One Friday morning in 1989, while I was reconnecting with the staff of the Division of Birds in the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History, an ornithologist whom I had not met before asked me if I would be interested in working on a new guide to the birds of India. That ornithologist was S. Dillon Ripley’s Scientific Assistant, Bruce M. Beehler.

I was 27 years old; I had not travelled in Asia. I had heard of bulbuls only because there were introduced North American populations of the Red-Whiskered Bulbul. I had no idea what a drongo was, let alone a prinia or a baza.

The world has changed radically since *Birds of South Asia: The Ripley Guide* was first proposed. Those were the early days of the desktop computer, essentially a data-storage and word-processing device; typewriters were part of Ripley’s office equipment, and the Internet and search engines were many years in the future. Cameras were bulky and heavy and the visual resources for Indian birds were very slim indeed. So the only evidence of the existence of the Rusty-throated (Mishmi) Wren-babbler *Spaeleornis badeigularis* was a single specimen in the Smithsonian’s collection. Ripley had collected it in 1947 in Arunachal, but no other records had emerged since; some had even disputed the validity of the species. Today many wonderful field photos of this bird can be found at the click of a keyboard, thanks to dedicated Indian birders.

Illustrating the entire avifauna of any landmass is a daunting task; for one as large and diverse as India’s, it is frightening unless you are as clueless as I was at the outset. The region has over 1,400 species presenting complex seasonal and regional variation, amounting to over 2,500 taxa (scientifically identified forms). In the end, I illustrated perhaps half of them, and found that, for the reasons discussed herein, it was best to focus on the complex groups special to the region and forgo trying to see everything for the sake of a long list. As wonderful as the shorebirds and waterfowl are, the babblers, bulbuls, warblers, and woodpeckers demanded the attention.

The biggest concern is that nothing significant is left out—any distinct plumage, whether age-related, seasonal, or geographic. This means that comprehensive specimen collections representing all regions of the Subcontinent had to be surveyed and loans secured. Museum collections are the cornerstone of field guide production: specimens are a hard record of what a bird looks like in any given location, and provides the illustrator with true colour, detail, and scale that cannot be conveyed in photographs. Such an operation, inevitably, has spinoffs—purging the literature of erroneous records (Pied Triller in the Andamans); finding new species that had lain unnoticed in museum drawers (Nicobar Scops Owl); and even revealing systematic scientific fraud, leading to the rediscovery of a species believed extinct (Robert Meinertzhagen and the Forest Owlet). All of these issues, and more, are addressed in senior author Pamela Rasmussen’s article in *Indian Birds* (2005).

The main challenge for the illustrator is to show all of the field marks essential for identification while keeping focus on the bird’s appearance as a living creature under natural circumstances. When recording field observations, in words or sketches, the focus should be to capture all those things that are missed by references such as published accounts, museum skins, photographs, and the work of other illustrators. From this perspective, I decided early on to put my efforts into observation rather than photography, which can take one’s attention off the subject in the pursuit of the perfect image. There were many, many birds I would not have observed had I attempted to get a picture, such as the Long-billed Wren Babbler and the Large-billed Thrush, two very peculiar birds, almost unique to India, that

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![Bulbul crests on a specimen, and in real life. The Black-crested Bulbul on the left, and the Himalayan Bulbul on the right.](image_url)
tend to pop up rarely and unpredictably. Good luck if you actually go seek them out.

Armed with the only existing Indian bird guide, John Henry Dick’s plates for an aborted project bound as the A Pictorial Guide to the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent (Ali & Ripley 1983), I was unprepared for the whimsical and sometimes comical ornamentation and behaviour of Indian birds. Crests that were pressed flat and looked the same in Black-crested and Himalayan Bulbuls specimens were seen in life to be an upright and mobile “finger” in the former and a crazy forward-curled “cowlick” in the latter [167]. Some birds looked so loopy at first encounter that I struggled to get them on paper. Witness the Hair-crested Drongo, with its velvet-black plumage setting off the metallic sheen of the wings and hackles; long crown filaments; heavy sickle bill; and bizarre outer tail feathers rolled up and over at the corners.

I quickly adopted the use of small pocket-sized notebooks and ballpoint pens (as they don’t smudge and the points don’t break) to jot these observations down on the spot; also to describe vocalizations and soft-part colours before the impression faded from memory. Immediacy was everything as that is what dead museum skins lack. Skins are useful for colour and size, but even patterns get seriously distorted. The big black blotches on the back of a specimen of the Striated Grassbird are arranged in the living bird into graphic black stripes, looking like lines drawn with a chisel-point marker. Little doodles and notes recorded that effect. Such drawings are often not much to boast about—drawing, standing up with gloves on, in the cold damp mists of Darjeeling will not likely produce a masterpiece—but they are vital.

It is also important for an illustrator keep in mind how detail registers under field conditions. Certain kinds of detail can be irrelevant even if technically correct—to do so would impede the “field look” of the bird, as in my figure of the Yellow-billed Babbler Argya affinis, which underplays the strange blank “halo” around the eye because I elaborated the facial feather tracts too much. Similarly, outlining all of the flight feathers in an illustration of a soaring honey buzzard will undermine the impact of the diagnostic wing bands. These are examples of the detail of the museum skin in hand outweighing the more important representation of the bird in life.

The standard preparation of museum skins to lay on the back with bill pointed forward has disastrous effects on aspects of the plumage. Several of India’s dizzying range of pied woodpeckers are identified by the pattern of red vs black at the rear of the head; this area is collapsed in specimens. My early encounters with the Crimson-breasted Woodpecker and its sympathetic larger edition, the Darjeeling Woodpecker, revealed distinctions in nuchal pattern that for the life of me I could not dig out of the skins. Those critical field marks found their way into The Ripley Guide only because I had a little waterproofed notebook in my back pocket. And a ballpoint pen.

The distinctive crests and the peculiar elongated and spangled “cowls” of some of the drongos are similarly difficult to interpret from museum skins. Watching the live birds in motion, one can see that these plumes arise from the side of the head behind the ear coverts, and thus move with the head (giving the effect of a “helmet”). In skins one could easily assume erroneously that they are part of the plumage at the side of the breast.

I also recorded aspects of behaviour and posture—the jauntily cocked tail of a Red-throated Flycatcher—that can declare the bird’s identity as readily as the field marks. And I did not hesitate to refer to familiar birds from back home to distill impressions more efficiently. For example, at my first sighting of the Yellow-browed Bulbul, my reaction was that it was built much like a Gray Catbird and coloured much like a female Hooded Warbler. I would then make note of the discrepancies—the bulb is shorter-legged than the catbird, with a finer-tipped bill; and with an upright but slack-winged posture that recalled a Scarlet Tanager. The rich chestnut of Gould’s Shortwing I likened to that of an eastern Fox Sparrow.

At the end of each field day, I would transcribe and flesh out notes on behaviour and vocalizations into a journal, while summarizing those characteristics and marks that most readily identify any given species. Also I would make pages of sketches based on the doodles I had done that day, as well as a great number from fresh memory. If I had come upon a good opportunity to do direct-from-life studies, say a roosting pair of Ceylon Frogmouths [168] or the nest site of a White-bellied Woodpecker [169], I would return the next day with a larger sketchbook to give as many hours of work as the birds would allow.

This daily protocol of covering the same region over a period of days or weeks made possible some proficiency in separating birds that were confusing at first encounter. For instance, I came to distinguish the east Himalayan bush robins—Himalayan Red-flanked, White-browed, and Rufous-breasted—easily by voice. Over weeks on Tiger Hill outside Darjeeling, I had come to be so familiar with the vocalizations of its common birds that any unrecognized sound would lead to something of particular interest: Rufous-throated Wren-babbler; Hume’s Bush-warbler; and Gould’s Shortwing.

An illustrator’s diligence in museum and field work will feed into the text: my field notes stressing the differences in the reds in male Himalayan minivets (Scarlet, Long-tailed, and Short-billed), found their way into the plate and text; as did observations on the rounded forehead of the Small Scrubwren versus the sloping forehead of the nearly identical Large Scrubwren for The Birds of New Guinea. Those characteristics are not apparent in museum skins. Conversely, I was heartened to confirm in the field (again in New Guinea) the white trim on the secondaries of the Brown-breasted Gerygone, that I had depicted based on museum skins before I had seen the bird in life.

Using published illustrations as references has to be approached with caution, however refined and authoritative they may seem. Some are incorrect because they are based on written descriptions rather than skins—especially in the case of remote and highly localized forms, such as those occurring on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Securing specimens for such locations is a major challenge, especially in the context of a comprehensive publication, and this sometimes leads to shortcuts. I recall a published description of a pitta from an island off New Guinea that was misleading because the author had apparently neglected to turn the museum skins over to examine the backs. Such vast projects as a field guide present multiple opportunities for exhaustion, and such mistakes are inevitable.
Ceylon Frogmouths study, Top Slip, Anamalais.
White-bellied Woodpecker, life study, Top Slip, Anamalais.
Anderton: Recollections on illustrating The Ripley Guide

At times illustrators are subject to more insidious influences. For example, the difficult-to-identify reed warblers *Acrocephalus* sp., which inhabit dense and forbidding grassy habitats, are frequently shown in hand-held photos taken at banding operations (for obvious reasons: it’s hard to get field photos in that habitat). These, to be sure, are useful for colouration and pattern, but birds under such stress often raise their crown feathers and puff their throats in uncharacteristic ways; and of course typical posture is not represented. I have been thrown by illustrations based on such references even for birds that I know well. The Thick-billed Warbler *Arundinax aedon* in life doesn’t look much like a typical reed warbler. Its swollen pale bill reminds an American birder of a tanager, and its build and carriage are more like that of a small babbler, such as the Buff-breasted. To liken it in an illustration to the “other” reed warblers misses its species-character. But it can look like one in a hand-held photo.

The communal energy of Indian birds was a constant source of amazement and confusion. I remember picking through thick undergrowth in Sikkim when suddenly the bamboo began to boil with activity and buzzing chatter; I was in the midst of a feeding flock of such insane activity that when it was over, all I could recall was a black throat here, a rufous crown there, along with a beady white eye and cinnamon cheek. Was it all on the same bird? Or was that spread over four species? It took several repeats of the experience before I sorted it all out to a mix of parrotbills, tits, warblers, babblers, fantails, and so on. The thrill of the experience never faded: I loved watching the quivering waves through the bamboo move away, reverse course, and waft back around me. With all that commotion, it seemed improbable that the participants were not burning more energy than they were taking in.

I do take advantage in illustration of multiple-figure species-complexes to suggest differing aspects of behaviour. My illustration of the four forms of the Black-throated Parrotbill on Plate 140 of *The Ripley Guide* was designed to reflect the acrobatic demeanor of this species, so often at the core of the frenetic feeding parties in the Himalayan foothills. Similarly, with the need for multiple figures of the Indian Black Robin on Plate 118, I could be sure one had the hyper-collared tail so typical of this species.

There is something deeply touching about watching a string of Jungle Babblers cross a path, gather up together, and preen each other with such closeness that their wings drape over one another; all the while bleating like dog squeaky toys. Once in Periyar Tiger Preserve I watched a large flock of many dozens of them squeal, strut, and distend their plumage to absurd proportions over some contentious issue I never did identify (sketches in recollection later that day, 170). I could not resist getting poetic in descriptions when it was necessary: Jungle Babblers always made me think of dust bunnies with googly eyes. Like they had been left to fade on a sunny windowsill.

The Gray-headed Bulbul looked like another victim of the sunny windowsill, with its green-gold against silver, and a funny pinched crown, waxy yellow bill, and beady white eye. I could not help note its overall similarity to South-east Asia’s Black-headed Bulbul, as if one had been dipped in bleach. The Nepal Cutia looked to me like a football (an American one) painted like an American Kestrel.

I loved the Greater Racket-tailed Drongos always seeming to lead the perimeter of mixed feeding flocks. The song of an invisible Spot-winged Ground Thrush drifting out mysteriously from the undergrowth of the Sri Lankan forest, sounding like a drunken, lost soul. Abbot’s Babblers popping out of ground cover onto low branches to stir up a vocal party as the sun was about to dip below the horizon. The air being torn by the wings of a pair of Great Indian Hornbills passing overhead. And the Spotted Forktail, with its spangled black & white plumage and elegantly arced and forked pied tail, seeming to put in feathers the glitter of the cascading mountain streams it forages among.

Such are the things that can’t be put in a field guide. I made the effort to record such impressions in sketches and notes, knowing well that they were outside the scope of the project. These are experiences one hopes others will have if a field guide is successful in leading its readers into their own deeper explorations. And this is why an illustrator must do his/her best to make the bird look alive and sensitively characterized; in short, a subject worth looking for.

I was fortunate to be able to sequentially work along ranges in a way that I was struck by the way a bird that was treated (at that time) as a single species, such as the Black-crested Bulbul, was in fact different in the Western Ghats (short ragged crest; scarlet throat; yellow eye) from that in the Himalayas (long narrow crest, black throat; yellow eye), and again in Sri Lanka (no crest; yellow throat; dark eye). These are now treated as distinct species. Mid 20th-century tendencies to gloss over such distinctions and “lump” forms into single species can lead an illustrator to miss something when the same old names are repeated on local checklists. The attitude of some birders “Oh, I’ve seen that one already”—can lead to a distinct form being missed. The White-bellied Shortwing (as it was known at the time) is a different bird on either side of the Palghat Gap in the Western Ghats. Now they are known as the White-bellied Sholakili to the north, and the Nilgiri Sholakili to the south. Work is ongoing. Similar speciation can be seen in the complex of small laughingthrushes *Montecincla* sp., and the Indian Blackbird, among others, in the same region.

Everything I have learned about the differentiation of species across geographic ranges was drawn from India’s astonishing diversity of habitats and the abruptness with which they can change—think of the way the darkly tropical Western Ghats rise starkly above the thorn scrub of Tamil Nadu to produce an isolated range full of bird species found nowhere else in the world.

At times the variation of a species over its range is subtler and not a candidate to be chopped up into regional forms, and can present a bigger challenge to field identification. Most Himalayan species that are distributed widely through the range are more saturated in colour in the damp east (e.g., Darjeeling) than in the arid west (e.g., Uttarakhand). This is known as a cline. Sudden “breaks” in the cline can occur at ridges or gaps, as in the brown-headed form of the Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrush to the west of the Singalila Ridge (western West Bengal), and the black-chinned, silvery-cheeked form to the east. The same species breaks up into other isolated forms in the North-eastern Hills. The Black-throated Parrotbill exhibits similar regional variation. Within the spectrum of such variation over a range, distinct species can go unrecognized. The Streaked Laughingthrush is dusty gray in the western Himalayas, and more coppery in the east; but the uniformly chocolate-brown Bhutan Laughingthrush was long passed off as the dark easternmost end of that same cline.
Jerdon’s Baza, life studies, Sinharaja, Sri Lanka.
Regional variation can run in parallel between difficult-to-separate species, such as the widely distributed Jungle and Plain Prinias, creating a nightmare for birders: five figures for each species were required in *The Ripley Guide* to adequately cover these warblers. Seasonal (breeding vs. non-breeding) variation is in the mix in that case.

The Ultramarine Flycatcher and the Little Pied Flycatcher are broadly sympatric in the Himalayas. The females are similarly drab, but can be distinguished in the western Himalayas by the rufous rump of the Little Pied. Gradually to the east, the females of both species sport this feature, making separating them much more difficult.

A particularly knotty case is presented by Tickell's Flycatcher, which is brightest and most richly coloured in Sri Lanka, becoming gradually paler and drabber as it ranges northwards and eastwards. In the northern Eastern Ghats it seems to meld seamlessly into the Pale-chinned Flycatcher, and the long-held belief that Tickell's Flycatcher ranges through north-eastern India into South-east Asia was shown to be based on misidentifed specimens of blue flycatcher species in the northeast Indian regions (Assam and the hill states)—these were in fact Large Blue and Hill Blue Flycatchers.

The carryover of identification standards from one part of the world to another, encouraged by far-flung forms being “lumped”, can then muddy the waters. In the early 1990s I encountered birders in India equipped with Philip Round’s *The Birds of Thailand*, a fine new volume to be sure, but one which made it that much more difficult to identify similar species, such as blue flycatchers, in extralimital India. The “Tickell’s Blue Flycatcher” of South-east Asia is disjunct from the “real” one of peninsular India (the species was first described from Sri Lanka) and it took a reappraisal of the avifauna (by Dr. Rasmussen) in museum collections (NOT the literature or sight records) to make that clear.

On that first day in 1989, discussing the new India guide, “four or five years” was suggested as a production period. *Birds of South Asia: The Ripley Guide* was published in 2005, sixteen years later. By that time I had already been handed, again by Dr. Beehler, the task of “updating” the plates of his 1986 *The Birds of New Guinea*. “Four or five years” were again to stretch out over a decade as just sampling the holdings of the American Museum of Natural History made immediately clear. Throw a gap into a mountain range, or an island into a bay, find a new bird.

Birds, as do all organisms, reflect their immediate circumstances in their appearance, vocalizations and behaviour. I remember Bruce advising me when I started to poke into the Indian collections of the Smithsonian: “Ignore the name on the tag. It’s the location that matters.” The raw, broken mountain ranges of New Guinea, surrounded by narrow and repeatedly pinched lowlands cross-cut by rivers, was a laboratory for everything I had learned in India about speciation reflecting geography. What were bumpy gradients with local “hiccups” in Indian birds were a kaleidoscopic mosaic in the (largely) younger and less weathered topography of New Guinea and its birds.

It has been a thrill in the years since to watch the energetic documentation in photographs of the birds of India by their compatriot humans. Species that were almost spectres back in the 1990s, such as the Wedge-billed Babbler or the Spotted Elachura, are now richly represented in authentic field images. Back in the 1990s, working from skins on a peculiar species that I had failed to see in the field, such as the Brown Parrotbill, I felt like I was working in the dark. Photos posted on the web in recent years make clear how much I missed the mark on that one, and many others.

A constant sense of discovery is also to be found in the reappraisal of relationships between bird genera and families through genetic research. When I read on Wikipedia that shrike-babblers (genus *Pteruthius*) are now allied with the New World vireos (*Vireonidae*), I thought “of course.” Same build, same unhurried working of the canopy. It is a good fit.

The breakup of such “wastebasket” groups as the babblers into more rigorous taxonomic relationships has been gratifying to follow, and no doubt many more adjustments are in the offering. Other changes have not gone down so well with me. The reallocation of the small chats (such as wheatears, bushchats, bush robins, Indian Robin, and the like) into affiliation with the flycatchers and away from the true thrushes feels right. But it seems like the whistling thrushes (*Myophonus*), with their chest-out, head-back “military cadet” stance and their bouncy carriage, should stay with the “real” thrushes, such as *Turdus*. But that’s sentiment on my part. The research suggests otherwise.

India is graced with a phenomenal diversity of intensely alive birds over-endowed with personality, and the subcontinent’s position on the southern aspect of Asia serves to concentrate a staggering influx of migrants in the winter. The region fills up with wagtails, warblers, pipits, and more in the winter, providing almost an ornithological cross-section of Asia. The Himalaya offers some of the most spectacular pheasants in the world, and the greatest diversity of such groups as tree creepers, rock pigeons, long-tailed tits, and rosefinches, among many others. Wherever else I have travelled, I have never had experiences quite on a par with those that are etched in my mind from Sikkim in 1991, Buxa Tiger Reserve in 1992, and the Nilgiris in 1993. India is ornithological sensory overload.

I remember being asked by a colleague in Australia about India’s raptors years later. I tried to recall them off the top of my head; every few seconds another plate from *The Ripley Guide* would appear in my mind’s eye as one group after another would come back to me. A half dozen *Aquila* at least; another half dozen buzzards; oh, and a dozen *Accipiter*. Don’t forget the half-dozen harriers. Or the serpent eagles. The honey buzzards, kites, or the White-eyed Buzzard. Osprey, sea-eagles, booted eagles, hawk-eagles, Snake Eagle, and Black Eagle. Oh, and the bazas [171]. And the vultures and the falcons. There seemed to be no end to it.

After the appearance of *The Birds of New Guinea* in 2015, it was difficult for me to look back on my older work for *The Ripley Guide*, some of which reaches back to 1993: over such a long period (25 years) of continuous work, one becomes better at balancing field impressions against the hard detail of the museum skins; at capturing the open textures of living plumage; at better at balancing field impressions against the hard detail of the museum skins; at capturing the open textures of living plumage; and using light and shadow to grace the subject into a natural presence rather than a hard graphic or sculpturesque one. It is also a challenge to prevent the compressed and compacted effect of museum specimen preparation from being felt in one’s drawings as they go into the book. Final work is typically done with the museum skin in hand and the living bird on the other side of the planet.
During the extended production of *The Ripley Guide*, the digital universe expanded into e-mail and the Internet, while traditional prepress methods of colour separation and image-editing fell into the hands of virtually anyone, designer or not, through the miracle of desktop scanners and Photoshop. In the early 1990s, participating illustrators would demonstrate finished work, or ask for clarification on a problem, by snail-mailing a colour Xerox; within a decade that would become a jpeg-attachment of a scan to an e-mail. Such technological revolutions serve to make many aspects of field guide production much more efficient. I felt these benefits constantly in *The Birds of New Guinea*. A photo of a specimen of the Mountain Thrush from Goodenough Island, taken next to a skin of its mainland relative and a measuring stick, could be zipped to me in Washington, DC from a collection in Brisbane, Australia, in a day. Many thanks to the museum support staffers that enthusiastically make this possible.

On the other hand, easy access to tools like Photoshop means that editing and corrections can be inexpertly done. In the final years of production, *The Ripley Guide* had grown to such proportions that it was clear that it would need two volumes. The coverage had been expanded to Afghanistan (though not a part of the Subcontinent, it was a region seriously neglected by the literature). The finished plates inevitably came to be cut up to be spread over more, less crowded pages. It was a major operation to ensure that each redesigned page would feature one artist’s work and hold to scale, while retaining a good presentation. I redesigned the entire body into 180 new plates, although, in the end, Lynx Ediciones held only loosely to my compositions. So the printed book contains very few examples of any of the artists’ finished work. For my own, only Plates 95 (Broadbills and pittas) and 180 (Magpies and treepies) are close to what I actually composed.

I developed over my years of field guide illustration an almost subconscious habit of arranging figures on a plate with a geographical bias—north-western forms at top left and south-eastern at bottom right. This can obviously be completely undone when original compositions are digitally recomposed by another hand.

On the other hand, digital recomposition also makes much easier the addition of plumages or taxa as revealed by new research, keeping field guides current.

Through Facebook’s Indian Birders, I have been drawn back into a circle that I left long ago, and compelled to pull out *The Ripley Guide* when I am trying to clarify a thread concerning a bird’s identification. This has made me realize that the book holds up well, including my illustrations that previously made me cringe. It is a handsome volume and a thorough one, largely due to the industry of Dr. Rasmussen. I am grateful to have played a central role in it, and I hope the birders in India find it useful in discovering their extraordinary avifauna.

**References**
