

Point Calimere

On a recent visit to Point Calimere on 11.i.2004, RA and PP, along with Shantikar Reddy and Aurosylle Bystrom, saw a flock of around 20 birds at Ramya Lake. These birds were with c40 Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus* and a few Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*, and contained males, females and juveniles. The list maintained here by the forest department does not mention this lapwing. This is probably the most southern record for this species.

Discussion

The Grey-headed Lapwing is a conspicuous and easily identified species, and it would be interesting to plot any further increases of its range over time.

Two of the wetlands in this note are threatened. Pallikaralai was an extensive wetland about 50 km² or more once, but is now greatly fragmented and disturbed. It forms part of an extensive network of over 90 wetlands whose runoff it drained. The typical habitat consists of *Typha* reeds, often over 3 m in height, open grassy patches and pools of water. Over a hundred species of birds have been recorded here since 1978 (Santharam 2003a). However in recent years reckless and thoughtless “development” of the area for building housing colonies, industrial and educational institutions, railway yard and garbage dump have caused irreparable damage to the ecosystem. Not only has the city lost a valuable wildlife habitat, but also a reliable source for recharging ground water.

Kalivelli tank and Yedayanthittu estuary are part of the Kalivelli wetlands, which are situated about 20 km to the north of Pondicherry along the East Coast. The wetland swamps cover an area of about 70 km². This tank forms an important wintering site for birds among the migratory

habitats along the East Coast, and is part of the flyway leading to Point Calimere and Sri Lanka. During winter (October–March), 71 species of water birds have been recorded here, the total number exceeding 60,000 birds. These include threatened species such as the Spot-billed Pelican *Pelecanus philippinus*, and large populations of the Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus ruber*. It fits many of the criteria required to become a Ramsar site.

There are strong commercial interests opposing its declaration as a sanctuary. Salt mining and shrimp farming interests have encroached on the wetland. Industrial concerns wish to acquire the land to establish salt production units, and a thermal power plant has apparently also been suggested.

Salim Ali proposed Kalivelli as a bird sanctuary in 1983. No action has been taken on this proposal; district officials who act against the shrimp farmers and attempt to have it declared a sanctuary get transferred.

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An instance of the Asian Koel *Eudynamys scolopacea* destroying the nest of a Black-headed Oriole *Oriolus xanthornus*

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On the morning of 7.v.2005, we were observing birds in agricultural fields (one out of four habitat elements we are studying for avian biodiversity estimation) of Haridwar district (29°55'N 78°8'E), Uttaranchal (India). On the margin of one agricultural field, in a mango tree *Mangifera indica*, there was a nest of a Black-headed Oriole *Oriolus xanthornus* that had been under our observations since its commencement. One individual of the pair was sitting in the nest, in an incubating posture, and the other individual was perched on a nearby branch of the same tree. Suddenly we heard very harsh and continuous calls from the tree where Black-headed Oriole was nesting. We reached the tree and noted that the Black-headed Oriole, which was outside the

nest, was very fidgety. It was hopping from one branch to another and spreading its wings while calling. Through binoculars, we saw that the Black-headed Oriole's calls were directed towards a female Asian Koel *Eudynamys scolopacea* that was sitting in an adjacent jackfruit tree *Artocarpus heterophyllus*. After a minute or so, the incubating Black-headed Oriole also started producing the harsh calls like that of the other bird. Unexpectedly, the Asian Koel attacked the incubating Black-headed Oriole and chased it off the nest. Consequently, the Black-headed Orioles, which were by now, extremely agitated, aggressively attacked the Asian Koel, though keeping at least two feet away from her. Meanwhile, the latter, reached the nest and was warily inspecting it. The next moment it held the edge

of the nest in its beak and shook it vigorously, dislodging two eggs that fell out of the nest. It then dismantled the nest until it had completely lost its striking cup shape. All this was done even while the orioles attacked it in vain. The koel then flew from the tree, producing 18–20 syllables of its water bubbling call. The Black-headed Orioles chased it for a long distance, but later returned to the nest site.

During this year's breeding season (evening of 12.vi.2006) we observed a single Black-headed Oriole chasing a female Asian Koel from its nesting site (orchards within Matri Sadan Ashram, Haridwar) indicating the possibility that the Black-headed Oriole could be one of the host species of the Asian Koel.

Asian Koel is a well-known brood parasite. However, not all its hosts are known (Desholm & Wegeberg 1997). In the Indian Subcontinent, House Crow *Corvus splendens* and Large-billed Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos* are its usual hosts (Grimmett et al. 1998). Additionally, orioles have also been reported as occasional hosts (Ali & Ripley 1969). In Malaysia, Black-collared Starling *Sturnus nigricollis* and five species of Myna (Sturnidae) (Glenister 1959) and in Australia, 21 avian species have been reported as hosts of the Asian Koel (Brooker & Brooker 1989).

In the present observation, the behaviour of the Asian Koel seems quite strange. Neither did it lay eggs in the oriole's nest nor feed upon its eggs. Is it possible that the Asian Koel tried to deposit its egg(s) in the nest of Black-headed Oriole but due to vigilance could not—hence its aggression?

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New records on the wintering range of Variable Wheatear *Oenanthe picata opistholeuca* from northern India

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The Variable Wheatear *Oenanthe picata* occurs as three regional forms, *O. p. capistrata*, *O. p. picata* and *O. p. opistholeuca*, variously considered as morphs or distinct species that have different ranges and require further taxonomic study. The species is known to occur as a summer visitor (March–September) to Afghanistan, northern Pakistan and Kashmir, 600–3,300 m (mainly 1,800–2,400 m) and winters in southern Afghanistan, eastern Pakistan and western India, straggling into Nepal, and the Indian states of western Madhya Pradesh and northern Maharashtra. Its habitat includes barren rocky country, along steep riverbanks, sparsely vegetated stony plains, ravines and sand dunes, old fields and around settlements, from sea level to 12,000 m, where it is locally abundant. The male of the race *opistholeuca* is entirely black apart from rump, base of tail and vent, female is dark brown in place of black. Its wintering range has been depicted as the northern areas of Pakistan (see map) and does not include any part of India (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005).

However, I have three sightings of *O. p. opistholeuca* from northern India within the last two decades. These sightings

are from the low-lying areas of Himachal Pradesh and Uttaranchal (see map), as described below.

1. Tons River valley (30°21'N 78°00'E) adjoining the New Forest campus, Dehradun valley, Uttaranchal. A male was observed feeding on a dry riverbed in scrub along a ravine on 3.i.1987 and 8.i.1987 (Singh 2000).
2. Bairchha village (31°08'N 76°40'E), Nalagarh district, Solan, Himachal Pradesh. The site is located at the base of the Himalayan foothills and bordering Punjab. Here a male was recorded feeding on the ground, perching on large boulders in open, dry scrub during peak winter (January 1990). It was observed for about a week at the same place.
3. New Forest (30°21'N 78°01'E), Dehradun, Uttaranchal. A female was recorded in the Forest Research Institute, main building (a large structure) and its front lawns (big) from January to February 2006 (peak winter) at one place. For foraging, it preferred to remain within the reach of the building that it chose as a shelter for hiding upon threat perceived from raptors like Shikra *Accipiter badius* and for roosting.