

Correspondence

The British and Indian natural history

The March–April 2006 issue of *Indian Birds* carried an interesting article on the birds of Mount Abu Sanctuary and a delightful account by Lt. Gen. Baljit Singh about his sojourn at Subathu. There was also that charming letter penned by Lavkumar Khacher in the May–June 2006 issue. Popular writing is a genre that should never fade into oblivion and every *Indian Birds* issue should ideally carry scientific papers and ones for lighter reading.

Both Lavkumar Khacher and Lt. Gen. Baljit Singh are eminent figures who have made worthy contributions towards the conservation movement. I recall my acquaintance with the latter when I was a speaker at the first workshop organised at the National Defence Academy, some years ago, to impart the message of wildlife conservation to officers of the Indian Army. He was the prime mover in initiating this programme for the Army and he received scientific support from the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS)—where Bittu Sahgal was a key promoter of the programme.

Before Independence, Army Officers played a stellar role in contributing towards the study of birds, butterflies, mammals, snakes, and other animals and plants. They were mainly British and a few Indians too. It was Surgeon-Major Thomas Jerdon who pioneered the first book on birds in 1862 with his monumental 'Birds of India'. Many other eminent names stand out from the ranks of the officers—Lt. Col. Tickell, Col. Sykes, Major Magrath, Captain Whitehead, Lt. Col. Rattray, Col. Bailey, Lt. Barnes and others. There was a Brigadier-General Betham who wrote extensively on the birds of Simla in the *Journal* of the BNHS. The explorations of Col. Bailey, who was a part of the now censured Younghusband expedition to Tibet, have been documented by Charles Allen in 'A Mountain in Tibet'. Army officers stationed in the remote corners of the Empire supplied crucial information on the distribution and migration of birds.

Towards the demise of the British era, you had books from the pioneer of bird photography - Lt. Col. R.S.P. Bates. The last Chief of the 'old' Indian Army, Field Marshal Auchinleck, was nick-named 'The Auk' and was a keen bird watcher and member of the BNHS. Another officer who stayed on in India was General 'Bill' Williams of the Engineers, who was an avid bird enthusiast. One of Field Marshal Slim's senior commanders, Lt. Gen. A.F. Christison used to send observations from the field during World War II. Many British Army officers and ranks took an enthusiastic part in decimating India's wildlife, notably the lion, particularly in the early British period. However, in the later era, many officers used to abide by the game laws and sporting codes of conduct.

Today, one observes that there are only a handful of dedicated naturalists in our Army. The pages of the BNHS' *Journal*, which used to be filled with observations on birds from diverse regions of India by British officers of prestigious British and Indian regiments like the Guides and the Gurkhas, now rarely carries any notes by Indian officers. One blessing

though, is that unlike the British officers who were hooked on *shikar*, most of our Indian officers, apart from some black sheep, have no interest in hunting or in the outdoors for that matter!

My father enjoyed the description of the Abu jungles in the article on the birds of Mt. Abu. As a young Corporal in the old Sixth Bombay Battalion of the NCC, in 1953, he and his comrades had been attending a circle camp and had done some gruelling labour to construct a road around the Naki Lake area. He remembers Abu as being thickly forested and recalls meeting a local armed with a spear and long dagger who explained that he needed protection against the bears in the area. Leopards were abundant and they saw a dead leopard, recently shot, displayed in one of the prominent shops of the station.

A British Army officer, who had served in a record number of Indian Army regiments and hunted extensively in the western and central parts of India in and around the 1880s, chronicled his experiences, and vehement and amusing views, in an interesting little book that I had the opportunity to peruse. When his regiment was quartered near Abu, he was asked to rid the area of some marauding bears that had terrorised the locals, which he set about doing in earnest. He also mentioned that tigers were frequent in the area.

We look forward to more issues of this splendid publication, *Indian Birds*.

– **Pervez Cama**

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Plumage of some birds in Kumaon

Birdwatching in Kumaon last year (2005) gave me the opportunity to observe a number of Himalayan birds for the first time. It was also interesting for me to see how distinct a number of common species are in this region. For instance, the Hoopoe *Upupa epops* is much lighter there (*U. e. epops*) than its counterpart in southern India (*U. e. ceylonensis*) and the Jungle Crow *Corvus [macrorhynchos] japonensis* has an entirely different call from *C. [m.] culminatus*.

All the Red-vented Bulbuls *Pycnonotus cafer* I saw had brown cheeks. The birds match the illustration of the race *humayuni* in Grimmett et al.; however, the Ali & Ripley (1987) do not mention this characteristic for this race. Is the Kumaon brown-cheeked form *humayuni*? [Editors' note: The race in the lower Himalayas is *P. c. intermedius*, which has brownish cheeks (auriculars). *P. c. humayuni* does not have this. The illustrations in Grimmett et al. (1999) and surprisingly Grimmett & Inskipp (2003) seem incorrect. Though *humayuni* is present in N and NW India, its plumage is different from *intermedius*. Abdulali (1982) states that "In addition to the brown ear coverts and the black of the head grading into the brown back, they [*intermedius*] can be distinguished from *humayuni* by their longer and more distinct crest feathers."]

The male Crimson Sunbirds *Aethopyga siparaja* were as striking as one expects from the illustrations in the above books. I saw these birds visiting hibiscus flowers a number of times at close quarters. Curiously, I could never see the yellow rump shown prominently in the plates. I think that the yellow rump is not easily visible in the field, and birdwatchers should be aware of that fact.

References

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– Kumaran Sathasivam

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Errata

Indian Birds 2 (5) September–October 2006.

Page 126: Text in the column 'Comments' for serial number 42 'Brown Dipper' are meant for serial number 43 'Alpine Accentor'.
Page 132, column one, line 13: "his 18th century ornithological journal" should read, "his 19th century ornithological journal."

Inside back cover and back cover: The following photographs were taken by Harkirat S. Sangha and not by R. Naoroji. 'Lady with Rufous-necked Hornbill head-dress', 'White-throated Redstart' and 'Collared Owlet'.

Editorial

This has been a signal year for *Indian Birds*. The icing on the cake being, the publication of Ramana Athreya's paper describing a new species for science, the exquisite Bugun Liocichla *Liocichla bugunorum*. For a fledgling publication, that was a big step indeed. In some ways, it was a leap of faith for Ramana, who was adamant from the outset to publish his astounding discovery in an Indian publication. When he chose *Indian Birds*, we had two main concerns. One, that the paper be rigorously refereed and two that it is given the publicity it deserved. We sent it for review to Edward C. Dickinson, Pamela Rasmussen and Jochen Martens, all of who responded rapidly to our requests. BirdLife International's Richard Thomas handled publicity with unbelievable efficiency. The results of his untiring efforts being published in over 130 English (and other languages) newspapers and magazines, in hard copy and on the Internet. Some of these included the *New York Times*, *Time*, the popular *Sun*, besides media coverage in Russian, Finnish, Chinese, etc. Our own website (www.indianbirds.in) saw an unprecedented 78,000 hits during the month. Ramana's paper was hit over 17,000 times (and perhaps downloaded too!). For this, we thank O. C. Naveein and his team, who handle our website, for uploading the paper in time to meet the press deadlines.

Another first for *Indian Birds* was the reprint of a paper on taxonomy in its May–June 2006 issue. The ready cooperation of the authors and the editor of *British Birds* made this possible.

As an editor, I am generally concerned about two or three aspects of *Indian Birds*. The first is a good stock of manuscripts, which really feels like a solid bank balance, the factual paucity of hard currency for printing *Indian Birds* notwithstanding. We are well provisioned at the moment, in that department, and are in the process of increasing the number of pages to accommodate more notes. The second is the quality of

manuscripts that arrive for publication. The rare, well-written one, which follows our 'instructions to authors' explicitly, is a joy to receive. The third is the cost of publication and postage! Now that we've switched over to glossy paper and colour, costs have soared free of any restrictive budgetary gravitational force. We birders are a passionate lot and I am sure that with your support *Indian Birds* will not only endure but also thrive.

During 2006 we published 79 papers, short notes, opinions, articles, reviews and letters to the editor.

Beginning with this issue, we take the pleasure of welcoming the veteran ornithologist, Lavkumar Khacher's column, "A flight down memory lane". In his own inimitable style he distills the experiences of several decades' involvement with birds in India—hindsight to benefit contemporary and future Indian ornithology.

Several persons helped in producing *Indian Birds* in 2006 and it is with great pleasure that I acknowledge their behind-the-scenes contributions—whether as sponsors, layout experts, referees, photographers, artists, or office help—here: Ramana Athreya, Maan Barua, Anwaruddin Choudhury, Edward Dickinson, Nicolas Fernandez, G.B.K. Charitable Trust, Ganesh, Anwar Hussain, Jairam, R. Jayapal, Jochen Martens, Taej Mundkur, Rishad Naoroji, B. M. Parasharya, Pitti Laminations Ltd., Suhel Quader, S. Ramakrishnan, P. Rambabu, Pamela Rasmussen, V. Santharam, Sumit Sen, The Serenity Trust, L. Shyamal, S. Subramanya, K. Gopi Sundar, and Suresh V. I would also like to thank here all our authors and subscribers for supporting *Indian Birds* and my colleagues at New Orns Foundation for allowing me a free hand with *Indian Birds*.

As *Indian Birds* steps into its third year, I wish you days full of birds and the joy they unknowingly bring to our lives.

—Aasheesh Pittie