Records of some rare birds from Farakka Barrage (West Bengal, India)

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The increasing instances of reclamation and conversion of wetlands into agricultural fields, industry, mines and dams have made wetlands one of the most threatened habits in India. This in turn has affected many wetland-dependent birds and nearly 29 species of water dependent birds in India are threatened with extinction (Islam & Rahmani 2002). Due to expansion of agriculture, species like Sarus Crane *Grus antigone*, which was common in almost all parts of the country only a century ago, have been reduced to small isolated pockets in north and north-western India (Gopi Sundar 2001).

However with the disappearance of natural wetlands, several artificial wetlands have become important for the conservation of waterbirds (Mischenko 2002). Indian sub-continental examples of such wetlands that are wintering sites for globally threatened species are Pong Dam in Himachal Pradesh, Kosi Barrage in Nepal and Chasma Barrage in Pakistan. In West Bengal too natural wetlands are under severe threat. Some artificial wetlands like Durgapur Barrage have traditionally been an important site for wintering waterbirds (Gauntlett 1972). The Farakka Barrage and adjoining area on Ganges River in Malda district (West Bengal) is a major wintering site for thousands of migratory waterbirds and has been designated as an Important Bird Area (IBA) by BirdLife International (Islam & Rahmani 2004). A list of birds of the area is available from the author on request. Notes on some of the rarer visitors to Farakka Barrage are given below.

Darter *Anhinga melanogaster* (NT): One or two birds are regularly seen near the barrage during winter.

Black-necked Stork *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus* (NT): On 3.xi.2005 a pair was seen flying over the barrage. On 12.ii.2006, Subhasish Sengupta, Sandip Mandal and Bibhash Sarkar saw a pair in the Ash Pond of Farakka Thermal Power Project and again on 19.ii.2006 the same pair was observed by all of us in the same area. This stork has not been recorded from central West Bengal earlier. They are rare in the foothills of extreme northern West Bengal.

Lesser Adjutant-Stork *Leptoptilos javanicus* (VU): Uncommon on the banks, but seen singly and in pair in rare cases, generally during winter. Some local people claim that these birds breed sometimes in large *Ficus* trees along the river. One colony was located 2 km east of Ganges River in 1993 (Jha 1998). But that site is about 40 km north-west of the main barrage.

Oriental White Ibis *Threskiornis melanocephala* (NT): Rare resident, seen mainly during winter. Three birds were recorded near Gopalpur on 12.i.1991, seven near Tola Mandal on 25.xii.1993 and eight near Tofi on 25.xii2004.

Ferruginous Pochard *Aythya nyroca* (NT): Common winter visitor, present in small numbers, which seem to have increased in recent times.

Baer's Pochard *Aythya baeri* (VU): Rare winter migrant, seen in small numbers along with the common Ferruginous Pochard.

Pallas's Fish-Eagle *Haliaeetus leucoryphus* (VU): Rarely seen in Ganges River. One bird was sighted on 21.xi.1992 near Farakka forest, which is 2 km upstream of the main barrage.

Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga* (VU): Uncommon winter visitor, generally found singly, perched atop trees close to the river or an oxbow lake. One bird was sighted near Farakka forest on 28.i.2003.

Black-bellied Tern *Sterna acuticauda* (NT): Rare local migrant. 23 birds were sighted near Farakka barrage on 23.xii.1994.

Indian Skimmer *Rynchops albicollis* (VU): Regular winter migrant or passage migrant in small numbers. Generally seen from early November to late December when sandbars (locally known as "*chaur*s") emerge. Rare from late January to late February. Seven birds were spotted near Manikchak Ghat on 7.ii.1991. Four near Gopalpur on 27.xii.1995. Nine on 31.i.1997, 23 on 1.xi.1998. 20 birds were seen on 11.xi.1999 and 14.xi.1999 near Farakka Barrage.

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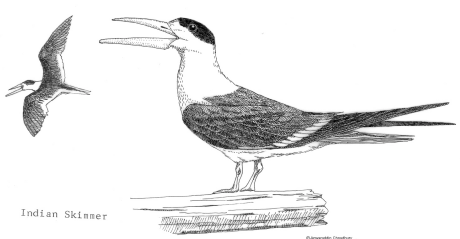
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