

Correspondence

A strange encounter with an unlikely visitor: A Eurasian Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola* in Hyderabad, Telangana

On 20 February 2021, at 1430 h, my wife Rithika, and I were driving on Hyderabad's extremely congested Begumpet road when our eyes fell upon a strange shape overhead, adjacent to the flyover. It was a bird entangled in a kite *manja* (=glass coated string), struggling to break free. The closer we got to the bird, the better we could discern its 'jizz'. That it was a wader was apparent, but which one? From that distance it seemed like a godwit (*Limosa* sp.). Barely had we reached a consensus when we realised that it was impossible to pause, or slow down on the road because of the traffic, and if we were to attempt to rescue the bird, or even take a good look at it, we would have to negotiate a lengthy U-turn to return to the spot. By the time we did so, a crowd had gathered there, and the bird was missing! To our relief we learned that a Good Samaritan, Raja Rajput, had managed to stall traffic, disentangle the bird, and retrieve it from the *manja*. Rithika collected the bird from him, brought it to the car, and we carefully wrapped it in a spare towel [68]. By the time the creature was in our hands, we had been able to decipher that it was a snipe, but both of us being a bit rusty with our waders, could not zero down on a species. Provisionally, we assumed that it could have been either be a Common *Gallinago gallinago* or a Pintail Snipe *G. stenura*, the likeliest snipes to visit the polluted drain that flows through Begumpet.



Rohan Chakravarty

68. The injured European Woodcock from Hyderabad, Telangana.

Following frantic phone calls to Farida Tampil of World Wide Fund for Nature—Hyderabad, and Shreya Paropkari of Humane Society International India's Hyderabad chapter, we decided that the best recourse for this injured winter visitor would be to hand it over to the veterinarian, Dr Syed Asaduddin, at the Nehru Zoological Park. We coordinated with Laxmi Narayan, the park biologist, who received the bird from us, and promptly administered first aid. He noted the details of the bird, and allotted it an enclosure in the company of a few injured herons and hornbills. After learning that Dr Asaduddin was busy tending to a critical case at the veterinary unit, we left the bird in the care of Laxmi Narayan and left.

We may have been relieved that the bird was in safe hands, but our thrill was barely quelled, as we had yet to figure out which species of snipe we had just had this tryst with. No sooner did we reach home than I settled with my field guide in one hand, and www.orientalbirdimages.org open on my web browser, matching references, illustrations, and pictures with the mobile photographs of the bird we had taken whilst it was in our hands. Looking at the bold horizontal bars on the crown and nape, the unusually long eye-stripe and the characteristic grey blotches on the bird's wings, it did not take us long to deduce that the bird was among the unlikeliest of surprises to spring in Hyderabad: a Eurasian Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola*. Cryptic, large, and unusual snipes that inhabit dense forests and forage along forest streams, woodcocks are known in India from the upper Himalayas where they breed, and the lower Himalayas and the Western Ghats where they spend their winters. The range maps on eBird yielded no records from Hyderabad or the south-eastern parts of the country. I had seen this bird once before in the Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary, Arunachal Pradesh.

Ali & Ripley (2001: 294) observed that 'From striking paucity of records in Peninsular India, probably journey from Himalayas performed in a single non-stop flight,' and then, uncharacteristically contradicted that with, 'Indications suggest that the birds reach their southern winter quarters mainly by the Eastern Ghats route.' Grimmett et al. (2011: 154) have a map that shows an isolated record from northern Telangana State, which is inexplicable (Tim Inskipp confirmed the 'circle' in Andhra Pradesh being based on Abdulali's 'Padera', *pers. comm.*, e-mail dated 26 February 2021). Rasmussen & Anderton (2012: 126) show a two-way migration along the Eastern Ghats, across the peninsular plains, to the Western Ghats (Map 58.9). Historical records from the Eastern Ghats are few: McMaster (1875: 14) stated, 'I have flushed a woodcock in the hills of the Northern Districts near Goodum, in the Golcondah Zemindary (=Golugonda, Visakhapatnam District, Andhra Pradesh; 17.68°N, 82.47°E) ...' (McMaster 1871: 111); Hume & Marshall (1881: 312) footnoted, 'Guddam in the Golconda Zemindari.—McMaster'; Arbutnot (1915: 777) recorded L. T. Harris shooting 'birds' at Salabam (18°10'N, 82°45'E), Eastern Ghats, on 26 February [1915]; and Abdulali (1945: 346) quoted the *Gazeteer* (sic) ' "... the Woodcock has been seen around Padera" [=Paderu]. Padera is in the hills, west of Sankrametta. I did not see a single snipe during Christmas—the soil is perhaps too sandy.' Raju (1985: 6) listed 'Paderu', most probably, based on this source. Taher & Pittie (1989: 10) listed it under 'Eastern Ghats' based upon Abdulali (*ibid.*).

It was Abdulali (1953: 747) who first wondered whether '... the paucity of data regarding the movements of the woodcock from the ornithologically better investigated Deccan and Western Ghats indicate that the birds may perhaps reach the Nilgiris by way of the Eastern Ghats?' The only published record of the Eurasian Woodcock that I could locate, from the peninsular plains, was that of one seen on 28 October 1991 in Bengaluru (Daniels 1991: 14). That bird would have been on its way to the Western Ghats, whereas the one recorded here, may have been returning to its breeding grounds. It does show, however, that the amazing cryptic plumage of this wader, and its crepuscular and nocturnal feeding habits have foxed birders in the peninsular plains, for decades.

Little did Rithika and I know that the bird wrapped in our spare towel would prove to be an ornithological marvel!

While this note was being written, the woodcock, diagnosed with a fractured left wing, was being treated for injuries, had recovered from its initial shock, and had begun feasting on grasshoppers and worms being served to it by the zoo authorities. In the coming days, we hope with our fingers crossed that the visitor will be able to spring back to good health, and return to its breeding grounds in the Himalayas. And if all goes well, may this woodcock, on its next journey to the Eastern Ghats from the Himalayas, pause at Hyderabad to reminisce *Hyderabadi* hospitality!



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[Editor's note: The Eurasian Woodcock succumbed to its injuries in the second week of April 2021.]

An Indian Scops Owl *Otus bakkamoena* breeding in an artificial wooden nest box

The Indian Scops Owl *Otus bakkamoena* is widely distributed from the Indus Valley in Pakistan, eastwards till south-western West Bengal and across the entire Indian peninsula southwards of the Himalayas (Ali & Ripley 1983). They generally nest in tree hollows and at times in abandoned buildings near habitation (Holt et al. 2020). We report an instance of the Indian Scops Owl breeding in an artificial wooden nest at the Punjabi University Campus (30.36°N, 76.45°E), Patiala—1,278 sq km wooded campus adjacent to the NH7 Rajpura-Patiala Road.

In 2016, a total of 200 artificial wooden nest boxes were installed at different locations in the campus, under the activities for Corporate Social Responsibility. These nest boxes were installed on the trunks and branches of trees, at various heights between at 2.5 m and 6.0 m, depending on the heights of trees. The nest boxes were roughly of two sizes, 20x22x25 cm (lxbxh) and 15x12x7 cm, with a 5.5 cm opening, with two hooks for fixing the boxes on a tree. Most of the nest boxes were occupied by Common Mynas *Acridotheres tristis*, Brahminy Starlings *Sturnia pagodarum*, House Sparrows *Passer domesticus*, and Spotted Owlets *Athene brama*. However, a pair of Indian Scops Owls *Otus bakkamoena* occupied one that was fixed on a Shisham Tree *Dalbergia Sissoo*.

The nest box was found occupied on 23 April 2018 [69] and we subsequently monitored it every day. Opportunistic observations were made from 0600 h to 2200. The pair remained in the nest during most of the day, becoming progressively active from the evening, into the night. They left the nest box for foraging in the night. On 28 April 2018, we saw them collecting dry twigs of plants, and small stones, presumably to construct a nest. After that day, we invariably saw one bird at the nest. The pair aggressively mobbed any other bird in the periphery of the nest. On 02 July 2018, two juveniles were spotted in the nest. They appeared greyish in colour with dark brown horizontal stripes on the belly. Plumage around eyes was absent, and they lacked ear tufts. The bill was greyish in colour, nostrils were not covered with feathering, colour of eyes was bluish and wings were under developed.



69. An Indian Scops Owl occupied a wooden nest box.