

Black-necked Crane
Grus nigricollis
(Local Name: *Cha Thung-thung*)

We saw eight adults and two chicks (2005 season) at Hanle (Mahe and Tsokar). What can a birder / wildlife photographer tell about this magnificent bird? Words cannot express the awe and wonder that one feels seeing it walk majestically through the cold marshes of Ladakh. One cannot imagine a wilderness without this crane. It is the heart and soul of avian life in Ladakh. Yet its survival hangs by a thin line. The local dogs (Tibetan Mastiff) are the greatest threat to the cranes' eggs and young ones. Even adults are taken. Four crane nests were decimated at Hanle itself by these dogs this year (2005).

Photo: Niranjan Sant



Birds of Ladakh

Clement Francis M.



Ruddy Shelduck

Tandorna ferruginea

(Local Name: *Muru*,
Nguru)

These birds were seen near water throughout western Ladakh. At Hanle, Mahe, Puga Valley, Tso-Moriri, Tsokar, Shey and Tikse marshes we found them with ducklings. Adults flew fearlessly at intruders, local dogs, Upland Buzzards *Buteo hemilasius* and kiangs, to protect the young. At Hanle we spotted an adult with ducklings, grazing on the grassy marshes and feeding on the abundant flies.



Bar-headed Goose

Anser Indicus

(Local Name: *Nangpa*)

Scores of these birds were present with young at Tso-moriri. The grassy banks of the lake are good feeding grounds for these birds. There is an abundance of insects and grasses for the adults and the young. It was an enthralling to see a few pairs with as many as 16 young! Tso-moriri is well protected and the only predator that threatened the young was the Brown-headed Gull *Larus brunnicephalus*. We did not spot any land predators.



Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris* (Local Name: *Rizit*)

Horned Larks are among the commonest birds in Ladakh. We found them very active even after sunset. At Tso-moriri, where there is enough sunlight even at 20:00hrs, these birds fed on grass seeds and tubers even as late as 22:00hrs. Their fledged young (top photo) are beautifully marked in buff, black and brown on the back. July being almost the end of their breeding season, we found many juveniles flying around adults and feeding on grass seeds and tubers. They were even digging for maggots in the marshes. (Middle: Female. Bottom: Male.)



Hill Pigeon *Columbia rupestris* (Local Name: *Angoa, Mukron*)

We found this bold bird almost everywhere that we traveled in Ladakh, at Leh, Mahe, Hanle, Tso-moriri and Tso-kar. Also at the Shey and Tikse marshes. They fed on gravel and also near restaurants. On the highways at Leh they were seen feeding on left over food. They look bulky and very sturdy to survive the harsh climatic conditions of Ladakh. Their survival skill were great and we found them feeding on seeds and partially digested edibles from the dung of kiang. We even found them feeding on the undigested food from the stomachs of dead kiangs at Hanle, which were ripped open by local dogs and birds of prey.

Little Owl *Athena noctua* (Local Name: *Ugpa*)

At Tso-kar, a pair had nested inside a wolf-trap. These are designed by Pashmina tribals to trap and kill wolves, which prey on their Pashmina goats. There were four fully grown chicks, which never allowed us to photograph them; they hid themselves well inside the stony construction of the wolf trap. Tso-kar did not have much water, as we expected, but had lots of voles, which are part of the owl's prey. The adult sat under the shade of a boulder and allowed us to take a few pictures. The sun light was very harsh for photography and we left the area happy with the knowledge that the pair had bred successfully and the young were in good condition.





Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola* (Local Name: *Sterzi*)

At Tikse marshes we found more than ten pairs of these birds breeding. Some were feeding fledged young while others had young in nests. All the nests were placed on the ground inside thick grass. Plenty of fly maggots were present in the marshes and these birds feasted on them. They arrived at their nests, with beak-fuls of maggots, every 5-10 minutes. A pair of Hume's Whitethroat *Sylvia althaea* was also nesting five feet from a pair of wagtails. When adults of both the species arrived in the nesting area, with prey for their young, they tried to aggressively chase each other out of the nesting area. There were many grass-cutters in that area and the birds were seldom shy of them. We found a few pairs nesting at Shey marshes as well.



Black-billed Magpie *Pica pica* (Local Name: *Chiatsaga, Katang-putit*)

Found all over Leh and surrounding areas. They seem to fill in for crows in Ladakh, virtually ruling the urban sky. In the Leh area we found a few active nests around the city on trees, which David Sonam said had been nests of Pond Herons *Ardeola grayii* and were usurped by these birds. They were seen around garbage dumps and marshy areas. In marshy areas they dug for edible items. Some hung around roadside restaurants for easy meals. By July we found most adults with fully-fledged young and the adults were teaching them to dig the loose soil for food. At higher elevations like Tso-moriri and Hanle we did not see this bird at all.



Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti oreophila*

(Local Name: *Chiu-logzi*)

At Hanle we saw at least four pairs of these birds with young ones. They had nested in crevices on the hills. Many different kinds of flies were breeding in huge numbers in the marshes and their maggots were harvested by the adults. It was amazing to see these small birds withstanding the harsh climatic conditions of Ladakh. Males were clothed in breeding plumage. Quite tolerant of humans – one male came as close as four feet from me to dig out a maggot. Their beaks are fantastically designed for digging loose soil for insect larvae.

(Left: Male. Right: Juvenile.)

