

Over 125 species of birds in the islands are from elsewhere, mostly originating in India and South-east Asia. These species are believed to have introduced Avian malaria and other blood-borne parasitic diseases into native bird populations, contributing to the demise of many indigenous bird species. In my monograph on the Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*, I mentioned reports of the occurrence of two Avian malarial parasites, *Plasmodium relictum* and *P. circumflexum* in the blood of mynas from Hawaiian Islands (Kannan, R. & D. A. James, 2001. The Common Myna. In Birds of North America, Philadelphia Academy of Sciences and American Ornithologists Union, No. 583, pp. 20). Despite this reported occurrence of parasites in the blood of Asian birds, and given the history of worldwide transmission of these parasites, it is surprising that until this study, there had been no systematic survey of Hematozoans from this continent. This paper presents

findings from an analysis of blood samples from 699 birds from Myanmar, India, and South Korea, collected over a 10-year period from 1994. Thirty-four per cent (238 birds) of the sample was found to be infected with Hematozoans. Using molecular techniques involving cytochrome-b gene sequences, the authors report 34 distinct lineages of *Plasmodium* and 41 of *Haemoproteus* in the sample. Myanmar and India shared lineages, and there was no such overlap in lineages between India and South Korea. The authors speculate that the lack of sharing of lineages between India and South Korea may be because migratory birds that ply between the two countries adopt different flyways. Conversely, Myanmar and India, being geographically adjacent to each other, may share migratory populations of many species and hence the congruence in Hematozoan lineages.

—Ragupathy Kannan

—In the news—

Compiled by Praveen J.

Its BirdRace time again!

The HSBC India BirdRaces are slowly expanding and gaining popularity. About eight Indian cities will conduct bird races starting from 11.xi.2007 in Kerala (three cities) with the grand finale at Bharatpur (Rajasthan) in February. Partly inspired by the Hong Kong Bird Race, the event is open to all, from experienced birdwatchers, lay-persons, beginners, students, well, just about anyone interested in birds and willing to give up a Sunday for birds and fun. This is a teamwork exercise with three to four persons comprising a team, which must include a good birder who is familiar with the site's / region's avifauna. Every team will remain as a composite unit for the entire day. There are no pre-determined routes or birding spots. The BirdRace begins at dawn and ends just before sunset. Thereupon, wherever the teams are, they take about an hour to converge at a venue for the prize distribution ceremony and dinner. Check out <http://www.indiabirdraces.com> for the recent updates and watch-out for announcements in regional e-groups.

New state bird for Himachal Pradesh

Himachal Pradesh has declared the exquisite and elusive Western Tragopan *Tragopan melanocephalus* or *Jujurana* as its locally known, as its new state bird. The Western Tragopan is a Near-Threatened species endemic to the Western Himalayas. Himachal's former state bird, Himalayan Monal *Lophophorus impejanus* was also the national bird of Nepal and hence was not considered unique for the state. Snow Leopard *Panthera uncia* would be the new state animal replacing Musk Deer *Moschus chrysogaster* and Pink Rhododendron *Rhododendron campanulatum* the state flower replacing the commoner *Rhododendron arboretum*. Decisions to designate these were taken in the 3rd State Wildlife Board Meeting at Shimla under the chairmanship of Chief Minister Virbhadr Singh on 10.viii.2007. According to a press release, the CM said the decision to grant exalted status to these rare species would go a long way in protecting them and also give a boost to their conservation efforts. Courtesy: <http://himachalpr.gov.in>.

Heronries in Kerala—hanging by a thin thread

Heronries in Kerala have not done well in recent years. The thickly populated state also happens to be a major breeding area for Oriental Darters *Anhinga melanogaster* and other mixed heronry species; and several of these heronries happen to be in public places close to human activity like hospitals, temples, bus stations and roadside trees. A smattering of news reports appear in press and e-groups annually, of heronry trees being cut, nestlings and hatching birds being caught and birds being shot. The heronries are extremely unpopular among the locals and there is much hue and cry to destroy the trees or nests to cleanse the area. The stench and noise that emanates from a mixed heronry is something which even the most ardent of bird-watchers would loath!

Local press reported the destruction of a heronry with nests of Little Cormorants *Phalacrocorax niger* from the premises of Lord Krishna temple at Guruvayur. Darter nestlings that tumble down from the trees around Kottayam bus station fall prey to stray dogs and are run-over by buses. A poacher was reportedly caught selling darter chicks by Forest Department officials at Thrissur.

It is generally felt that legislation cannot do much to protect mixed heronries in Kerala. However, awareness campaigns are slow and gradual and sometimes not very effective. Individual initiatives have been fairly successful in protecting a mixed heronry at Irinjalakuda where more than 60 pairs of darters nest. A sub-adult darter, which was being sold in a market at Kottayam, was bought by bird-watchers for Rs 30/- (!) and re-habilitated at Kumarokom. This bird has become quite popular with local children who bring fish to feed the bird. A heartening note was the report by B. Sreekumar and others from Vembanad Nature Club of 500 darters breeding at Kumarakom heronry in ix.2007; perhaps one of the very few sites away from direct human conflict.

Problems at each heronry are different and there is no single "magic" solution. Subsequent to regular heronry counts by Malabar Nature History Society (MNHS) in recent years, it is felt that greater effort should now be directed towards developing

and deploying effective conservation action at the key nesting sites rather than initiating and allocating funds for further heronry surveys. *Courtesy: KeralaBirder.*

Mitigating bird-hits on aircrafts—IAF plans to study birds

Indian Air Force (IAF) is planning to initiate a Bird Hazard Data Collection Project in major airports in the country and has invited volunteers with field experience in birds. The project, which shall run for a year in several airports across the country, aims to provide further details on the birds found in the areas close to airbases. The tentative list of airports identified for the project includes Adampur, Agra, Ambala, Bareilly, Chabua (in north-eastern India), Dindigul (or Hakimpet), Gorakhpur, Gwalior and Jamnagar (or Srinagar). Two volunteers are expected to be present at each airport for a period of 15 working days to conduct the study. Interested candidates may post their resume with relevant details to airportbirds.india@gmail.com.

Will Spoon-billed Sandpipers be gone—forever?

Populations of one of the world's most enigmatic birds have crashed over the last decade, and surveys, this summer, of its breeding grounds suggest that the situation is critical. The charismatic, and rather aptly named, Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Eurynorhynchus pygmeus* is now worryingly close to becoming extinct. With only 200–300 pairs left, and populations dropping by 70% in some key sites in the last couple of years, conservationists are calling for urgent help to tackle the decline.

The reasons for these losses are complex, involving changes to habitat during migration and loss of breeding areas. What is clear is that nest predation by foxes and disturbance by people and dogs could prove to be the final nail in the coffin for the few birds left.

Spoon-billed Sandpipers' spoon-shaped bill is still something of a mystery, the exact use for which is still unknown. They breed during June–July on a small strip of coastal Arctic tundra in Chukotka, north-eastern Russia. They then migrate thousands of kilometres to winter along coasts in South and South-East Asia. Spoon-billed Sandpipers are one of several species that depend on the rich tidal coasts of the Yellow Sea in East Asia, where they stop to refuel on their way to and from their breeding grounds. Recent surveys along the eastern coast of India, where it was known to winter sparingly, proved futile with no birds being recorded.

BirdLife International has launched the Preventing Extinctions initiative to try and turn the tide for species like Spoon-billed Sandpiper and is looking for companies, institutions and individuals to step up and provide funding by becoming BirdLife Species Champions. For more news, visit http://www.birdlife.org/news/pr/2007/10/spoon_billed_sandpiper.html.

More Protected Areas go online

Yet another protected area has created an official website for itself. Silent Valley National Park in Kerala launched its official website on the day when the 147.22 km² buffer zone was inaugurated and annexed to the national park. The well-designed pages include detailed sections on flora and fauna recorded from the park including a section on birds. However, it is heartening to note that the management plan of the park is also made available online through these pages. The other protected area in Kerala, which went online recently was Parambikulam Wildlife Sanctuary. These pages can be accessed at www.silentvalleynationalpark.org and www.parambikulam.org.

Vulture news

There is news of a mixed nature on vultures; from the sighting of White-rumped Vultures *Gyps benghalensis* in a new locality in Karnataka to the alarming decline of vultures in Gujarat and finally on education campaigns to save our vultures.

On 18.viii.2007, forest officials from Ankola reported twelve White-rumped Vultures behind Hattikere timber depot in northern Karnataka. From a video clip sent across to Vijay Mohan Raj, it was evident that some of the birds were juveniles. S. A. Hussain furthered on this sighting that he used to see White-rumped Vultures in late 1980s near Karwar, which is near Ankola and hence it could have been the same population still surviving. *Courtesy: BngBirds.*

However, as per a survey conducted by Gujarat Forest Department, there was a 40% fall in the population vultures in the state from an erstwhile 2,646 to 1,500. The news also claims that the fall in population is due to the rampant use of the banned drug diclofenac by cattle houses. The CCF, Wildlife, has identified two companies in Gujarat that manufacture this drug and have asked them to stop the production. The full Story can be found at <http://www.dnaindia.com/report.asp?NewsID=1118622>.

Meanwhile, Rajputana Society of Natural History, Udaipur has launched stickers and mementos in Hindi during the 53rd Wildlife Week at Chittorgarh, appealing to people to save the vultures by checking use of diclofenac in their area. *Courtesy: OrientalBirding.*

Open access Journal for Ornithology

Bentham Open, a forum that publishes Open Access journals is increasing its coverage this year by undertaking more journals in 2007 devoted to various disciplines in the fields of science and technology, the Open Ornithology Journal being one of these. These journals are freely accessible via the Internet in full text at no extra cost. Authors who publish in Open Access journals retain the copyright of their article. All published articles will be deposited immediately upon publication in PubMed Central and are indexed by Google and Google Scholar, therefore providing the maximum exposure to the articles. The Open Access Journal for Ornithology will publish research articles, reviews and letters in all areas of ornithology. Visit the journal's homepage for article submission at the following website www.bentham.org/open/tooenij.

From the field

A Thick-billed Green Pigeon *Treron curvirostra* was photographed at Lingambudhi Lake, Mysore by C. S. Kulashekara on 20.ix.2007; far away from its normal range in north-eastern India. The nearest



Thick-billed Green Pigeon Lingambudhi lake, Mysore, Karnataka 20.ix.2007.

Kulashekara C S

sightings are from Kolkota (West Bengal) by Sumit K. Sen and others. However, there are high chances that the bird was an escapee rather than a straggler. *Courtesy: www.indianaturewatch.net.*

Vinod Kumar Gupta and his friends had a good trip with falcon sightings and other raptors at Tal Chappar Wildlife Sanctuary in Rajasthan. During the field trip (22–23.ix.2007) they saw 4–5 **Laggar Falcons** *Falco jugger* with juveniles, **Red-necked Falcons** *F. chicquera*, an immature **Peregrine Falcon** *F. peregrinus* and a **Common Kestrel** *F. tinnunculus* apart from other raptors like **Tawny Eagle** *Aquila rapax*, **Steppe Eagle** *A. nipalensis*, **Pallid Harrier** *Circus pygargus* and **White-eyed Buzzard** *Butastur teesa*. *Courtesy: DelhiBird.*

Sumit K. Sen reported **Eurasian Hobby** *F. subbuteo* from the southern tip of Indian Sundarbans on 12.x.2007. The species is considerably rare in this region and there are very few records from the Indian Sunderbans. *Courtesy: Bengalbird.*

Subramanian Janakiraman reported about 50–60 **Spot-billed Pelicans** *Pelecanus philippensis* on 29.viii.2007 in the waters between ECR Road and old Mahabalipuram road at Chennai, while travelling by bus. He also later learnt from fellow commuters that this level of congregation is a regular feature here. *Courtesy: TamilBirds.*

About 66 **Dalmatian Pelicans** *P. crispus* were reported near the shore in a private sea-salt company in Abdasa, Kachchh, Gujarat on 9.x.2007 by Jugal Tiwari. *Courtesy: OrientalBirding.*

An exceptionally large clutch of 20 eggs was reported from a nest of **Lesser Whistling-Duck** *Dendrocygna javanica* from Mavoor wetlands, Kozhikode district, Kerala by Rajan C. P., in viii.2007. The average clutch size is 7–12 and the maximum reported is 17 (*Handbook*). *Courtesy: KeralaBirder.*



Rajesh Shah

European Bee-eater Kanakapura road, Bangalore 9.ii.2007.

Several people reported and photographed **European Bee-eaters** *Merops apiaster* on the Kanakapura road environs, Bangalore since first reported by Rajesh Shah on 1.ix.2007. The birds are on passage and have been recorded in previous years also during the same time of the year. *Courtesy: BngBirds.*

Clive Harris and his friends reported an adult and a chick **Baillon's Crake** *Porzana pusilla* at Dadri wetlands, Delhi among several other birds on 29.ix.2007. Breeding of Baillon's Crake around Delhi region has been sporadic. *Courtesy: Delhibird.*

Subsequent to the photograph of female **Crimson-backed Sunbird** *Leptocoma minima* from Nandi Hills (*Indian Birds* 3(3): 119), Bangalore, a male Crimson-backed Sunbird was reported by Mike Prince and others on 2.ix.2007 and later Mike Prince saw a female on 29.ix.2007. Could it be that the species always dispersed

to Nandi Hills during monsoons and everyone overlooked it in previous years? *Courtesy: BngBirds.*

Himanshu Rathore photographed a **Phylloscopus warbler** (which had a ring) caught in the web of a Giant Wood Spider *Nephila sp.* in Bandhavgarh National Park, Madhya Pradesh. This is perhaps the second instance of such an incident reported from Indian forests after Anish Andheria's report of Black-naped Monarch *Hypothymis azurea* caught in the web of *Nephila maculata*. *Courtesy: www.indianaturewatch.net.*

Tracking migratory birds by satellites

The United States Geological Survey (USGS) Alaska Science Center is in the forefront of migration studies in the Pacific. A new release on September 10th announced the successful arrival of a female Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica* after a marathon flight of 29,181 km in about 500 hours of flying to the same location in New Zealand, where it has been tagged with a satellite transmitter. Scientists use satellite transmitters to track and clock the complete migratory route of long distance migrants like Bar-tailed Godwit. The USGS Shorebird Research Group goes one step further by providing online updates on maps on the migrants' current position. The website <http://alaska.usgs.gov/science/biology/shorebirds/index.html> is worth visiting to have a peek at the results of shorebird studies in the Pacific.

Jalapaadom—wetland conservation through education

Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE) launched a unique environmental education program, *Jalapaadom* ('Lessons on water'), targeting school and college students in the Vembanad backwaters area in Kerala. The Vembanad Lake is the largest humid tropical wetland ecosystem of the south west coast of India. Based on its rich biodiversity and socio-economic importance, the Vembanad Lake along with adjacent Kole Wetlands was declared a Ramsar site. The idea is to involve youngsters in the Communication, Education and Public Awareness (CERA) activities as per the Ramsar Convention, to address wetland degradation issues and to help restore Vembanad's socio-ecological system. Community Environmental Research Centre (CERC), an initiative of ATREE, with schools and colleges of Vembanad region as partners, facilitates the wetland education system. Visit www.vembanad.org for more information.

Life history of a 'lost bird' unearthed from rediscovered field notes

In 2000, the Zoological Museum, Amsterdam received a number of unpublished and previously unknown bird notes and manuscripts written by one August Spennemann. Among them was a detailed typed account of his observations of Javan Lapwing *Vanellus macropterus*, a species that has not been recorded with certainty since 1940 and is current classified as Critically Endangered by BirdLife International. His observations made in the late 1920s near Pamanukan, West Java province had descriptions of the calls and behaviour of this species, which was completely unknown to the scientific world. Spennemann lived on Java from c. 1915–1940 and these reports from areas with no previous reports of Javan Lapwings suggest that these birds may have wider habitat preferences. In the latest issue of *Bird Conservation International*, a fascinating paper gives a historical insight into the life of one of the world's rarest and most poorly known species, pieced together from newly translated notes of this German amateur ornithologist. For more on this news, visit http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2007/10/BCI_Javan_Lapwing.html.