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Indian Blackbird *Turdus simillimus* breeding in Mt. Abu

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Indian Blackbird *Turdus simillimus nigropileus** is a common visitor to the hills of Mt. Abu (24°34'N, 72°39'E; 1,219m a.s.l.), Rajasthan, India. It arrives as early as 10.iii. However, it is common from May to September. No breeding record of this species exists from Gujarat and Rajasthan. We report here a first nesting record of the Indian Blackbird from Mt. Abu on 11.vii.2004. Males were heard singing from June to September from the top of the canopy of tall trees.

The most common areas for observing Indian Blackbirds in Mt. Abu are AVM School premises, St. Mary School area, Anil Mathur's garden, Honeymoon Point area, Achalgarh, Sunset road, etc.

Indian Blackbirds have four races in the Indian Subcontinent (Rasmussen and Anderton 2005). Butler (1875) mentions the Indian Blackbird as a breeding visitor to Mt. Abu, but confesses that he "was never fortunate enough to find a nest." In a footnote to that statement, A. O. Hume states, "This is quite the most northerly point attained by this species; it is unknown throughout the whole region with which we are dealing [Gujarat and Rajasthan] No one has yet taken the nest." Prakash and Singh (1995) did not come across Indian Blackbirds in Mt. Abu during their survey from January

1993 to August 1994. Devarshi and Trigunayat (1989) mention the occurrence of Indian Blackbird in Mt. Abu (1983-1988) but do not comment on nesting.

On 11.vii.2004, one nest of Indian Blackbird was seen in Anil Mathur's garden (Rising Sun retreat) at Mt. Abu. There were two chicks inside the nest. On 26.vii two chicks left the nest. A second brood was raised in the same nest after about 15 days, but this time the nesting was not successful. The nest was built in a Rubber tree plant at a height of 3m in a fork of the tree and the nesting tree was close to human habitation. The birds tolerated human presence and kept bringing food to the young even when there were people around the nesting tree.

Both the parents took part in raising the chicks, feeding them mostly with insects and caterpillars. On several occasions they were seen carrying food in their beak at Kodara dam and AVM area in August 2004 but nests (?) could not be located.

This species is absent from Mt. Abu during winter. Indian Blackbirds were even not seen at the foothills of Mt. Abu. They are breeding visitors to Mt. Abu where they are common above 1,219m from May to early September.

This note is to document the breeding of Indian Blackbirds in Mt. Abu.

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J. K. Tiwari worked with Bombay Natural History Society's Bird Migration Study Project and Grassland Ecology Project (1989-1995). He is presently setting up a Centre for Desert and Ocean in Kutch, for nature education, halophyte afforestation and ornithological research and conservation.

Anil Mathur, M.Sc. Zoology (fisheries), is a keen naturalist who owns an eco-resort in Mt. Abu.

*Rasmussen and Anderton (2005) have split this taxon from the earlier conspecific taxon *Turdus merula*, and have grouped the following forms under *T. simillimus*: *T. s. nigropileus*, *T. s. simillimus*, *T. s. bourdilloni*, *T. s. kinnisii*. They state that, "All forms grouped herein differ markedly and in the same ways in plumage, proportions, wing formula, vocalisations, and egg colour from northern forms previously treated under *T. merula*. Despite their heterogeneity in plumage, they undoubtedly form a monophyletic group. While the *nigropileus* group (including *mahrattensis* and *spencei*) is the most divergent in terms of plumage colouration, the Sri Lankan *kinnisii* is the most distinct in other ways, including its small size, plumage texture, near lack of sexual dimorphism, and vocalisations, and is probably better treated as a distinct species. A formal taxonomic revision is underway by P. Alström and co-workers," (p. 364).

Recoveries from the Newsletter for Birdwatchers – 8

Zafar Futehally

Although the *Newsletter* had started appearing in 1960 as a smudgy cyclostyled sheet, it was only in 1962 that it was formally "born" and acquired a proper identity. On 16.xii.1961, at the Annual General Meeting held traditionally under the mango tree in the editor's garden, there were 23 persons present (quite a record), while suggestions for the formation of an Indian Ornithological Society were also received from several who were unable to attend. These included Dr J. C. George and Dr R. M. Naik (both from Washington), Mrs Jamal Ara (Ranchi), Mrs Desiree Proud (British Embassy, Nepal), Major W. W. A. Phillips

(England), Dr J. P. Joshua (Liberia), Mr Yusuf Patel (West Africa), and a telegram from R. A. Stewart Melliush, one of our strongest supporters from Madras. It was heartening that this amateur effort had so many well-wishers in different parts of the world. There was much discussion about the desirability of forming an Indian Ornithological Society. As I have said earlier in this column the BNHS was then opposed to this move as they believed that it might further erode their already limited membership. The meeting discussed the option of creating a Bird Wing in the BNHS rather than creating a new Society. The

Chairman, Dr Sálím Ali, summed up the views expressed and concluded that, "the contention was that a little more spade work should be done before an ornithological society was formed... For the time being the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* would be kept going..."

One constructive decision at the meeting was the establishment of an editorial board, whose members covered the various regions of the country, and the following members were chosen: Dr Salim Ali (Bombay), K. S. Lavkumar (Rajkot), Y. S. Shivraj Kumar (Jasdan), Dr R. M. Naik (then at Michigan State University) Mrs Usha

Ganguly (Delhi), Major D. G. Haig Thomas (Assam), Mr E. D. Avari (Darjeeling), Capt. N. S. Tyabji (New Delhi), Dr Biswamoy Biswas (Calcutta), Dr Joseph George (Dehra Dun), Mrs Jamal Ara (Ranchi), and Prof. K. K. Neelakantan (Kerala). Zafar Futehally was elected editor. There is no doubt that this spread of members of the editorial board was a wise move and gave the *Newsletter* an all-India character. 1962 was also the year when the importance of ornithology was increasingly recognised world-wide and several resolutions of the WWF and IUCN related specifically to the importance of monitoring bird species as a tool for understanding changes in the natural world, particularly the pollution of air and water, and the consequences of the shrinking forest cover. Apart from the WWF and IUCN, the International Council for Bird Preservation (ICBP, now BirdLife International) at its 13th meeting in June 1962, at which Sálím Ali was present, made strong recommendations against the then widespread use of pesticides like DDT. One of the resolutions read, "Having noted that pesticides will often a) have a lethal effect on birds and other animals though this may only become apparent after one or more years, b) kill insect predators of the pest so that in spite of a satisfactory initial control soon after an application, an exceptionally heavy infestation may follow recommends that governments adopt legislation by which all pesticides must only be applied at the minimum effective concentration since the cumulative effects are largely unknown..." Unfortunately our government did not take this seriously enough. I was for some time the Chairman of the Pesticides Environmental Pollution Advisory Committee, set up by the Ministry of Agriculture and our attempts to limit the use of DDT were always over-ruled by the government on the ground that the health of human beings was more important than the disappearance of a few bird species.

In the very first issue of the *Newsletter*, J. S. Serrao and P. B. Shekar produced an exceptionally interesting article about the breeding of the Pheasant-tailed Jacana *Hydrophasianus chirurgus* at a tank in Kalina in central Bombay. "Every morning we reached (the tank) at 6.30 to make such observations as we could during the two hours before we proceeded to our daily work. The 5 males out of the total of 7 pheasant-tailed jacanas present in the tank have established nesting territories and were now working on the nesting sites.

Later the numbers of the breeders increased to 13 individuals, 9 males and 4 females". As a result of careful observation they came to several conclusions about the family secrets of the species. They discovered 1) that the male selects a nesting territory which he jealously guards from other prospecting males and works single-handedly at the nest site, 2) Into such an established territory alights a roving female. If she accepts the working male as her mate, she takes over from him the duty of guarding the territory against intruders". The other findings, relating to the breeding biology of these birds, are now well known as a result of the work of other researchers. But I would like to mention that these two birders made a fervent appeal for the preservation of this tank. They pointed out that, apart from its value as a bird sanctuary, it also acted as a sponge for absorbing excess rain water during the rains. If the planners had heeded their request it could have resulted in far less destruction during the 1,000mm downpour in July this year. In November 1961 Sálím Ali, accompanied by E. P. Gee, visited Jatinga in Assam – the small village remarkable for its extraordinary phenomenon of birds being attracted to lights and killed in large numbers as food by the locals. I quote from Sálím Ali's report, "A successful night is one which is dark and moonless, cloudy and overcast preferably with a light drizzle and with heavy mist or fog near the ground and winds blowing south to north, i.e., against the flow of migrants. If the wind direction is not right no birds will come to the petromaxes, open fires or flares. The light is screened on the southern side for the hunter to remain invisible to the birds as they fly in from the north. As many as 500 to 600 birds are often killed in a single night at 50 to 60 lights". One curious thing noticed by Sálím was that all the species of birds killed during their presence were resident species, and all of them were non-migratory or diurnal, which should have been normally roosting peacefully at that hour, except for the bitterns.

Quite a sensational mist netting operation was carried out in Kerala between December 1961 and April 1962 as a result of information supplied by Dr P. V. George, one of the Baroda University post graduates who had assisted in field camps in Saurashtra and Rajasthan. After George sent his reports about the exceptional concentration of wagtails and other species at Eddanad, 96km south of Cochin, Sálím visited the area

between 21-26.iv. He reported that "the wagtails spent the day feeding in the dyked lands of Kuttanad and Vembanad Lake (near Alleppy) and commute 32-40 miles (32-40m) south-east every evening to roost among the sugar cane fields of Eddanad in fantastically large numbers. On arrival at the roosting ground they mill around 50-100 feet (15-30m) above the cane fields filling the sky from horizon to horizon, looking like a swarm of locusts. Gradually the birds begin to drop into the cane at a steep angle, first singly, then in two's and three's, then in scores and hundreds. By half an hour after sunset all the birds have settled in leaving the sky clear again. Soon their soft chattering also dies so that there is nothing to suggest the presence of the numerous numbers hidden within the canes".

I might mention here that P. V. George was an exceptionally energetic and intelligent mist-netter and later, I believe, went to work in the Museum in Baghdad, Iraq. I recall his letters which suggested that he was very happy with the work, and with the surrounding environment.

The second productive mist-netting session was in Bharatpur, again in April. In his report Sálím Ali wrote, "Local clues furnished by H.H. The Maharaja led to the discovery of a gigantic roost of migratory sparrows – the Eastern Spanish (*Passer hispaniolensis transcaspicus*) and the Turkestan House Sparrow (*P. domesticus parkini*)... They both visit northwestern India in winter, usually keeping in mixed flocks, but neither my own experience nor the literature had ever suggested such unbelievable hordes within Indian limits. Guesswork estimates are always unsatisfactory but a million birds for this roost would perhaps be on the cautious side".

One new assistant for Sálím Ali to assist him in his bird ringing project was Julian Donahue. He helped him to find rich bird localities in the Delhi area and I quote from his article in the June 1962 issue "One evening Mrs. Usha Ganguli and I went to Okhla, a part of the Jumna River south of Delhi where water is diverted to the Agra Canal. There we saw hundreds of wagtails on the sand bars – almost all of them were Yellow Wagtails, of the blackheaded and ashyheaded races. Just before dark the birds flew off in a southerly direction. The next day I got hold of a large scale map (one inch to the mile) of the area and tried to guess where the birds would roost. Three miles

south of Okhla, I could see on the map, was a marshy area next to the canal. That looked like as good a risk as any, so that evening I cruised up and down the canal road until I saw a flock of wagtails pass overhead. Matters were confused somewhat, though, because hundreds of weaver birds were also flying to their roosts. I managed to follow the flocks of wagtails as they were tossed around in the strong wind, and, sure enough, they came down by the marsh – which was almost entirely composed of a large expanse of cattails. I got out of the car and saw a field of stubble literally covered with birds, almost all of which were in full plumage... As a result of this discovery the Delhi bird-ringing effort will get a big boost.” And as expected, Julian Donahue’s effort has proved invaluable to Delhi birders.

Apart from these articles on bird ringing,

the 1962 *Newsletter* contained some exciting material. Like Donahue, K. K. Neelakantan, through the medium of a map, found a new pelican (Pelecanidae) area in Andhra Pradesh, Usha Ganguli found an unexpected visitor in the shape of a Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus* in her garden in Delhi. Dr Joseph George had a rare sighting of the mating of the Black Drongos *Dicrurus macrocercus*. It is difficult to do justice to everyone who wrote in the 12 issues of 1962 in this space. But I would like to include this piece by Professor A. A. A. Fysee, the noted Islamic scholar, and our first ambassador to Egypt, as an example of persons who had little interest in birds, occasionally keeping *such* careful notes about them. Writing about the morning calls of birds he noted, “It might interest readers of the *Newsletter* to know the sequence of

time when birds commence singing in the morning, or to use the language of Islamic scholars, when birds commence their paens to God, the Exalted, the Almighty”. This is what he observed: April 2nd 1962: 05.55hrs, Koel *Eudynamis scolopacea* 05:55hrs; Jungle Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos* 06:00hrs (chorus); kingfisher (Alcedinidae) 06:10hrs; Red-whiskered Bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer* 06:13hrs; *Dhaya*l (Oriental Magpie-Robin *Copsychus saularis*) 06:13hrs; Pond Heron *Ardeola grayii* 06:15hrs (“koh koh”); Crow Pheasant *Centropus sinensis* 06:17hrs; Unidentified 06:25hrs (“too too too”); Tailor Bird *Orthotomus sutorius* 06:27hrs; Coppersmith *Megalaima haemacephala* 06:30hrs; flowerpecker (Dicaeidae) 06:45. The timings were about the same on April 1st and 3rd.

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