings and tail, voice and habitat all matched our field observations. In particular, the habitat is given as "...favours bushy, scrubby areas...not associated with wet habitats and reeds etc," (p. 360). Furthermore, no field marks are given which contradict our observations. We were thus fully convinced that this is the bird we saw.

Abdulali (1981) does not include the Thick-billed Warbler in his checklist. Ali and Ripley (1987) include southwestern Maharashtra in the distribution of this species. However, the exact location has not been mentioned. Prasad (2003) records sightings by various people from Gangapur Dam, Nasik district; Panchgani, Satara district; and Purandar, Pune district. We feel that the species has been under-recorded in at least this part of the country.

References

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Green Vine Snake *Ahaetulla nasuta* preying on a Baya Weaver *Ploceus philippinus*

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In the summer of 2000 we decided to survey the tanks in the Yelandur area in the Chamrajnagar district of southern Karnataka, for nests of Black-bellied Terns *Sterna acuticauda*. But unfortunately, by the 20th of May, when we made our third visit to the area (within a month), many of the largest tanks had dried up. But the Agara Tank (12°6'N, 77°4'E), the largest in this group with a water-spread of over 6km² (600ha), had sufficient water and we concentrated our efforts there. The lake bund is crowded with large *Prosopis* shrubs on the downstream side that faces paddies, and there is a small outlet canal that leads from the tank to the fields embracing the bund for quite a distance, also lined by the *Prosopis* bushes.

It was around two in the afternoon when we were walking along the eastern end of the 2km long bund, that we heard loud, disembodied cries of some bird from a nearby turn of the bund. When we rushed to the source of the sounds, all we could see was a group of around 50 or so highly agitated Baya Weavers *Ploceus philippinus*. These birds were hovering around frenziedly and in batches of 2-3 birds were diving in succession towards a particular patch of *Prosopis* bush, apparently attacking something. The birds would then settle down on the bush, circumscribing what looked

like a 'no-landing' zone! Our attention was drawn to a baya in that 'patch', which initially appeared to be caught in the long spines of the bush and was trying to free itself, in the process showing signs of a violent struggle. But what was not immediately apparent was the green Vine Snake *Ahaetulla nasuta* that was holding the bird by the neck and had probably caught the bird by the head and neck. The fresh green foliage of the plant had so effectively camouflaged the snake that it took us a minute or so, at a distance of a couple of meters, to discern its presence! The bird had probably been captured just a minute or so before we arrived at the scene. The struggle proceeded for a further ten minutes with the bird losing out slowly, and ended with a few dramatic convulsions by the bird before it went limp. All the while the other bayas relentlessly attacked the snake by pecking, and made quite a lot of noise that attracted other birds like Common Mynas *Acridotheres tristis* to join the brawl. But the snake had its way and took nearly 70 minutes to swallow the entire bird, head-first.

Daniel (2002) describes the food of this snake as "Small mammals, birds, lizards, and occasionally other snakes," and this report of a baya in its dietary enhances the list. Daniel's description

of the hunting strategy of this snake [“On seeing prey, the forebody is slowly raised, and coiled in a zig-zag manner and at the opportune moment darted forward to unerringly catch the prey just behind the head, drag it off its support and keep it dangling till its struggles cease. It then swallows the prey, which may take more than half an hour after capture...”] matched our own sighting, as to what happens after the prey is captured, although we did not observe the actual capture of the bird. But life-and-death struggles as the one described are not witnessed everyday, and we considered it

worthy of record.

References

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Introduction to natural history through birds

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“Are they kids to fight and make such a noise?” remarked a little girl while observing some parakeets creating a cacophony perched atop a Gulmohur tree at Cubbon Park one day. This was heard at a nature trail conducted for five-year olds. This and more innocent and interesting comments as well as intriguing questions by children make me ponder about the impact that birds and other wildlife can have on young minds. The way children (and adults) can relate to nature, if oriented in the right way, is noteworthy!

Being involved with sharing information on natural history, I have always hoped that in the bargain, I'd be able to do a little more for a change in attitude than just what the work demanded. The thought that I could take help from birds for this purpose is perhaps well summed up by Sir David Attenborough in his book *'The life of birds.'*

Attenborough says, “It is easy to understand why so many of us are so fond of birds. They are lively; they are lovely; and they are everywhere. They have characters with which we can easily identify – cheeky and shy, gentle and vicious, faithful – and faithless. Many enact the dramas of their lives in full view for all to see. They are part of our world yet, at a clap of our hands, they lift into the air and vanish into their own with a facility that we can only envy. And they are an ever-present link with the natural world that lies beyond our brick walls. It is hardly surprising that human beings have studied birds with a greater dedication and intensity than they have lavished on any other group of animal.”

This is something that all of us interested in birds must have experienced time and again. And each time one tends to be intrigued, wonder-struck and spellbound!

It was with the view to generate interest in natural history that one day, many years ago, I offered to go out with a group of Zoology teachers to a wilderness area. I was looking forward to this interaction, hoping to learn something from this congregation of formally oriented intellectuals, but was highly disappointed!

My interaction with the teachers was for a few minutes before lunch. Luckily for me, a little creature decided to venture upon me before I spoke with them. It was an ant-mimicking spider and I “held on” to this little fellow until it was my turn to address the audience. When I got my chance, I summoned them to have a closer look at the not so glamorous little fellow on my palm. The audience, who had by now settled well into their chairs, reluctantly got up and came closer to me. They all peered at my palm; some were even adventurous to pull my hand for a closer look. And, almost in unison, they said it was an insect, while others were

specific and said it was an ant.

At this stage, I coaxed them to have a second look at the creature as I differed with their identification. Most of them stuck to their identification while others were noncommittal. Agreed, the mimicry was very good! But what surprised me was the lack of careful observation prior to identification, that too for a group of people formally trained in the subject. I ended my interaction by saying that all of zoology cannot be taught between the four walls of the classroom. Of course not failing to add that students (along with their teachers) should venture outdoors at least once in a while to learn zoology as this would then help in putting into perspective the classroom learning.

There is a formal need to encourage nature study – call it by any name, field biology, ecology, research, etc. The skill set required for field study is already on the endangered list. The need to educate and encourage development of such skills is imperative to save them from going the dodo way. Birdwatching as a hobby can give students an ample opportunity to learn more about a host of other aspects of natural history apart from birds. It also provides for learning skills that are not formally taught.

Besides learning, one can also, by constant practice, hone skills. This is essential. In times when biodiversity is one of the most discussed global issues, it becomes important to have people with identification skills. Birds are excellent subjects to start with as they provide for non-invasive field identification, particularly with the plethora of field guides available in the market today. Naming birds is the first step towards doing something more productive for their conservation. As Malcolm Tait says in his article in *The Ecologist* (July/August 2003), “You have to be aware before you can care.”

This being the case, I have always wondered why students of life sciences, at least at the degree level, are not exposed to the fascinating hobby of birdwatching. Moreover, many are often ignorant / misinformed, even about the fundamental aspects of biology / natural history despite being prescribed in their curriculum. The experience that I have narrated above probably explains why students are not interested in natural history and also explains the lacunae in our education system. What is true for birds is true for most other wildlife; a lot of it is overlooked by many of us.

An interest in natural history need not necessarily be restricted to students of life sciences. It is something any one with an inclination towards nature can indulge in. Over two decades of birdwatching, I have seen several people getting interested in birds.