

Bird-watching around Jairampur, Arunachal Pradesh

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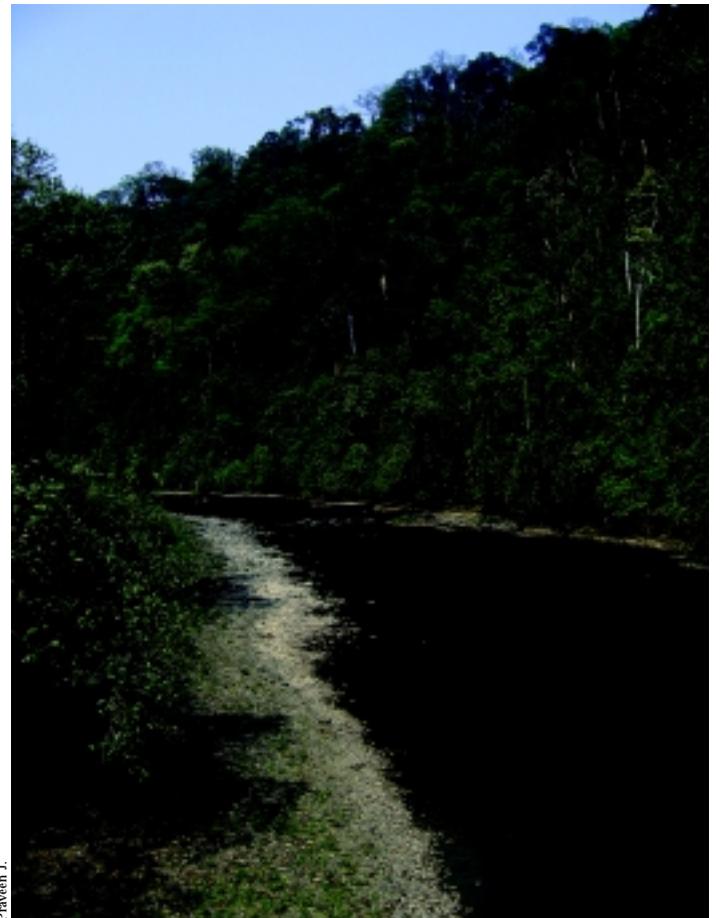
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As we lumbered along the forest path with optics of various sizes and shapes—cameras, binoculars and spotting scopes—hanging around our necks and beads of perspiration dripping from our heads, a shrill “*kee-kee-kee*” call from the top of the canopy attracted our attention. We could see two bulbul-sized birds, perched shoulder to shoulder, on a bare branch at the top of a dead tree. Even without our field glasses, we knew exactly what we were looking at. In a jiffy the scope was on them and one of us (SD) started digiscoping. There sat, a cute pair of Pied Falconets *Microhierax melanoleucos*, one of the prettiest of smaller raptors we have in India, making long drawn cheeping calls. In a short while, one of them disappeared suddenly and came back with a dragonfly in its beak. We were on climb through the dense forests of Patkai Hills in the Indo-Myanmar border of Arunachal Pradesh on a hot and humid day while these little birds of prey were enjoying a bird's eye view of the valley, perhaps should be termed as “a Falconet's eye view”.

North-eastern India has always been a treasure trove for a naturalist and the forests in Arunachal Pradesh considered the “hottest among the hot spots” of the world, due to their location at the junction of the Palaearctic and Indo-Malayan realms. Not many from peninsular India get a chance to visit this unique area; the virtual inaccessibility of this land and the seemingly fragile political situation being the key reasons. It so happened that we met at Eaglenest Sanctuary in western Arunachal Pradesh, during a ‘first of its kind’ bird-tour organised by Ramana Athreya, called “Vacations for conservation”. After the tour, Arif Siddiqui, of Namchik Valley Society for Eco-tourism & Wildlife Conservation (NSEWC), invited us to spend a few days at his hometown, Jairampur (Changlang district, Arunachal Pradesh), a small historical village of WWII fame, nestled in the foothills of the Patkai range. The primary agenda of the visit was to explore the possibility of conducting a ‘Butterfly Conservation Workshop’ at Jairampur with specific focus on the north-eastern region. However, we spent our spare time watching birds around the forests, some of which fall under the International Bird Area (IBA) network, demarcated as Namtok-Namheik¹-Nampong-Manmao (<http://www.ibcnetwork.org/IBA.htm>). The tour

schedule was from 29.iii.2006, 11:00hrs to 1.iv.2006, 10:00hrs, about 28 field hours, during which we covered natural and cultivated habitats around Jairampur (c.200m), Nampong (c.500m) and Manmao (c.500m). We had good company from Arif and other members of NSEWC and we used this opportunity to explain to them the importance of documenting the avifauna of this region.

The first day was spent exploring the area around Jairampur, in a car, with Arif. We kept a close watch on both sides of the road—as most of the forests we drove through were relatively disturbed and sparse, it was not difficult to spot a bird's flight or any other movement in the woods. Such



Praveen J.

Rivering forest

¹ Namchik misspelled as Namheik, pers. comm. Arif Siddiqui (v.2006).

birdwatching meant an excited shout, “stop-stop-stop”, from one of us, followed by a tyre-screach, and then both of us would be out in a flash. An Oriental Broad-billed Roller *Eurystomus orientalis* was the first of many interesting species we saw this way and later we got to see them almost everyday. The habitat around Jairampur was perfect for this species, with small clearings amidst forested patches. We went further ahead towards Nampong, close to the Indo-Myanmar border. Along the banks of Rima River masses of butterflies were found mud-puddling, and our cameras went snapping. Here we saw a Blyth’s Kingfisher *Alcedo hercules* flying across the river, one of the more elusive birds of north-eastern India. Later, a buzzard *Buteo* sp., with field-identification features closely suggesting a Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*, flew low and close to the car. Two francolins, which seamlessly walked across the road and later flushed from the bushes, turned out to be hen Black Francolins *Francolinus francolinus*. A group of Rufous-necked Laughingthrushes *Garrulax ruficollis* was also seen near Nampong, strangely in cultivated land! We never thought they would ever come out of natural forests. Near Nampong, we often heard the familiar four-noted call of the Banded Bay Cuckoo *Cacomantis sonneratii*, perhaps one of the eastern most records from India (Kazmierczak 2000). We had to return early on this day, for further discussions on the butterfly workshop.

Our primary goal, next day, was to visit the habitats around Manmao village, 40km from Jairampur. Apart from a few *jhoom* (shifting agriculture practiced in north-eastern India) lands, most of the area on the roadside is forested. We started off with lifers. Two Striated Swallows *Hirundo striolata* that perched pretty as a picture on an electric wire and a couple of Black-browed Treepies *Dendrocitta frontalis* that flew across the road. The 4km trek from Manmao towards the river, had its share of observations. We heard calls of Grey Peacock-Pheasant *Polyplectron bicalcaratum* from the valley behind the village. As it was mid-day, butterflies and dragonflies were extremely active near the innumerable water puddles on the road. Most of our time was spent photographing these jewels; we had Orange Oakleaf *Kallima inachus*, Magpie Crow *Euploea radamanthus*, Striped Blue Crow *Euploea mulciber*, Yellow Helen *Papilio nephelus* and many others—all so special. Birds were not active. Black-browed Treepie and Brown-eared Bulbuls *Hemixos flavala* were the first that attracted our attention. After some time, one of us (SD) saw the bird of the trip, a Green Cochoa *Cochoa viridis* that offered a fantastic view and later dived into the canopy. A Lloyd’s Scimitar-Babbler *Pomatorhinus ochraceiceps* was also noted at the same locality. As we proceeded further towards the river, we entered a tall evergreen jungle with typical riparian elements. Soon after, we stumbled upon the cute pair of Pied Falconets described above. As we crossed the river over a scary, suspended bridge, a kingfisher on the riverbank attracted our attention. Before long, it gave a good view and we identified another Blyth’s Kingfisher. While tramping along the forest path, an agamid disappeared, extra-quick, into the grassy undergrowth—SD’s natural herpetological flair overcame birding interests as he made a frantic sprawl to recover the reptile. It was later identified as *Ptyctolaemus gularis* based on photographs.

Our drive back from Manmao was also quite eventful. We craned our necks outside the vehicle’s windows, for calls and



Striped Blue Crow

sightings, and must have stopped umpteen times. Every curve brought us a new species—Large Green-billed Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus tristis*, a small flock of very vocal Long-tailed Broadbills *Psarisomus dalhousiae*, Black-backed Forktail *Enicurus immaculatus*, Black-naped Green Woodpecker *Picus canus* and Pale Blue-Flycatcher *Cyornis unicolor*. Numerous Spangled Drongos *Dicrurus hottentottus* kept us guessing with their accomplished rhapsody of mimicry. An Oriental Pied Hornbill *Anthracoceros coronatus* flew across the road as the evening sun faded below the hills.

The rich variety of birds we saw on the second day, prompted us to visit the same route on foot the next day. We started early, from the beginning of the Manmao road. The loud booming call of hoolock gibbons *Bunopithecus hoolock* could be heard from the distant hills. Yellow-breasted Babblers *Macronous gularis* were also heard and we saw both Black-browed as well as Grey Treepies *D. formosae* in the canopy. Numerous White-throated *Alphoixus flaveolus* and Brown-eared Bulbuls called often, enlivening our walk. We could hear a Golden-throated Barbet *Megalaima flavifrons* at a distance but did not manage to see one. A small flock of Pin-tailed Green-Pigeons *Treron apicauda* flew across the road and settled into the canopy of a tall tree. A spectacular male Sultan Tit *Melanochlora sultanea*, with its yellow crest glistening in the sun, was sighted on a small tree with several Orange-bellied Chloropsis *Chloropsis hardwickii*. A peculiar ringing call that intrigued us in the beginning turned out to be that of a Mountain Tailor Bird *Orthotomus cuculatus*, which was later found to be exceedingly common. We often thought that the bird, with its yellow belly and grey throat resembled a *Phylloscopus* warbler. Numerous dragonflies and damselflies were active on the roadside. One species of damselfly *Rhinocypha fenestrella*, which one of us (PJ) photographed, turned out to be unlisted in the Odonata checklist for the Indian region (Prasad & Varshney 1995).

The increasing heat of the day soon made birding tough, so we settled beside the road and resorted to a more sedentary kind of bird watching. A fruiting fig attracted a lot of interesting birds as well as numerous local kids with catapults! Though the birds out-smarted the kids every time, it would not be surprising if each of them did get a few birds daily. The fig was host to species like Orange-bellied Chloropsis, a couple

*Rhinocypha fenestrella*

of Yellow-vented Flowerpeckers *Dicaeum chrysorrheum* and a richly coloured male Rufous-bellied Niltava *Niltava sundara*, brilliantly living up to its specific name, *sundara*, derived from the Hindi, 'sundar' (=beautiful). Later in the day, along the river we saw Slaty-backed Forktail *Enicurus schistaceus*, Dusky Warbler *Phylloscopus fuscatus*, Rufous-bellied Plaintive Cuckoo *Cacomantis merulinus* and another hepatic cuckoo along with the former. The walk back towards the main road yielded some excellent views of male Large-billed Blue Flycatchers *Cyornis banyumas* and the calls of Indian Cuckoo *Cuculus micropterus* and Drongo Cuckoos *Surniculus lugubris*. Arif picked us up and we drove to the famous WWII monument, a cemetery where hundreds of Allied soldiers were buried during the war. Some tombstones had Chinese inscriptions on them. That night we heard Brown Hawk-Owl *Ninox scutulata* and Oriental Scops-Owl *Otus sunia* very close to our guesthouse in Jairampur.

On the final day we had time only in the forenoon, and took a trail that led from Jairampur towards Miao, the entrance to the famous Namdapha National Park. As our path followed a river course, we kept a look out for a possible Long-billed Plover *Charadrius placidus*—however, we only got to see a River Lapwing *Vanellus duvaucelii*. A noisy Red-breasted Parakeet *Psittacula alexandri* was seen and also a flock of laughingthrushes, which could have been one of the "Necklaced" *G. pectoralis*/*G. monileger* ones. Two Blue-bearded Bee-eaters *Nyctornis athertoni* were seen hawking dragonflies across the river.

Overall, the four-day trip yielded 120 species of birds, including a handful of lifers for both of us. It re-emphasized the urgent need for biodiversity monitoring for this region. The onus clearly lies with local communities for bridging this

gap in our knowledge, through effective utilization of available resources. There is immense potential for eco-tourism in this area as it lies close to Namdapha. It is up to NGOs like NSEWC to educate local communities to understand this scope, which can act as a motivation for the conservation of this beautiful landscape.

Hearty thanks to members of NVSWE, Arif Siddiqui, Nobin and Nimbong, our excellent hosts. We hope they add many more birds to this checklist that we have started.

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Checklist

- Little Cormorant *Phalacrocorax niger*
 Great Cormorant *P. carbo*
 Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*
 Indian Pond-Heron *Ardeola grayii*
 Little Green Heron *Butorides striatus*
 Crested Serpent-Eagle *Spilornis cheela*
 Long-legged Buzzard (?) *Buteo rufinus*
 Pied Falconet *Microhierax melanoleucos*
 Black Francolin *Francolinus francolinus*
 Red Junglefowl *Gallus gallus*
 Grey Peacock-Pheasant *Polyplectron bicalcaratum*
 White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus*
 River Lapwing *Vanellus duvaucelii*
 Blue Rock Pigeon *Columba livia*
 Spotted Dove *Streptopelia chinensis*
 Emerald Dove *Chalcophaps indica*
 Pin-tailed Green-Pigeon *Treron apicauda*

- Mountain Imperial-Pigeon *Ducula badia*
 Red-breasted Parakeet *Psittacula alexandri*
 Brainfever Bird / Large Hawk Cuckoo
Hierococcyx varius/ sparverioides
 Indian Cuckoo *Cuculus micropterus*
 Banded Bay Cuckoo *Cacomantis sonneratii*
 Rufous-bellied Plaintive Cuckoo *C. merulinus*
 Drongo Cuckoo *Surniculus lugubris*
 Large Green-billed Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus tristis*
 Greater Coucal *Centropus sinensis*
 Oriental Scops-Owl *Otus sunia*
 Collared Owlet *Glaucidium brodiei*
 Asian Barred Owllet *G. cuculoides*
 Brown Hawk-Owl *Ninox scutulata*
 White-rumped Needletail-Swift (?)
Zoonavena sylvatica
 Asian Palm-Swift *Cypsiurus balasienis*
 Pacific Swift *Apus pacificus*
 House Swift (?) *A. affinis*
 Red-headed Trogon *Harpactes erythrocephalus*
 Blyth's Kingfisher *Alcedo hercules*
 Small Blue Kingfisher *A. hercules*
 White-breasted Kingfisher *Halcyon coromanda*
 Blue-bearded Bee-eater *Nyctyornis athertoni*
 Indian Roller *Coracias benghalensis*
 Oriental Broad-billed Roller
Eurystomus orientalis
 Common Hoopoe *Upupa epops*
 Oriental Pied Hornbill *Anthraceros albirostris*
 Great Barbet *Megalaima virens*
 Lineated Barbet *M. lineata*
 Golden-throated Barbet *M. franklinii*
 Blue-throated Barbet *M. asiatica*
 Fulvous-breasted Pied Woodpecker
Dendrocopos macei
 Rufous Woodpecker *Celeus brachyurus*
 Small Yellow-naped Woodpecker
Picus chlorolophus
 Large Yellow-naped Woodpecker *P. flavinucha*
- Black-naped Green Woodpecker *P. canus*
 Lesser Golden-backed Woodpecker
Dinopium benghalense
 Bay Woodpecker *Blythipicus pyrrhotis*
 Long-tailed Broadbill *Psarisomus dalhousiae*
 Common Swallow *Hirundo rustica*
 Striated Swallow *H. striolata*
 White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*
 Oriental Tree Pipit *Anthus hodgsoni*
 Large Cuckoo-Shrike *Coracina macei*
 Black-winged Cuckoo-Shrike *C. melaschistos*
 Scarlet Minivet *Pericrocotus flammeus*
 Pied Flycatcher-Shrike *Hemipus picatus*
 Large Woodshrike *Tephrodornis gularis*
 Red-whiskered Bulbul *Pycnonotus jocosus*
 Red-vented Bulbul *P. cafer*
 White-throated Bulbul *Alophoixus flaveolus*
 Brown-eared Bulbul *Hemixos flavala*
 Black Bulbul *Hypsipetes leucocephalus*
 Common Iora *Aegithina tiphia*
 Gold-fronted Chloropsis *Chloropsis aurifrons*
 Orange-bellied Chloropsis *C. hardwickii*
 Asian Fairy-Bluebird *Irena puella*
 Brown Shrike (?) *Lanius cristatus*
 Rufous-backed Shrike *L. schach*
 Grey-backed Shrike *L. tephronotus*
 Blue Whistling-Thrush *Myiophonus caeruleus*
 Oriental Magpie-Robin *Copsychus saularis*
 Black-backed Forktail *Enicurus immaculatus*
 Slaty-backed Forktail *E. schistaceus*
 Green Cochoa *Cochoa viridis*
 Common Stonechat *Saxicola torquata*
 White-crested Laughingthrush
Garrulax leucolophus
 Rufous-necked Laughingthrush *G. ruficollis*
 Spotted Babbler *Pellorneum ruficeps*
 Lloyd's Scimitar-Babbler
Pomatorhinus ochraceiceps
 Yellow-breasted Babbler *Macronous gularis*
 Plain Prinia *Prinia inornata*
- Mountain Tailorbird *Orthotomus cuculatus*
 Common Tailorbird *O. sutorius*
 Dusky Warbler *Phylloscopus fuscatus*
 Yellow-browed Warbler (?) *P. inornatus*
 Striated Marsh-Warbler *Megalurus palustris*
 Slaty-blue Flycatcher (?) *Ficedula tricolor*
 Rufous-bellied Niltava *Niltava sundara*
 Pale Blue-Flycatcher *Cyornis unicolor*
 Large-billed Blue-Flycatcher *C. banyumas*
 Black-naped Monarch-Flycatcher
Hypothymis azurea
 Sultan Tit *Melanochlora sultanea*
 Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch *Sitta castanea*
 White-tailed Nuthatch *S. himalayensis*
 Velvet-fronted Nuthatch *S. froalis*
 Yellow-vented Flowerpecker
Dicaeum chrysorrheum
 Little Spiderhunter *Arachnothera longirostra*
 Streaked Spiderhunter *A. magna*
 Oriental White-eye *Zosterops palpebrosus*
 House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*
 Eurasian Tree Sparrow *P. montanus*
 Grey-headed Starling *Sturnus malabaricus*
 Asian Pied Starling *S. contra*
 Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*
 Jungle Myna *A. fuscus*
 Common Hill-Myna *Gracula religiosa*
 Black-headed Oriole *Oriolus xanthornus*
 Maroon Oriole *O. traillii*
 Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus*
 Ashy Drongo *D. leucophaeus*
 Crow-billed Drongo (?) *D. annectans*
 Bronzed Drongo *D. aeneus*
 Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo *D. remifer*
 Spangled Drongo *D. hottentottus*
 Greater Racket-tailed Drongo *D. paradiseus*
 Grey Treepie *Dendrocitta formosa*
 Black-browed Treepie *D. frontalis*
 House Crow *Corvus splendens*
 Jungle Crow *C. macrorhynchos*

Recoveries from the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers (1969)—17*

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For the benefit of new readers of *Indian Birds* I would like to mention that I retired as editor of the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers (NLBW)* in December 2003, having announced this fact in the annual get-together at Dodda-Gubbi on 4.i.2004. From then onwards Aasheesh Pittie and V. Santharam started a new journal called *Newsletter for Ornithologists*. Having run this for a year, they found the name inappropriate, as the contents consisted of serious articles relating to the birds of our country, and the emphasis was not on birding news. From 1.i.2005 *Indian Birds* came into being.

The editor thought that it would be interesting for the younger generation to read about the atmosphere and the

events relating to birdwatching in its earlier years, as recorded through the pages of the *NLBW*. This I have tried to do by digging chronologically into past issues of that newsletter. Having come this far (January 1969 from December 1959, when the *NLBW* commenced) and considering my prospects at 87, I am reminded of the famous lines of the poet Sir Mohammad Iqbal, which translated read, "How would it help to ask the wise what my Beginning was, when the fear within me says, My end, what will it be". Looking at the distance yet to be covered I must increase my pace and in the process skip over many interesting contributions