



Figure 1. Distribution of Yellow-throated Bulbul localities in India (as per Subramanya *et al.* in press).

Barn Owls *Tyto alba*, Black-shouldered Kites *Elanus caeruleus*, Jirds and Gerbils

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The charms of being an amateur naturalist lie in the fact that the process of gathering Natural History knowledge outlasts the man. And excitement comes every now and then when the amateur is able to relate an outdoors occurrence to a law of Natural History. Tara Gandhi's most interesting article (*Newsletter for Birdwatchers* Vol. 43, No. 6, November-December 2003) and her observations that "The population of many species of birds of prey...tends to follow the population uprise-decline by Lemmings and...other rodents..." reminded me of a similar interface between the presence of Barn Owls *Tyto alba* and Black-shouldered Kites *Elanus caeruleus* on the one hand and Indian Desert Jirds *Meriones hurrianae*, on the other, which I chanced to witness once.

In 1984, I was stationed at a place that was the boast of the

Indian Army as the largest and the first planned cantonment in Asia. It had been in the making since 1972. A 900-acre patch earmarked for future needs had, by the inter-play of forces of Nature, over 12 years, become a pristine habitat of the semi-desert flora and fauna. Located within a military security area, there was no trespass or poaching and so grasses, bushes, trees, birds, mammals, rodents and reptiles that inhabit the Thar Desert region flourished here in great abundance.

There was one very large copse of "Babul" trees, *Acacia nilotica*, spread over nearly ten acres and after a gap of about two kilometers, there were "Khejri" trees, *Prosopis cineraria*, in an equally extensive cluster. The space between was scattered mostly with bushes of "Aak", *Calotropis procera*, "Kaer", *Capparis*

aphylla, “Ber” *Zizyphus mauritiana* and grasses of the arid semi-desert covered almost the entire floor space. The Babul trees were the favoured perch and roost of the Black-shouldered kites; they were so numerous that I shied from enumeration. The Barn owls, fewer in numbers (45+) perched exclusively on the Khejri trees. They were most supportive of my attempts at hand-held, snapshot bird photography. Being nocturnal, they hated to move or fly by day [unless harassed by crows (Corvidae) and Common Mynas *Acridotheres tristis*] so they shut their eyelids and pretended they had not seen me wielding the camera! The Black-shouldered kites allowed me no such indulgence.

One flank of this wilderness-niche rested on an irrigation channel, brick-lined inside and compressed mud on the outer side. There was one 3km stretch of the channel, which I found extensively honeycombed with burrows of the Indian desert jird. As they are diurnal, they were encountered in large numbers always and anytime of the day. Mischievous and playful though the Desert jirds were, they were always on high alert against the Black-shouldered kites, their fierce predators.

This aroused my curiosity about the Barn owl’s prey. One moonlit night I saw them fly over and beyond the irrigation channel towards cropped fields. A few days later, I found considerable rodent burrows in the sandy fallow fields and telltale signs of the presence of more gerbils. As they did not show up by day, I presumed that they were the kindred species (Family Muridae), the Indian Gerbil *Tatera indica*, which being nocturnal, would be the natural prey of the Barn owl.

Then came the summer rains. Unfortunately, for the gerbils, there

was one spell almost round the clock for five days; constant drizzle interspersed with sessions of heavy downpour. When the skies cleared at last, there was not a single gerbil to be seen anywhere. Their burrows had been flooded and damaged. When I did not see any Black-shouldered kites either, I made haste to the perches of Barn owls. They too had cleared out to the last bird. The unusually excessive rainfall had evidently triggered the survival instinct among gerbils to move out to higher ground (sand dunes). There was just no evidence of any of them having perished through predation or any other calamity. Likewise, the Barn owls and the Black-shouldered kites having lost their prey-base must have felt obliged to look for pastures anew. I missed their presence but was happy to have witnessed at first hand a law of Natural History operating at such a fundamental level. Not just, that, I was also able to see for myself the fascinating architecture of gerbil burrows. As is believed, the burrow of the male was a straightforward tunnel with one entrance and one exit. However, the burrows of females had several interconnected chambers each leading to a separate exit. As the female gives birth to four or more at a time, she needs larger space and more than one exit for a quick get-away by her progeny in an emergency. So here was another elementary survival strategy on display. Today, much of this habitat of the gerbils has already been encroached upon by the unsatisfied demands of urbanization and the Green Revolution. Just as Tara Gandhi opines that the prey-predator dynamics could very well have inspired “the fables and stories of mysterious mass suicide by Lemmings” so also the life history of the gerbils in India may become a mere story or a fable soon.

Recoveries from the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*

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Towards the end of 1960, during an evening walk, Salim Ali suggested that we form a Birdwatcher’s Field Club of India. “It will encourage members to observe wild birds in the field, and make notes carefully, on the spot about their activities.” He said that a great deal of work had been done on the taxonomy of birds. “We have enough specimens in the collections of the Bombay Natural History Society, the British Museum of Natural History and the Indian Museum in Calcutta. The time has now come to study the life histories of our living birds about which we know so little. We do not even know the incubation periods of some of our common birds like the bulbuls.”

There was silence for some time and I broke in to say, “What about the theory that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush?” I am glad he did not flare up at this misguided bit of humour.

Our walk and our talk continued. I said that in the *Journal* of the Bombay Natural History Society (B.N.H.S.), in its ‘Miscellaneous’ section, the majority of notes related to birds. “Was it necessary to have a new organisation?” He was insistent that a separate Society, specifically devoted to birds, was necessary to make progress in ornithology and particularly, to get a large number of people involved in this fascinating and useful hobby. He said he was surprised at the response to the *Book of Indian birds* since its publication in 1941.

At that time, I wrote a monthly column, called “Birdwatcher’s Diary” in the *Times of India*, Bombay. I was also giving regular broadcasts on birds, which in fact resulted from one of the officials of A.I.R. Bombay, noticing my column in the *Times*. I was thereby, beginning to acquire a modicum of knowledge of our birds.

At a later meeting, Salim suggested that I start a “Newsletter for Birdwatchers” which would be the medium of the proposed Birdwatcher’s Field Club of India. In the end, the Field Club remained an idea. The “Newsletter” became a more tangible product and, I believe, succeeded in Salim Ali’s objective of creating a greater interest in birds.

I might mention here, that when the members of the Executive Committee of the B.N.H.S. heard about the proposed “Newsletter”, they were very upset and said that the B.N.H.S. itself was woefully short of members. A new organisation would result in further depletion. In one of the A.G.M.s of the period, there were only six members present and so their fears were justified. On the other hand, both Salim and I felt that if the “Newsletter” succeeded in kindling an interest among amateurs they might later decide to join the B.N.H.S. I cannot quote figures, but it is my impression that several young people, who first became subscribers of the “Newsletter” at Rs. 5/- per annum, later joined the B.N.H.S.