

Black Stork *Ciconia nigra*

On 7.i.2002 at 16:30 hrs, we (B.P.L. & P.J.) saw a lone stork in flight at Jatragre (25°25'N 90°27'E, c.412 m a.s.l.) near Chokpot, in the southern range of Nokrek National Park. The bird had white under parts, black neck and under wing with distinct red bill and legs, which left no doubt that it, was an adult of this species. This was the first sighting of Black Stork from the state of Meghalaya (Choudhury 1998; Ali & Ripley 1987).

According to forest personnel and local people, there was no wetland close by. Perhaps, the rivers that flow out of the hills get wide and shallow in the plains, becoming a suitable feeding site for a large water bird like this stork. The bird might be foraging in such areas and was looking out for its roost. It could also well be that an individual strayed from the neighbouring lowlands of Bangladesh (Kazmierczak 2000) or perhaps it was en route to the lowlands of Assam's plains.

Ashy Minivet *Pericrocotus divaricatus*

On 28.x.2001 at 08:10 hrs, we (H.J.S., B.P.L. & M.F.A.) saw a single female minivet in the northern range of Nokrek National Park near Daribok (25°29'N 90°19'E). It was in a mixed flock of White-spectacled Flycatcher-Warbler *Seicercus affinis*, Grey-headed Flycatcher *Culicicapa ceylonensis*, Streaked Spiderhunter *Arachnothera magna*, Rufous-bellied Bulbul *Hypsipetes maclellandii*, Black-faced Flycatcher-Warbler *Abroscopus schisticeps* and Brown-eared Bulbul *Hemixos flava*.

On 5.i.2002, we (BPL & PJ) saw another female minivet at 16:20 hrs, in a forest patch along the Dareng River (25°26'N 90°26'E), in the southern range of Nokrek. The bird actively foraged in a mixed flock of Black-crested Bulbul *Pycnonotus melanicterus* and Brown-eared Bulbul.

Ashy Minivet can be readily separated from other minivets by its grey-toned coloration (with no red or yellow). The white forehead and under parts, grey back and black tail with white outer rectrices were clearly noted during both the sightings. The Ashy Minivet can be confused with a female Rosy Minivet *P. roseus*, which is found in the region and is considered more common than the former. However, during our observations we neither saw any pale yellow under parts nor the dull olive-yellow rump present in the female Rosy Minivet. Perhaps the only other minivet that needs to be taken into account is the female of Swinhoe's Minivet *P. cantonensis* (formerly conspecific with *P. roseus*). However, the lack of yellow in the wing was clearly noted on both the occasions, confirming our identification.

The status of Ashy Minivet in India is little known—it is perhaps one of the most erratic winter visitors, appearing in small numbers all over the country. This additional record extends the distribution to the Garo Hills of Meghalaya.

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Sightings of Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca* from Vadakara, north Kerala

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On 4.x.1999, we were watching shorebirds on the sandbanks of Vadakara (11°60'N 75°58'E) when one of us spotted a duck amidst a flock of waders. Its overall colouration was dark and blackish. A closer look showed that the head, nape, back and wings were dark chocolate brown. There was a hint of buff-brown patch visible on the face at certain angles which stood out on otherwise dark features. At rest, the under tail coverts were a clear white patch. The bird was very wary, taking wing at the slightest disturbance and settling at a distance. In flight, the trailing-edge of the upper wing was dark brown with a prominent broad white wing-bar extended from the tip to the base of the wing. Under wing and belly was whitish. Later a few

fishermen flushed it and to our surprise the duck flew directly to the sea. The size and colour were characteristic of a pochard (*Aythya* spp.) and we tentatively concluded in the field that it could be a Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*.

One of us (SM) got to see the same species (always single) on two occasions in subsequent years—on 10.x.2000 flying across the estuary towards the sea and on 30.xi.2002 resting on the banks and taking wing at the slightest disturbance and flying directly to the sea—hence the bird got nick-named, “The Sea Duck”.

The identification of this elusive “sea duck” remained inconclusive for a long time. It was only after referring to the recent, well-illustrated field guides (Grimmett et al. 1999,

Kazmierczak 2000, Mullarney et al. 2001), and having gained more field experience with *Aythya* species that we could confirm the identification as *Aythya nyroca*. The key field marks, which helped in identifying the species, were the broad white wing-bar on the upper wing and pure white under tail coverts and white belly, which eliminated all other similar species. The characteristic “white-eye” of the adult male was absent indicating the bird was a female or an immature bird.

Though included in *Birds of Kerala* (Ali 1969), there has been no recent report of this species from the state (C. Sashikumar, verbally, iv.2005). However, Ali & Ripley (2001) state, corroborating our sighting, “In coastal areas, and in the Kerala backwaters, often spends the daytime riding on the sea beyond the surf, safe from disturbance by passing boats, flying inland at dusk to feed in outlying tanks and paddy fields and returning to the diurnal refuge at dawn”.

Globally, there has been a decline in its population and it has been classified as a Near-threatened species (Kazmierczak 2000). It is perhaps one of the rarest wintering ducks in southern India.

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White-bellied Sea-Eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster* preying on salt-water crocodile *Crocodylus porosus* hatchling

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White-bellied Sea-Eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster* affects seacoast, tidal creeks and estuaries and is seen occasionally inland along tidal rivers and at fresh water lakes (Ali & Ripley 1978). Bhitarkanika mangrove ecosystem along the eastern coast of India harbours mangrove forests, rivers, creeks, estuaries, sand bars and mud flats hosting a small resident population of 10–15 White-bellied Sea-Eagles. On 29.xii.2005, we were rowing back on Bhitarkanika River, after nest monitoring of a nearby Painted Stork *Mycteria leucocephala* colony near Gunakar ghat in the Bhitarkanika forest block. When we reached closer to Balijore Creek around noon, we spotted an adult White-bellied Sea-Eagle perching atop a tall *Sonneratia apetala* tree on the riverbank. The tide was receding at that time exposing both the sides of the mud-bank to sunlight—an ideal time to watch many crocodiles basking. Then, the White-bellied Sea-Eagle started hovering along the course of the river for about 30 seconds and all of a sudden, it dashed towards the exposed mud bank and picked up something in its talons. When it flew towards us, we saw a live crocodile hatchling in the powerful talons of the eagle.

White-bellied Sea-Eagles predominantly feed on sea snakes (Hydrophirinae), and to large extent fishes, some of which are of considerable size. It has also been reported to take crabs, rats and dead fish cast overboard from fishing boats. There have been occasional reports of it lifting domestic duck and piglets (Ali & Ripley 1978;

Dharmakumarsinhji & Khacher 1956). del Hoyo et al. (1994) also report rabbits, fruit bats, seagulls (Laridae), cormorants (Phalacrocoracidae) and gannets (Sulidae) in its diet. Murthy & Rao (1989) observed White-bellied Sea-Eagles feeding on dog-faced water snake *Cerberus rhynchops* and a large-sized wart snake *Achrochordus granulatus*. However, there have been no previous reports of White-bellied Sea-Eagle preying on a salt-water crocodile hatchling and this is probably the first observation of this kind.

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