

Some interesting sightings from the 2014 Asian Waterbird Census in Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana, India

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The annual exercise of the Asian Waterbird Census (hereafter AWC) takes place under the aegis of Wetlands International every year, normally during the second and third week of January. This is the period when the population of wintering waterfowl in the South-East Asia region would have stabilised and the birds have spread out to their regular wintering areas. In a way, this has been one of the longest-running, and most successful projects ever undertaken by the members of the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh (hereafter BSAP). Since the inception of this exercise, in 1987, the members of the BSAP have participated in the annual counts, and submitted the data to the Asian Wetlands Bureau (Wetlands International).

These 27 years have seen many changes in the methods of counts, and also, inevitably, changes in the populations, densities, and distribution of wintering waterfowl in the region. One of the major achievements of this project has been the addition of species to the known list of the birds of Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh (hereafter AP) and, and new distribution ranges. Cases in point are the addition of the Heuglin's Gull *Larus fuscus heuglini* to the list of birds seen around Hyderabad city (Taher *et al.* 2012), and the sighting of the Great White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus* in Kolleru (Taher & Mani 2008).

Here I present some interesting observations made during the 2014 AWC exercise, with notes, and further details in Table 1.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

This species is a winter visitor from Sind (Pakistan), in small numbers, to India, spreading from northern India to Tadoba, Maharashtra (Haribal 1987). There are three records from Andhra Pradesh: Visakhapatnam District (Palot 1999); the coastal areas of the state (Raju *et al.* 1985); and the coastal plains (Taher & Pittie 1989).

The bird was recorded in the AWC for the first time during the 2009 census. In December 2008 I saw, and photographed a single bird at the Nelapattu Tank in Nellore District [49]. Subsequent visits to this tank have drawn a blank, and the bird

has never again been seen at this site.

The sightings made of the species in the 2014 AWC are given in Table 1.

This species is now being regularly sighted in the districts of Visakhapatnam, and Srikakulam. So it is probable that the record from Nellore District was a stray, or vagrant bird, but since there are regular sightings from the coastal districts, it is perhaps safe to say that the bird is a regular winter visitor to the state. The bird is now breeding in Srikakulam District (Sraavan Kumar R., *et al.* 2014; Vikram P., *pers. comm.*, verbally).

Great White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus*

Great White Pelicans have been only very sporadically reported from erstwhile Andhra Pradesh. According to Ali & Ripley (1987) they are 'mainly winter visitor[s] to W. Pakistan (Baluchistan, Sind) and N. India from the Punjab to Assam (U.P., Rajasthan, Kutch, Saurashtra, N. Gujarat), Andhra Visakhapatnam), and "Madras". Taher & Pittie (1989) do not list it. Kumar (1980) reports seeing 'a pair on the Mir Alam Tank (near Hyderabad), in January 1973 (it was a year of drought).'

On all these locations, the birds are seen in company with the commoner Spot-billed Pelicans *P. philippensis*. It is not yet clear whether the birds are regular breeders in the state. Only in Uppalapadu were there any signs that the birds may be nesting, as they were seen perched on half-finished nests. There is no evidence of nesting from the other locations, though there are signs, such as for example the single Great White Pelican that was observed flying into one of the nesting trees in the Nelapattu WLS. More observations are required.

Western Reef Egret *Egretta gularis*

Breeding colonies of this species are known from around Pulicat Lake. The sightings made of the species in the 2014 AWC are given in Table 1.

Being a predominantly coastal species, it was interesting to spot it at Himayat Sagar, which is a large fresh-water lake supplying drinking water to the city of Hyderabad. The only other known records of this species from the Hyderabad district that I have been able to trace is one by Neavoll (1968), an undated records from ICRISAT Asia Center (Medak District), Rouriyal Lake, and Inkriyal Tank (both in Ranga Reddy District) (Pittie & Taher 2004).

Black Stork *Ciconia nigra*

In Andhra Pradesh, the Black Stork is scantily reported. One of the early records is from 1990, from near Jeedimetla, Hyderabad District (Kanniah & Ganesh 1990). A single bird was reported



Photo: Humayun Taher

from Kotepally Reservoir, Ranga Reddy District in 2011 (K. B. Rao, *pers. comm.*, e-mail of 26 December 2011). There is a record from 1985, from Rollapadu, Kurnool District (Manakadan 1988). Subsequently there are reports from along the banks of the Gowthami River, East Godavari, in 1987; Madanapalli, Chittoor District, 1989; Kumarajulanka, East Godavari, 1992; and Ravulapalem, East Godavari, 1995 (Rao *et al.* 2000). G. Ramakrishna Rao has photographed it in 2013, in Adilabad District (*pers. comm.*, e-mail of 30 March 2013). Sightings from the 2014 AWC are given in Table 1.

On 06 February 2014 G. Ramakrishna Rao, DFO, Kawal Reserve, photographed a flock of 16 birds (*in litt.*, e-mail dated 08 February 2014). This is by far one of the largest flocks sighted in the state, and the fact that it has been seen twice in successive years in the same district, is significant.

Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*

There are a limited number of records of this species from Andhra Pradesh. The first is of 56 birds from Pulicat Lake, Nellore District, in 1989 (Anonymous 1989), but such a large number seems suspect. The 1990 record from Kurnool District seems to be of doubtful veracity, even though it is reported in the AWC for 1989. In 1992 there were many records from Nellore District, from Pulicat, Kesavaram Tank, and Venkatachalam Tank (Pittie & Taher 2004). Of these, the Pulicat Lagoon is brackish, while the other two are fresh-water tanks. The 1996 record from Coringa Mangroves, East Godavari District is also of doubtful veracity.

The sightings from the 2014 AWC are given in Table 1.

This time again the species has been seen in the state on brackish water (if we discount the report from the Coringa Mangroves). It is generally thought that the birds mostly stay on fresh-water bodies in their winter quarters. In its summer quarters however, it seems to favour estuaries and salt marshes.

Demoiselle Crane *Anthropoides virgo*

As Demoiselle Cranes are migratory, their winter habitats include north-eastern Africa, Pakistan, and India.

Historically there is a considerable corpus of data of the species from both Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, though nowhere is it abundant in its southern-most range in India. There are sight records from Singur, Medak District (Kumar 1990), and in 1986 from Rollapadu, Kurnool District, and one from Kurnool town (Choudhury 1990). There are sight records from Manjira, and Singur reservoirs, from 2004 (G. Ramakrishna Rao, *verbally*). However, this will be the first time in more than ten years that Demoiselle Cranes are being reported from Andhra Pradesh in the AWC.

The sightings made of the species in the 2014 AWC are given in Table 1.

It is pertinent to note that after its sighting on 02 February 2014 (see Table 1), the bird was still present on the lake two days later, when G. Ramakrishna Rao, DFO, visited the lake, and photographed the bird (*in litt.*, e-mail dated 07 February 2014). It was noted as being completely solitary, not mingling with any other birds on the lake, and it also fed almost continuously. It spent the greater part of its time feeding. So, although the bird is not exactly unknown from Andhra Pradesh, it is being reported from Adilabad District for the first time and therefore, even if it is a stray record, it becomes important as showing that possibly the birds do fly over this district.

Greyheaded Lapwing *Vanellus cinereus*

There appears to be very little published literature of this species from Andhra Pradesh or Telangana. Though it has been recorded in Taher & Pittie (1989), it seems to be mostly known from a few sight records. In Andhra Pradesh, it has been recorded from Pulicat Lagoon by Dipu K (2009), Praveen J (2010), and by this author in 2011, when five birds were seen. A subsequent trip

Table 1. Interesting Sightings from the AWC in AP and Telangana in 2014

Species	Date	Location	Count	Remarks
<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	12 January 2014	Thatipudi Reservoir, Vizianagaram (18.13°N, 83.18°E); Andhra Pradesh	2	Clear photograph available (Team: Vikram P., and Surekha A.)
<i>Pelecanus onocrotalus</i>	26 December 2013	Nelapattu WLS, Nellore (13.77°N, 80°E); Andhra Pradesh	1	A single bird seen going into the nesting trees. (Team: K.B. Rao, H. Taher, Y.S.R.K. Prasad)
	18 January 2014	Uppalapadu Tank, Guntur (16.32°N, 80.52°E); Andhra Pradesh	5	This is the third successive year the species has been seen at this site. (Team: Sathvik R., P. Gowthama)
<i>Egretta gularis</i>	25 January 2014	Kolleru Lake & WLS, West Godavari (16.53°N, 81.35°E); Andhra Pradesh	2	In company with the nesting Spot-billed Pelicans at Atapaka (Team: J.V.D. Moorthy, K. Madhusudan, Vikram P.)
	18 January 2014	Himayath Sagar Reservoir, Ranga Reddy (17.33°N, 78.33°E); Telangana	1	A single bird seen foraging in the shallows along with Little Egrets. This was a dark morph bird. (Team: Shafaat Ulla, Sharada A., Anjali P.)
<i>Ciconia nigra</i>	21 January 2014	Coringa Mangroves WLS, East Godavari (16.5°N, 82.38°E); Andhra Pradesh	66	This species is fairly common in the mangrove creeks of the sanctuary. (Team: K.T. Rao, K.M. Rao, P.S. Selvam)
	01 February 2014	Kalpakunta Lake, Adilabad (19.1°N, 78.98°E); Telangana	2	Two birds were seen on this lake close to the Kawal Project Tiger Reserve (Team: Shafaat Ulla, Anjali P.)
<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	29 December 2013	Pulicat Lagoon, Nellore (13.57°N, 80.17°E); Andhra Pradesh	21	A single flock mingling with a mixed flock of ducks. (Team: K.B. Rao, H. Taher, Y.S.R.K. Prasad)
<i>Anthropoides virgo</i>	02 February 2014	Kawal Lake, Adilabad (19.17°N, 78.97°E); Telangana	1	A single bird, probably a juvenile, was observed foraging in the small village lake of Kawal, close to the Kawal Project Tiger Reserve. (Team: Shafaat Ulla, Anjali P., Nand Kumar)
<i>Vanellus cinereus</i>	27 December 2013	Pulicat Lagoon, Nellore (13.57°N, 80.17°E); Andhra Pradesh	9	Seen in the same place as the sightings in all previous years; on the shores of a fresh-water pond on Irakkam Island. (Team: K.B. Rao, H. Taher, Y.S.R.K. Prasad)
	27 January 2014	Kolleru Lake & WLS, West Godavari (16.53°N, 81.35°E); Andhra Pradesh	1	A single individual seen. (Team: J.V.D. Moorthy, K. Madhusudan, Vikram P.)

in 2012 did not spot it, but three birds were seen in 2013. One bird was photographed at Hussain Sagar, in Hyderabad city in 2008 (Sreekar & Ram 2010). There are reports from Tamil Nadu (Santharam 1987; Gopi Sundar 2000; Santharam *et al.* 2007), Karnataka (Subramanya 1987), Goa (Lainer 1991), and Kerala (Sashikumar *et al.* 2011).

The sightings from 2014 AWC are given in Table 1.

Conclusion

In the past decade, six species of birds have been added to the list of birds of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. These are:

1. Greylag Goose (Ulla & Taher 2011)
2. Sooty Tern (Taher, *et al.* 2011)
3. Red Phalarope (Rawal, *et al.* 2013)
4. Great White Pelican (Taher & Mani 2008)
5. Grey-headed Lapwing (Conroy 2003)
6. Indian White-rumped Spinetail (Kalinadhabhatla 2013)

Most of these birds were added as a direct result of the findings during the AWC. The Red Phalarope is a good example: It was found while members had gone to watch, and photograph the Greater Flamingos that were reported in the 2013 AWC from the Gandipet Lake. The Greylag Goose, the Great White Pelican, and Greyheaded Lapwing are all census-related discoveries. The Sooty Tern is perhaps the only waterbird that was seen outside of any waterfowl count related activity.

The AWC is a great success story for Indian ornithology, and I hope state coordinators of the project research their data and write up about interesting records that it has thrown up from their areas, as has been done by Nameer *et al.* (2015).

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