

Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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■ Editorial

- NL Award 1997
- The Grey hypocolius
- Get Together at Dedds-Gubbi
- The Bustard and Eucalyptus
- Releasing Birds
- Birds of the Indian Grasslands
- News from the OBC
- Is Man a part of Biodiversity?
- The Policy of the NL



■ Articles

- A Bustard's Nest at Ranibennur, by S.G. Neginhal
- Mango Trees and Ioras, by J.C. Uttangi
- Conservation Strategies for Grassland Birds, by Asad Rahmani
- Some Birds of Nongkhylem, by Chandan Chaudhuri
- Some Unusual Bird Records from Malda District of West Bengal, by Samiran Jha

■ Correspondence

- Delayed Breeding of Red-vented Bulbul, by R.N. Desai
- New Eastern limit of the Bank Myna, by Anwaruddin Choudhury
- Description of a Strange Myna, by Rajat Bhargava
- Waterfowl Census around Surat, Gujarat, by Snehal Patel
- Common Pochard, Tufted Duck and Great Crested Grebe in Kanha, by Ravishanker Kanoje
- Territorial Behaviour of Little Ring Plover, by M.S. Kulkarni
- Third Golden Crow in Hazaribagh, by Bulu Imam
- Flamingo Flocks near Haveri, by Dr J.G. Devadhar and others
- From Kazakhstan to Land of Lord Krishna, by Dr Rajal Thaker and Dr Niyati Maniar
- Thou speak'st well of fools, by Aamir Ali
- An owl in Agram by ZF

■ Announcements

- Experienced Birdwatchers required in Israel
- Oriental Bird Club Small Grants
- Pocket Guide to Common Birds of South Gujarat.

Newsletter Award 1997

In the Jan/Feb issue I announced the NL award for the best article this year. I thought I might mention that what we seek is an article not only crammed with ornithological observations (though these are of course valuable) but one which describes the beauty and the ecological characteristics of the habitat.

I was led to this idea by reading the Preface in the *Nidification of the Birds of the Indian Empire* by Stuart Baker. He says: "I have seldom indulged in ornate or lengthy descriptions of the often beautiful surroundings of nests which are in themselves beautiful objects ... if one indulged in descriptions long in proportion to one's admiration our four proposed volumes would have to be extended into some number more like fourteen".

Though a length of a thousand words was mentioned for our prize winning effort, I am sure the judges would not disqualify one if the limit was exceeded by 200/300 words.

The Grey Hypocolius

FORKTAIL 11 (1996) 33-38, published an article on the grey hypocolius (*Hypocolius ampelinus*) in Kutch by J.K. Tiwari and others. Tiwari very kindly sent me "the only available pictures of this species in India". This species has not been seen in any place in India except in Kutch, and by Salim Ali in Kihim in Raigad District (formerly Kolaba District) in 1930. The photos are reproduced here. Tiwari writes to say that this bird has been seen again in two new localities in Kutch apart from Fulay village.



Grey hypocolius (Hypocolius ampelinus), Ringed & released at Fulay - Kutch Gujarat - Photo J.K. Tiwari

I remember Salim Ali telling me about his encounter with this bird. He pointed out the area where the pair was seen. At first he took them to be grey shrikes. Then he realised that they were rare birds out of place. He rushed back the mile to his house, came back with his gun and managed to collect them.

Get Together at Dodda-Gubbi on 9.2.1997

Through the kindness of Major M.B. Appachu, birdwatchers in Bangalore were able to get together at his resort in Dodda-Gubbi, and a lovely time was had by all. Birds were few and far between on a hot day. T.N. Perumal located a live nest of the purple-rumped sunbird, which looked like a bit of rubbish hanging from a lantana bush; someone sighted a short-toed eagle (identified by the silver colour of the underwings); an adult and a young of the scavenger vulture were scanning the ground for suitable food; a few night herons were roosting on the time-honoured tamarind tree in the Ghorpada Farm. There were black-bellied finch larks, wren warblers, redvented bulbul, pond herons, large pied wagtails and a few more. But altogether a poor show for an area which in earlier years had a wealth of anatidae and charadriidae and a harrier or two to keep them in order. The dry tank bed was of course the reason for the lack of plovers and ducks. Major Appachu has invited us again next year. Let us pray for a normal monsoon.

The Bustard and Eucalyptus

S.G. Neginhal's article on the great Indian bustard indicates that eucalyptus planting in the sanctuary was a mistake. Since the removal of the exotic trees the habitat has regained its indigenous character and we look forward to the return of bustards and blackbucks in Ranibennur. There have been suggestions that in periods of unusual drought bustards break open the eggs to drink the liquid. In extreme cases the survival of the parent takes precedence over the future of the progeny. George Schaller reported that during his studies on the Serengeti Lion he found female lions snatching away morsels of food from the cubs, who starved to death later. This was done, according to Schaller, to ensure that in a drought year when food was scarce, the population of these predators matched the resources available. Lemmings drown themselves, and owls lay fewer eggs when the rodent population is low. Nature's system of Family Planning is harsh, but it works.

Releasing Birds

In the article by Rajat Bhargava, the reference to trade in "released birds" intrigued me. Apparently our "pious" citizens seek to earn merit from the Almighty by purchasing birds and then releasing them back to nature. It is ironic that people encourage the capture and torture of birds by keeping them in small overcrowded cages, and then seek to earn a spiritual reward by releasing them. I suppose the only advantage is that bird traders get some money. But it is time we considered the welfare of birds too. All that they ask is to be left in freedom, and that is the best way to earn the blessings of our common creator.

Birds of the Indian Grasslands

Asad Rahmani has sent a draft of a paper on Birds of the Indian Grasslands. He has analysed the species living in five different types of grasslands — alpine, terai, and semi-arid and shola. This has been possible by a careful study over a long period. The relationship of birds with specific habitats is a fascinating subject. The author has identified 155 species present in Indian grasslands, out of which as many as 113 are resident and breeding within Indian limits.

I reproduce a section headed Conservation Strategy, which shows that saving our avian habitats is important for humans as well.

Indian News from Bulletin 24, Dec '96 of the Oriental Bird Club

- Three adult siberian cranes (*Grus leucogeranus*) landed in Bharatpur on 16 Nov '96.
- 6000 demolella cranes winter in Khichan (150 km north of Jodhpur) every year. The main attraction for the birds is the 500 kg of grain given to the birds every day, by Prakash Jain and volunteer Ratan Lal.
- C. Sashikumar was given a grant of £500 to study birds of the four Sacred Groves of Kannur district of Kerala. 99 species were seen including 78 resident species. "This study helped to gain a better understanding of the importance of Sacred Groves as refuges for many forest birds".
- Prakash Gole with a grant of £500, organised a survey in the northern Western Ghats. 168 bird species were found compared to 232 species once recorded in the area.
- A bristled grassbird (*Chaetornis striatus*) was found singing and displaying near Okhla, Delhi, in August 1996, by Bikram Grewal and others. The previous record was by Julian Donoghue in July 1962.

Is Man a Part of Biodiversity?

(Journal of Ecological Society, Vol.9, 1996, Pp. 1B
Abhimanshree Society, Pune 411 008)

The article by the Editor (Prakash Gole), "Is Man a Part of Biodiversity?" is of great practical importance. The author argues that conservationists who claim that tribals and others allegedly in tune with nature, can be allowed to remain within sanctuaries, are taking a too rosy view of man/beat relationship. Hunter-gatherers and others who lived on the interest and not on the capital of nature are already a vanished species. Once the tribals come in contact with modern civilization and see its material advantages, they are only too eager to exchange their ecological life styles for modern ways of living. Gole argues that birds, beasts and vegetation are safe only within the sanctuaries, and these occupy only 4% of India's land surface. It is for humanity to look after their own species within the confines of the 96% of the land they have, and leave the 4% to nature to work out its own salvation. This may give a jolt to human rights activists who are championing the cause of locals within sanctuaries and protected areas. But it is an intelligent approach to the problem which needs to be discussed.

The Policy of the NL

In the last issue (Jan/Feb 1997) I said that further general comments were not welcome for the moment. However, I reproduce Asmir Ali's letter in the correspondence section because of its intrinsic merit.





A Bustard's Nest at Ranibennur

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I had lost hope of the great Indian bustard's (*Chotiis nigricaps*) future at the Ranibennur Blackbuck Sanctuary, after its habitat deterioration, on account of the large-scale eucalyptus planting undertaken since 1972. Last year (1996) I could see only one bustard against fifteen I had counted in 1974. I had taken a photograph of a bustard's nest with an egg at this sanctuary in May 1976 — perhaps the first photograph since ages anywhere in our country!

If given proper protection, the bird is capable of multiplying in its potential habitats as was evident from what I saw on 15.1.1997. I was thrilled to see a nest with an egg bustard's at Ranibennur.

The Forest officials cleared a plot of 55 ha's of this sanctuary in 1976, of all its dense eucalyptus growth and ripped it with a bulldozer in linear lines at 6 mt apart, to take up plantings of *Hardwickia binata*, *Acacia nilotica*, etc. in the ripped lines. The area also was fenced to prevent grazing by cattle and sheep, which resulted in profuse bushy growth of grass of 30" in height, studded with bushy growth of local species (photo 1). The trench-mound fencing also prevented local predators like the fox, jackal, domestic dogs, etc. from entering this plot. A watchman was kept to look after the plot. Reasonable supply of food also increased in the form of insects, lizards, reptiles etc. The medium-sized grass, coming up uniformly, and the bushes provided the suitable required shelter. The great Indian bustard rightly



The Cracked & Spoiled Bustard Egg

chose this area for nesting, and the habitat was (unintentionally) manipulated for its breeding requirements.

I was told that the forest guard saw this nest on 6.1.1997 while supervising weeding operations. He took prompt action in instructing the villagers not to take away the egg, (presuming it to be of a peahen) for getting it hatched by an incubating village hen. I was also told that the hen bustard was often seen coming to the nest accompanied by a male, (not for incubation, of course). The colour of the egg was originally buff, which was fading then.

When I was here on 15.1.1997, the bustard was not there near the nest. While we were strolling around to see the bushy vegetation, the bustard all of a sudden flushed away in front of us. It was so perfectly camouflaged to bluff the human eyes.

Interestingly this nest was located in winter, whereas Salim Ali says that the bird chiefly nests from March to September. Is this an exceptionally early period for nesting? Can anybody corroborate this winter nesting? The egg size (taken without touching the egg) was $3\frac{1}{2} \times 2\frac{1}{4}$



Creation of grassy lands by removal of eucalyptus



A Bustard's Nest at Ranibennur

I again went to Ranibennur on 26.1.1997 — accompanied by Dr J.C. Uttangi, the octogenarian ornithologist. Alas! the egg had cracked and foul smelling

fluid was oozing out. On close examination it was suspected that the egg had been pecked open the same morning.

Now the dilemma is why did the egg get spoilt after 21 days (6/1 — 26/1) without hatching. (Is there any other record of such a case?). Why did the bustard break open the egg after 21 days? Did it suspect that the egg was not going to hatch? Or was it cracked open by some other creature?

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The evergreen Mango tree with its dense foliage surpasses every other tree in its capacity to attract insect-eating birds. In these mango trees I have on several occasions heard, seen and followed this bewitching, greenish-yellow dumpy little bird, the common lora, (*Aegithina tiphia*). It forages sometimes alone, and at other times with other insect-eating birds like grey tit, tailor bird, red-vented bulbul, minivets and white eyes. Its far reaching whistling calls (*siaubeeg*) and mellow whistles (*peeeou*) alternating with long drawn sibilant whistles (*whewee-Choo*) are unmistakable. Between the male and the female members, the communication is maintained through these wonderful calls. Nesting and breeding takes place frequently between May and July but, occasionally, they attempt to nest during August and September. This year the rains were irregular, scarce and erratic around Dharwad. A pair of loras decided to build their nest in a mango tree quite close to our house on 5.8.1996, but abandoned it on 11.8.1996. The previous night a strong squally wind had struck and turned the nest over. Moreover, this particular mango tree had blossomed strangely in the month of August instead of its usual months of December and January. This queer occurrence was suggestive of microclimatic upsets.

Essentially, the vegetation of this forest edge community of Dharwad consists of grass, shrubs and scattered trees with open ground and meadows. Birds adapted to live in colonies of forest-edge community show a close

Mango Trees and Loras

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relationship with the arrangement of standing crops. Thereby they indicate their preference to certain tree heights and pattern of stem branching and the nature of foliage. Bulbuls, tailor birds, sunbirds and prinia prefer bush heights of not more than 4 feet. While the spotted munia selects bush heights of more than 4 feet. The common lora has adhered to mango trees and its twig forking system. The white-browed bulbul which was so common has abandoned the area because its preferred Lantana bush was eradicated long back. For continued existence of the lora in Dharwad areas, preservation of mango trees is vital. Why the common lora prefers to nest and breed in mango trees is explained in the following paragraphs :

- The diet of the lora is restricted to foliage insects and other Arthropods dwelling within the tree canopy only. It does not come down to feed on ground insects. Therefore the bird is forced to choose tree species whose leaves do not shed periodically. The mango tree fulfills this requirement of the bird because it is an evergreen species and does not shed its leaves annually.
- The greenish-yellow body plumage of non-breeding loras blends superbly with the new green leaves where it remains concealed.
- For placing its cup-like nest made up of fibres and cobwebs, the lora needs a suitable fork in the tree that will support it firmly and safely in a branch that is located

at a height which is at least about 15 to 25 feet from ground level. Several such spots can easily be found in the mango tree because the forking system of twigs is such that a crotchety of 5-6 twigs bifurcate regularly from each node of its stem at different heights in the tree. Added to this opportunity to place the nest safely in the tree the nesting iora can collect cobwebs easily within the area of the tree itself, since many of the spiders found here depend on mango-hoppers.

- The umbrella-like crotchety of 5-6 leaves of the mango tree being specially elongated and slightly folded up along the margin provide a natural groove or a channel at midrib through which rain water during monsoon can trickle down protecting the nest placed underneath this umbrella. It is naturally available in the mango tree and hence the preference.

There are in all five different sub-species of iora, *Aegithina tiphia* found in the Indian sub-continent. Three of them, namely (1) *A. tiphia* (Himalayan), (2) *A. t. septentrionalis* (Pakistan) and (3) *A. t. homei* (Central India), are from Northern India. The other two, namely (4) *A. t. mullicator* (Kerala) and (5) *A. t. deignani* are

from Southern India. These sub-species studied by Salim Ali and Ripley (1987) from Museum specimens, have been identified from colour differences found on the back of non-breeding male individuals. A few non-breeding members of Dharwad iora examined in the field during October showed grey-green between head and tail. It appeared as though the original black colour of the breeding male was gradually fading away and it would remain grey green subsequently. In field identification to differentiate shades of green, pale green and grey green becomes very difficult. For the time being and until further verification of colours of male and female individuals of Dharwad iora are made, the species is deemed to belong to *Aegithina tiphia deignani*.

The Marshall's iora, *Aegithina nigrolutea*, replaces the common iora *Aegithina tiphia tiphia*, as its variant in different States of our country. Its status as a distinct species is not yet fully settled because of voice and colour differences. The "wheel — wheel" calls of Marshall's iora are said to differ from 'we-e-e-tu, we-e-e-tu' calls of common iora and there are some colour differences between the two species. Much work still needs to be done before this anomaly is finally settled.



Conservation Strategies for Grassland Birds

ASAD RAHMANI, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh 202 002, Uttar Pradesh

Habitat destruction is the main cause for the extinction or rarity of a majority of species (Myers 1979). In India, the grasslands are the most neglected and abused ecosystems, with overgrazing playing a major role. India with only 4 per cent of the land area in the world, has 15 per cent of world's cows, 50 per cent of its buffaloes, 4 per cent of its sheep and 15 per cent of its goats (Anonymous 1985). There is no let down in the increase in livestock population. From an estimated 292 million in 1951, India's livestock population increased to 414 million by 1982. On the one hand the livestock population is increasing, while on the other hand grasslands are disappearing. It is estimated that since independence nearly 40% grazing area has been lost to agriculture, industrial and urban expansion and severe overgrazing. Unfortunately, in our country, only cattle is considered as 'wealth' and not the grass on which the life of cattle depend!

Numerous studies at Banaras Hindu University, Central Arid Zone Research Institute and Indian Grassland and Fodder Research Institute have shown increase in grass productivity by simple protection for 3-4 years. For example the production level of 0.1 tonne/ha/annum dry matter from semi-arid natural grasslands can be raised to 3.5 t/ha/annum after three years of protection and further to 4.2 t/ha/annum by eradication of weeds (Singh 1987). Similarly, the terai grasslands are extremely productive, with above ground biomass reaching as high as 1495 g/m² in the absence of livestock grazing (Javed and Rahmani 1992). Results of the studies on carrying capacity of various grasslands show that

with deferred and rotational grazing, 1.5 times more animals can be sustained in the same unit area (Singh 1987). According to Gupta and Ambastht (1979), controlled grazing results in an approximate doubling of herbage production after two years of average rainfall in all classes of range.

The importance of rotational grazing, some control on free ranging animals, total protection of grassland plots to serve as nucleus for seed bank, and genetic improvement of livestock have been emphasized by many workers. Interestingly, protection of fodder producing natural grasslands greatly help in the protection of many endangered bird species such as the great Indian bustard and the lesser florican because these birds breed during the monsoon when such grasslands should be protected to allow the grass to grow. Similarly timely burning or harvesting of the terai grasslands is necessary for protection of many endangered mammals and birds (Rahmani 1992).

The survival of the lesser florican is intimately interlinked with the protection of natural grasslands during the monsoon when this endangered bird breeds (Sankaran *et al.*, 1992.). By the time the grass is ready for harvesting in October or November, the chicks of lesser florican are already fledged and ready to fly to their wintering quarters, so the aim of conservation of florican and grass production does not clash. By developing more grasslands under the florican protection scheme, local people will benefit by getting grass for their cattle (Rahmani, 1987).

Similarly, conservation of the Bengal florican and the production of thatch for villagers have common aim i.e.

proper management of terai grasslands. The Bengal florican lives in humid grasslands of north India, Nepal and the Assam Valley. It breeds in summer, after burning/cutting of grasslands. Protection of endangered fauna of the terai in areas like Chitwan in Nepal (Mishra 1982) and Manas in India (Rahmani *et al.*, 1991) has indirectly benefited local people by providing them thatch grass which had disappeared from other areas due to lack of protection. The swamp francolin, pied harrier (in northeast India only), and Finn's baya, which live in the terai grasslands also benefit by proper management of grasslands. Limited grazing and timely burning/cutting of the terai grasslands vastly improve the breeding success of these endangered birds.

Unfortunately, in our country we do not have a well-defined grazing policy. The free-roaming livestock has access to every possible habitat. It is estimated that almost half of 329 million hectare land mass of India is degraded. Massive afforestation under the Social Forestry Schemes and Wasteland Development Board is being undertaken at a very high cost. However, owing to uncontrolled grazing, administrative neglect and short-sighted planning many of these plantations fail. Creation of these "forests", ostensibly to supply fuel wood and fodder on a sustainable basis to local communities, costs between Rs 5,000 to 10,000 per hectare, depending upon local conditions, to plant and

maintain for the first three years (Vohra 1987). As the cost of planting millions of hectares is prohibitive, greater emphasis should be given for natural regeneration of grass cover. This is not possible without the control on free-ranging animals and the cooperation of local communities. Besides strictly controlling free-ranging animals, the Government of India should encourage development of grassland plots to show to villagers that with proper management, grass productivity could be vastly increased. These grassland plots will also help many threatened species to survive.

In order to avert the ecological disaster facing our country, we have to develop a well-defined grazing policy. As India's foremost grassland ecologist Prof R Misra has said (1987), "It is futile to think of a rise in the cattle population and the white revolution unless the grazing lands of India are conserved scientifically".

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Umling is thirty six kilometers from Guwahati on the Guwahati-Shillong road. From Umling there are two roads which will take you to the Nongkhylliem Wildlife Sanctuary at Lailad under Nongpoh Range of Meghalaya Forest Department.

It is advisable to take the road near the culvert (at Umling) which runs parallel to a stream. This stream will be on your left until you reach the wooden culvert which you have to cross to reach the forest rest house. The FRH is a little over a kilometer from this point.

This stream winds its way to meet the Umtru river on whose bank the sanctuary is situated. It has many shaded patches, which are ideal forktail territory. We actually saw from the car a blackbacked forktail taking off from the edge of the water. Later we saw the bird at another point of the stream and noted the features that identify it. There were a number of Satpate *Aesculus assamica* with inflorescence (a terminal spike) along the bank.

Much of the sanctuary has been extensively planted with teak *Tectona grandis* which is exotic to the area. The teak like *Cryptomeria japonica* in Darjeeling hills is the bane of the birdwatchers in Nongkhylliem. The weeds which have colonized much of the area, as they have in many places in the country, are Ashoke lata *Eupatorium odoratum*, *Mikania scandens* and, to a lesser extent, the goat weed *Ageratum conyzoides*.

Some Birds of Nongkhylliem

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The place was very moist for the month of December (we were there from 10-15 December 1995). The trees were still in full foliage. The visibility was decidedly poor for birdwatching. We found the area around the bungalow best for birding. It has trees like *Anthocephalus cadamba*, *Cephalanthus occidentalis*, *Duabanga sonneratioides*, *Terminalia myriocarpa* which did not have very dense foliage; therefore the birds could be observed better than at all the other places. The best time to visit the place would be from the middle of February to the middle of April.

The bungalow is built on an eminence and we made the paths around the bungalow, and the road to Lailad on the other side of the stream, our beat. A list of the birds that we saw during our stay is given below.

Family : Accipitridae

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|---|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| 1 | Shikra | <i>Accipiter badius</i> |
| 2 | Crested serpent eagle | <i>Spilornis cheela</i> |

Family : Phasianidae

- | | | |
|---|-----------------|----------------------|
| 3 | Red jungle fowl | <i>Gallus gallus</i> |
|---|-----------------|----------------------|

Family : Columbidae

- | | | |
|---|--------------|-------------------------------|
| 4 | Spotted dove | <i>Streptopelia chinensis</i> |
|---|--------------|-------------------------------|

Family : Alcedinidae

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 5 | Whitebreasted kingfisher | <i>Halcyon amythinus</i> |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|

Family : Capitonidae

- 6 Lineated barbet *Megalaima lineata*

Family : Picidae

- 7 Rufous piculet *Sasia ochracea*
 8 Blacknaped green woodpecker *Picus panus*
 9 Small yellownaped woodpecker *Picus chlorocephus*
 10 Lesser goldenbacked woodpecker *Dinopium benghalense*
 11 Fulvousbreasted pied woodpecker *Picoides macul*

Family : Laniidae

- 12 Greybacked shrike *Lanius lephronotus*

Family : Oriolidae

- 13 Blackheaded oriole *Oriolus xanthornus*

Family : Dicruridae

- 14 Bronzed drongo *Dicrurus aeneus*
 15 Lesser racket-tailed drongo *Dicrurus remifer*
 16 Haircrested drongo *Dicrurus hottentottus*

Family : Sturnidae

- 17 Hill myna *Gracula religiosa*

Family : Corvidae

- 18 Green magpie *Cissa chinensis*
 19 Jungle crow *Corvus macrorhynchos*

Family : Campephagidae

- 20 Scarlet minivet *Panicrocatus lammeus*

Family : Irenidae

- 21 Common iora *Aegithina tiphi*
 22 Goldfronted chloropsis *Chloropsis aurifrons*
 23 Goldmantled chloropsis *Chloropsis cochinchinensis*

Family : Pycnonotidae

- 24 Blackheaded yellow bulbul *Pycnonotus melanicterus*
 25 Redvented bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer*
 26 Brownsared bulbul *Hypsipetes flavatus*

Family : Muscicapidae (Timalinae)

- 27 Blackgorgeted laughing thrush *Garrulax pectoralis*

Family : Muscicapidae (Muscicapinae)

- 28 Redbreasted flycatcher *Muscicapa palva*
 29 Greyheaded flycatcher *Culicicapa ceylonensis*

Family : Muscicapidae (Sylvinae)

- 30 Tailor bird *Orthotomus sutorius*
 31 Yellowbrowed leaf warbler *Phylloscopus inornatus*

Family : Muscicapidae (Turdinae)

- 32 Magpie robin *Copsychus saularis*
 33 Shama *Copsychus malabaricus*
 34 Plumbeous redstart *Rhyacornis fuliginosus*
 35 Blackbacked forktail *Enicurus immaculatus*
 36 Whitecapped redstart *Chaimarornis leucocephalus*
 37 Blue whistling thrush *Myiophonus caeruleus*

Family : Sittidae

- 38 Chestnutbellied nuthatch *Sitta castanea*

Family : Motacillidae

- 39 Pied wagtail *Motacilla alba*

Family : Nectariniidae

- 40 Yellowbacked sunbird *Aethopyga siparaja*

Family : Zosteropidae

- 41 White-eye *Zosterops palpebrosa*



Some Unusual Bird Records From Malda District of West Bengal

SAMIRAN JHA, C/o Nirmal Kumar Jha, Pranta Pally P.O., District Malda, West Bengal 732 101

Occurrence of Blue Rock Thrush (*Monticola solitarius*) in Malda District, West Bengal

On 4th April 1989, at 5.30 pm I was birding behind the Malda Railway Station where the damaged wagons were deposited. The place was very peaceful and devoid of any human disturbance. Suddenly, I watched a black bird larger than a bulbul but smaller than a common myna, rise from a wagon to catch an insect. After catching the insect it returned to its place. I came to the conclusion that it was a blue rock thrush (*Monticola solitarius*). The glossy dark blue colour and the absence of any brown or fulvous colour suggested that it was in its breeding plumage. According to the Handbook and Synopsis this thrush breeds between 1200 to 4000 msl in barren rocky hill sides from Chitral to Garhwal, and winters

from the Himalayan foothills, including Sikkim, Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh, south through India, Sind, Bangladesh and Assam; also in the hills of Sri Lanka. But it is absent or very scarce in the flat country (Gangetic plain, coastal Tamilnadu and coastal Sri Lanka) and there is no definite record from central and lower Bengal. Later, I visited the place several times but the bird was not to be seen.

Further Eastern Range Extension of Redtailed Chat (*Oenanthe xanthopyrma*)

On 20th October 1989, I watched a small bird, brownish in colour, on the roof of my neighbour's house. Its size was that of a sparrow. I thought it might be a female pied bush chat (*Sexioola caprata*). But in the winters of 1990 and 1991 I

had many opportunities to observe it from a very close distance. The bird was a bit larger than a sparrow but rather slim; the upper part was grey-brown and a distinctive white supercilium distinguished it from *Saxicola caprata*. The rump and upper tailcover was rufous or reddish brown clearly visible during flight. It was very busy running and catching insects and during intervals it was shivering its tail like a redstart. The species was surely a redtailed chat (*Oenanthe xanthopygma*). According to the Handbook and Synopsis these birds breed in northern Afghanistan and north Quetta, winters over most of Pakistan from N.W.F.P. and the northern foothills, south to Sind, Rajasthan (Mt. Abu) and northern Gujarat. But I found this species to be a regular visitor in small numbers in Malda district, West Bengal. In my opinion this is the first sighting of this species in eastern India.

A whitebellied sea-eagle (*Haliaeetus leucogaster*) in Malda District, West Bengal

On 3rd January 1994, I was watching birds at Sagardighi Fisheries which is about 6 km from Malda town. Around 10a.m I saw a black and white eagle chasing a Pallas' fishing eagle (*Haliaeetus leucoryphus*) which is a regular winter visitor at Sagardighi. I identified it as a whitebellied sea-eagle. The bird was larger than the common pariah kite (*Milvus migrans*) and slightly shorter than the Pallas' fishing eagle. The upperside of the wing was brown and the tail was brown with a conspicuous white ring. Again on 6th January, I saw it near Rabindra Bhavan. It was coming from the western side and it could be the same bird since Sagardighi is only about one and half km away. It was hovering over a pond near Rabindra Bhavan and suddenly dived in the water. It was able to catch a fish and flew away in the same direction from which it had come. According to the "Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan" (Ali, S. and Ripley, S.D., 1989) these birds are seen near the sea coast, tidal creeks and estuaries. Occasionally they are seen a few miles inland along tidal rivers and at fresh water lakes. So the record of this species in Malda district is noteworthy since it is located some 450 km away from the nearest sea coast.

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[The "conspicuous white ring" on a brown tail makes this identification doubtful] Editor



CORRESPONDENCE

A CASE OF AN UNUSUALLY DELAYED BREEDING ACTIVITY OF THE RED-VENTED BULBUL *Pycnonotus cafer*. R.N. DESAI, Vivekanand Nagar, Vidyagiri, Dharwad 580 004 (Karnataka)

Eventhough the breeding activity of the red-vented bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer* in Dharwad (15° 28'N) is observed from late February to May (Desai, 1993 and 1995), surprisingly a pair of bulbuls was observed constructing a

nest on a beam underneath the ceiling of the corridor of our Zoology Department Karnatak Science College, Dharwad on 18th August, 1995. Two eggs were laid on 21st which hatched on 3rd September, 1995. The incubating birds were much smaller (85 mm long) compared to the ones (about 180 mm long) observed by me during my earlier studies (Desai, 1993 and 1995). The food of the chicks consisted of only small larvae and nymphs of insects.

Interesting findings of the present study are : (I) a considerable delayed breeding activity of this pair of *P.cafer* in Dharwad and; (II) conspicuously small size of the incubating birds.

The onset of breeding season of *P.cafer* and for that matter birds in general, varies according to their latitudinal distribution. *P.cafer* in southern India breeds during February-August while it breeds during May and June in northern India (Whistler, 1941). In Dharwad it breeds between late February and May, and rarely in the first week of June (Desai, 1993 and 1995). *P.cafer* of Kanha Tiger Reserve of central India (22° 17'N) starts breeding from late May onwards (Newton et al., 1996). The date clearly indicates that the breeding activity is the function of the latitudinal distribution of this bird species and is adjusted in such a way that the nestlings are hatched when the habitat is rich in a variety of fruits, insects and their larvae and feeding of the nestlings is not a problem at all. Whistler's (1941) observation on the breeding activity of *P.cafer* in August might be a case of breeding by the young ones. Lack (1968) says "young birds start breeding only when the older ones complete their activity". In the present study the breeding activity so late after the season, and the small-size of the birds incubating the eggs and feeding the chicks, suggest that it is a case of the young ones that have commenced their breeding activity after the older ones have completed their turn.

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NEW EASTERN LIMIT OF DISTRIBUTION OF THE BANK MYNA. ANWARUDDIN GHOSHUR, Deputy Secretary to the Government of Assam, Cooperation Department, Dispur, Guwahati 781 007

The Bank myna *Acridotheres ginginianus* is a common bird all over northern India and its known eastern limit of distribution was around central Bangladesh (90°E

Handbook). Subsequently its eastern range was extended upto Kamrup district in Assam (91° 45'E : Synopsis). I observed a small population in Pani-Dihing area (now a Bird Sanctuary) of Sibsagar district which further extended its range by about 300 km (94° 35'E; Choudhury: Forktail 1991).

On 14 September, 1993, at 1.20 pm, I observed a lone myna riding on the back of a grazing cow in the 'Development Area' (Bordoloi Nagar) of Tinsukia town (95° 25'E). This further extended its eastern limit by more than a hundred kilometers and is also the easternmost recorded site for the species. The bird was obviously a straggler to the area as no others were seen during more than two years of bird study in the district. However, it should be noted that in 1994-95, some captive Bank mynas were set free from the cages of a seller from north India by the Forest department and by NGOs at Gujjan. These birds have also survived. But the lone bird sighted in 1993 was not in any way connected with the released ones.

The Bank myna has been recorded by me in many other localities of Assam as well as in one locality of Nagaland. But everywhere it is extremely rare. A small number breeds in Guwahati city and around the wetlands of Pani-Dihing Bird Sanctuary.



DESCRIPTION OF A STRANGE MYNA. RAJAT BHARGAVA, Centre for Wildlife & Ornithology, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh 202 002, UP

During a visit to Meerut I came across a strange specimen of a myna which appeared to have similarities with the Pied myna (*Sturnus contra*) and with the Bank myna (*Acridotheres ginginianus*). I suspect it to be a hybrid of the two species. On sending the pictures of this bird to BNHS for identification, Mr Humayun Abdulali commented. "Common myna without white tips to the outer tail or on wing — just *Acridotheres tristis* — why a hybrid". Since I had seen the bird from close quarters, I feel confident that it was a hybrid of a Pied and Bank myna.

Features similar to Pied myna :

- The small visible whitish ear patch in this bird was very similar to that of a pied myna.
- The greyish-white upper tail coverts found only in pied mynas.
- The orange-red colour of the orbital skin is not present in the common myna.
- The half white pattern of the shoulders resemble the half made pattern in pied myna.
- The absence of mirrors and excessive white tip to outer tail features is absent, an indication that the specimen was a hybrid of pied and bank myna.

Features similar to Bank myna

- The orangish-red orbital skin colour which is seen clearly is very similar in pattern to that of the bank myna.



- The outer tail feather colour was faunish (biscuit) and not white, which is a feature of the Bank myna.
- The head resembled that of a bank myna. Also the bird was the size of a bank myna.
- The colour of this bird was greyish-black (ash) brown, similar to that of a bank myna and not like the colour of the common myna which is more brownish than greyish.
- The legs of the bird were orangish, similar to the bank myna.
- The breast and belly (abdomen) had an ash colour, unlike that of the common myna. The colour of the under tail coverts was not white as in common and pied myna.

It was caught by a trapper of Sadar Bazar, Meerut, in March 1995. The trappers in this place are specialists in ornamental birds. Common mynas, bank mynas, pied mynas and brahminy mynas were caught in large numbers for export before the ban, but now for the pet trade.

Since these birds are caught mainly for releasing, they are sold at a low price. The maximum catch of these birds can be obtained in the roosting sites. Bank myna and pied myna commonly roost in sugarcane or other crop fields and are caught by the funnel net at night. Common mynas are mainly caught by latex as many of their roosting sites are on trees around Meerut, and the funnel net cannot be operated on trees. Also when mynas are caught in crop fields the maximum birds caught are pied and bank mynas which forage together. Common mynas are not generally observed among these two species.

This particular bird was caught with other pied and bank mynas which indirectly confirm it to be either a pied or a bank myna and not a common myna. No common myna was present in that night catch.

The call of this particular bird was similar to a pied myna's. It was kept with another pied myna as a companion for acclimatization.

According to Dr Asad R Rahmani of the Centre for Wildlife & Ornithology, the bird appears to be a hybrid between the pied and bank myna, from the coloured pictures shown to him. I hope the points mentioned regarding this bird go in favour of it being an aberrant form of pied myna or most likely a hybrid between a pied and bank mynas.



WATERFOWL CENSUS AROUND SURAT, GUJARAT.
SNEHAL PATEL, 81, Sarjan Society Athwalines, Near Parle Point, Surat 395 007

Our Club carried out a Waterfowl Census at 11 sites this year. All the seven sites counted in the previous years were included. In addition, four new sites were surveyed. The highlight of the census this year was a weir on the river Tapi, near Surat. The new site supported about 35,000 waterfowl, which was extraordinary despite the disturbance along the shore. The area upstream of the weir, showed a very large population of twenty-eight thousand coots, where water is fresh; whereas the area downstream of the weir was dominated by ducks where the water is brackish. For the first time, such a large concentration of waterfowl has been observed, and from just 3 km of the river.

The other important site counted this year was Ukai Dam on the river Tapi 105 kms east of Surat. This reservoir (totalling about 200 sq km could, of course, not be completely covered. However, in the small region covered (less than 5%), some 7000 waterfowl were observed, of which there were 4000 pochards and 2000 tufted duck.

This year a higher number of waterfowl were observed compared to previous years at all lakes in the South Gujarat region. No explanation, however, can be made for this. In fact many species of duck were observed at lakes, where they have not been observed in the last ten years.

However, some hundred people have started trapping these birds using crude traps. The weir being located in a very popular part of the city, is constantly disturbed. Efforts are being made by our club to prevent this poaching and provide protection with the help of the Forest department. I am pleased to inform the readers of our Newsletter that a Forest department official accompanied us in plain clothes. Coots trapped by fishermen were bought at the selling rate of 35 rupees, and the trappers were caught red-handed and booked for trapping and selling wild birds under the Wild Life Act. Since then the trapping activity has decreased.



COMMON POCHARD, TUFTED DUCK AND GREAT CRESTED GREBE IN KANHA TIGER RESERVE.
RAVISHANKAR KANOJE, Forest Ranger (Kanha Tiger Reserve), Mukki 481 111, Dist Balaghat (MP)

On 3rd March, 1996, I was watching birds at Samnapur irrigation tank (22° 8'N and 80° 44'E) in the Buffer Zone at the Southern boundary of the Kanha National Park. Samnapur tank is spread over 15 hectares and is 3 metres deep. It is situated in the village Samnapur at the foothill of Bhaisan Ghat.

I saw two similar black and white ducks, one with a chestnut head, and the other with a black head, among little grebes, little cormorants, great cormorants, garganey and coots. On careful observation I found that the duck with the chestnut head and neck had a black breast, uppertail and undertail coverts and bill, light grey body with darker back.

The duck with black head with purple gloss had a contrasting black and white plumage, had a limp occipital tuft too. The former was a common pochard (*Aythya ferina*) and the latter was a tufted duck (*Aythya fuligula*).

The common pochard and tufted duck are winter migrants arriving in the mid-October and mostly gone by the end of March. Both winter in North India decreasingly southwards in the Peninsula to Karnataka.

On 9th March, 1996, again I happened to spot one tailless brown waterfowl quite different from the ducks, cormorants and coots. It was swimming with an erect white long slender neck. The triangular head had a prominent black crest, chestnut and brown ear tufts and a black line from the eye to the bill. This bird was a great crested grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*).

The great crested grebe is a winter visitor in small numbers to Northern India from Sindh to North East Assam and Manipur, South through Rajasthan to Gujarat on the West and Orissa on the East (Ali and Ripley, 1989).

Mundkur and Prevez (1986) rediscovered the breeding site of this species in Gujarat. Bealite (1995), Dhanwatay (1987) and Haribal (1984), sighted this grebe at Bombay, Nagpur and Tadoba respectively in Maharashtra. Raju *et al.*, (1984) reported great crested grebe to occur at Vizag district in Andhra Pradesh. Thus the wintering range of the great crested grebe has been extended upto 18° North latitude to the south.

The common pochard, tufted duck and great crested grebe are the first records of the Kanha Tiger Reserve.



TERRITORIAL BEHAVIOUR OF LITTLE RINGED PLOVER (*CHARADRIUS DUBIUS*). M.S. KULKARNI, (Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh), 207, Sreenidhi Apartment, Street No.8, Habshiguda, Hyderabad

During the waterfowl census on Pocharam lake, district Medak, A.P., I was attracted by the typical territorial behaviour of a little ringed plover. This lone bird was still in its breeding plumage. It was feeding on insects near the water. A few other L.R. plovers, white wagtails, little stints and common sandpipers were also seen trying to feed near this particular bird. This little ringed plover was constantly driving away other birds and sometimes running right upto them to make them fly away. This behaviour, for protection of its feeding area, was noticed for a considerable time till a female marsh harrier (*Circus aeruginosus*) disturbed all the shore birds, as well as the ducks on the water.



THIRD GOLDEN CROW IN HAZARIBAGH, SOUTH BIHAR. *BULU IMAM, Regional Convener, Indian National Trust for Art & Cultural Heritage (INTACH), Coordinator CHIPKO (Human Ecology Centre), "Sanskriti" Sacred Grove, Village Dipugarha, P.O. Hazaribag 825 301, Bihar, India*

It might interest your readers to know that the first sighting of a Golden Crow was exactly ten years ago in the same place; the date toddy palm tree at the bottom of the garden in our estate The Grove, on the north eastern fringe of the Hazaribagh Town next to Canary Hill. It was sighted by my wife and then collected by me with a .22 rifle and the pelt was sent to the Bombay Natural History Society, where Mr Humayun Abdulali very kindly had it mounted and placed in the BNHS Ornithological collection. A detailed report dated 8.11.1987 was sent by me to the BNHS.

Again the bird in this light golden colour presenting a perfect specimen of territorial albinism was reported by me to the BNHS after sighting by me and my wife on April 7, 1993, in the same spot. The bird was again sighted today, 10th February 1997, by my sons Justin and Jason but we failed to collect it.

Further, a curious coincidence. On 14th April 1993, I and my family saw a golden crow pheasant with white wing-tips on the Siwanee River about ten kilometers north of the Hazaribagh Town on State Highway No.33. The Hazaribagh area has produced several white tigers and tigresses, as well as black panthers which favour the rocky hills of Rajgir.

Can there be some truth in the speculation that where the Indian peninsula joined the Asian plate, a new form of flora and fauna have sprung up? The Hazaribagh — Rajgir area exactly marks the joining of the peninsular with the Asian plate! Also, three varieties of the drongo are also found at this strategic spot!



FLAMINGO FLOCKS NEAR HAVERI. *Dr J.G. DEVADHAR, Mrs MADHURI DEVADHAR of Haveri and Sri S.G. NEGINHAL (Retd IFS) of Hubli and Dr J.C. Uttangl of Dharwad*

On 19th January 1997, we decided to survey four of the most important irrigation tanks located in areas of Haveri, Hanganal and Bankapur Taluks of Dharwad district, namely 1. Heggeri tank o Haveri, 2. Heggeri tank of Naregal, 3. Irrigation tank of Akkialur and 4. Irrigation tank of Neeralgi. Since these tanks touch one another and are at a short distance from the main road, they are easily approachable and two of them, namely, Naregal and Akkialur tanks are perennial being fed by a canal while Heggeri and Neeralgi are seasonal. In these two shallow watered tanks we noticed the presence of flamingos (*Phoenicopterus roseus*) during the entire census period. As many as 27 were counted from

Heggeri tank and nearly 35 were found feeding along the shore edge of Neeralgi. During our earlier visits to these tanks on 5th and 12th January 1997, no flamingos were seen.

Associated with these longlegged rosy coloured waders were 6 European storks in Neeralgi tank. Those in Heggeri tank were in the company of 2 painted storks and one white spoonbill. In Naregal and Akkialur tanks we noticed a large congregation of barheaded geese (*Anser indicus*).

The early arrival of flamingos to tanks of our Southern region in mid-January is surprising. Normally they appear in the months of April and May when the first few showers produce fresh planktonic food in the puddles. With the help of their hooked bills immersed in shallow waters of these temporary pools and puddles they suck water through the lamellae in the bill to filter out shrimps and other crustaceans that hatch in the waters of early and productive summer rains. The distribution of flamingos is sporadic depending on the rainy season and availability of their specialized planktonic food. The inadequate rainy season the district of Dharwad experienced last year 1996, may be the reason for the arrival of flamingos to the waters of Neeralgi and Heggeri tanks as early as mid-January 1997.



FROM KAZAKHSTAN TO THE LAND OF LORD KRISHNA. *Dr RAAJAL THAKER and Dr NIYATI MANIAR, 3A Manav Flats, Near HLCC, Ahmedabad 9*

On 21.11.1996, we were driving from Dwarka to Jamnagar after birdwatching trip to Beyl Dwaraka in the Western coastal region in the Gujarat State.

About 20 kms from Dwarka, on the state highway, there is a place called Charakela pump. Here, Tata Chemicals have put a waterpump for their factory at Mithapur. Sea water is pumped into pans and forms large bodies of water. Water is collected on either side of state highway attracting large number of birds like pelicans, flamingos, reef heron, avocets, gulls, terns, black-necked grebe etc. There is also about three story high gridline on one side of the road. Birds are seen frequently flying over the water.

I found this dead dalmatian pelican at this site. On inquiring about it, it was found dead by locals on 19.11.1996. There were no external marks of injuries and exact reason for its death was not known. The bird might have hit the grid





Dead dalmatian pelican with the ring (shown by arrow)

one while crossing over. I also found one dead brown headed gull and injured juvenile flamingo (It could not be saved despite treatment).

The aluminium ring had following inscription on it.

АЛТАНФОНЖЕ
KAZAKHSTAN KKK 0216
ALMATY 32

This bird was ringed at Kazakhstan and ended its journey in India - in the land of Lord Krishna.



THOU SPEAK'ST WELL OF FOOLS. AAMIR ALI, 14 ch de la Tourelle, 1209 Geneva, Switzerland

I read with admiration the letters of V. Santharam, Rahul Purandare and Krys Kazmierczak about improving the Newsletter, checking the information provided by your contributors, and generally making the articles fit for being 'cited as references even in scientific journals'.

But my admiration was tempered with some alarm. I have been a reader of the Newsletter since it began and have watched how its scientific standards have mounted to levels which would have been inconceivable even a decade ago. On my regular visits to India, I have also been astonished at the rapid growth of the interest in bird-watching and in the knowledge and appreciation of birds.

Your Newsletter has been an important stimulus in all this. I would be sorry if it became so serious and scientific a journal that it alienated bumbling amateurs like myself, who get tremendous joy out of bird-watching, sometimes get our identifications wrong, jump to wrong conclusions, welcome criticism and correction but know that we will never reach the standards justifiably demanded by scientific journals.

Could we not achieve a compromise? Have the serious and scientific articles together in one Section of the Newsletter, and have the casual bird-watcher's outpourings, which occasionally do no more than encourage the enthusiasm of other amateurs, in a separate Section. Scientists would know that these are not the stuff that should be quoted without checking. If the editor is in a position to make corrections, he would, of course, do this. Would it be terribly difficult to tell a serious, scholarly article from one that is written merely because one wants to share the pleasure of one's experience — experience that may be emotional rather than scientific? I am sure this would not be as easy as I make it sound, but it may not be impossible.



AN OWL IN AGRAM

Last evening (10-3-97) I had a delightful walk in the Agram grounds. There was a fairly strong breeze, but not strong enough to dissuade birds from coming out into the open. My favourite, the black-winged kite was on the wing. I must have seen it hovering over various spots a dozen times between 4.30 to 6 p.m. but not once was it able to procure a meal. It must be tiring for the bird to hover for such long periods and remain unrewarded at the end.

There were a large number of black and ashy drongos in the fields where the grass had been cut and burnt in the usual controlled manner. There were hardly any birds on the ground except for mynas but I got an exceptionally good view of a female pied bush chat. The sun was behind me at 5 p.m. and the bird swaying on the branch of a shrub, quite violently when there was a gust of wind. It is remarkable how firmly passerines can cling to branches with their front and hind toe locked on the perch. The colours of the female are most appealing, brown with very well defined white stripes, sober and no vulgar show about them.

There were swallows, Brahminy kites and pariah kites in the sky and in the far distance over the Balundur tank a cloud of white egrets moved back and forth.

When I started for home the sun was in my eyes, but on an ancient Banyan I saw a group of crows attempting in their usual way to disturb an object on the branch. I realised that it was a largish owl that the crows were attempting to harry. Two crows, one on each side were within 6 inches of the owl, but they dare not come any closer. And the owl looked absolutely at peace, certain that its reputation was enough to keep the attackers from engaging in physical combat.

I circled the tree cautiously and came right below the branch where the owl was perched. It peered at me intently, and craned its neck in my direction, but gave no indication of being upset at being observed. It had a round face, but no white facial disk. It had no ear tufts. The tail was almost non-existent, but such as there was, had a slight bifurcation. Its colour, overall, seemed to be grey-brown. I think it was the mottled wood owl (*Strix ocellata*).

Z.F.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

EXPERIENCED BIRDWATCHERS REQUIRED 1997 Autumn Migration Survey, Israel

During the Autumn, over a period of 45 days, some 806,000 migrating birds were counted passing over Israel. It included 580,000 raptors of 30 different species, 250,000 white storks and 36,000 white pelicans.

We would like to invite you to join an international team of birdwatchers and be a part of the annual Raptor, Stork and Pelican Migration Survey. The survey will take place at the northern valleys of Israel. During that time, you will experience the busiest migration route on the western Palearctic.

Minimum participation period will be 4 weeks. We will provide lodging and food during the survey. The cost of travel to and from Israel will be covered by the participant.

If you are an experienced birdwatcher, capable and willing to watch migration for a minimum of 10 hours a day, please contact us as soon as possible, enclosing details of your previous experience and c.v.

Dan Allon

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ORIENTAL BIRD CLUB SMALL GRANTS

Small grants of upto \$500/- are offered for conservation work and conservation awareness projects. Strong preference will be given to Oriental nationals, and grants may be awarded to fund Oriental nationals working with people from outside the region.

Applications will be considered at any time during the year. You should apply a few months ahead of your study to allow time for your proposal to be considered.

(For further information on these awards, application forms or for help in developing a project, please write to Melanie Heath, the Conservation Officer, OBC, C/o The Lodge, Sandy, Beds SG19 2DL, UK)

POCKET GUIDE TO COMMON BIRDS OF SOUTH GUJARAT

The Nature Club, Surat, has published a small pocket book with colour illustrations of 34 common birds found around South Gujarat. Each bird is described briefly in local language Gujarati, as well as in English.

The aim is to make children and others identify the birds they see around them.

These books are sold at Rs 15/- in Schools, Colleges, Clubs and through Book Shops.

Interested readers should write to Snehal Patel, Nature Club, 81 Sarjan Society, Surat 395 007, Gujarat for a complimentary copy.

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Cover : Ringed teal (*Actonetta leucophaya*). Occurs in Bolivia and South Brazil to North Argentina and Uruguay. In the face of continuous loss of habitat and hunting pressure many species of teals are declining in numbers.

Photo : S. Sridhar, 1998



Get Together at Dodda-Gubbi on 9.2.1997



There is no purer definition of birdsong than the skylark's (above left). The grey partridge (above right) is most often seen in a convoy, and the tree sparrow (right) is more graceful than the common sparrow

Tree sparrows under threat

Martin Wainwright

BRTAIN'S humblest songbird, along with other once-common birds, is facing devastation from agro-chemicals, according to a new report.

A survey commissioned by six countryside groups, including the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, has found the tree sparrow to be uncomfortably close to facing the Last Tweet. Numbers of the small chestnut bird collapsed by 89 per cent between 1969 and 1994, according to the British Trust for Ornithology. The grey partridge is down by 82 per cent and the skylark by 58 per cent.

The decline in birds whose abundance has never before been questioned triggered the inquiry by the Government's joint nature conservation committee, which will publish the findings later this month. Ornithologists contributing to the document blame the use of insecticides and weedkiller sprays for destroying the food

chain upon which the birds depend.

Insecticide dosing of farmland rose from 5 per cent of crop in 1970 to 90 per cent in 1990. In the same period herbicide use rose from an average 1.3 sprayings of a field annually to 2.5.

"These birds are still spread over wide areas but are becoming thin on the ground," said RSPB researcher Andy Evans, who helped to draw up the report. He and colleagues from English Nature, the Game Conservancy and the RSPB also blame the decline on the loss of hedges — ideal for shelter and nesting — and a shift from spring to autumn tilling, which leaves less cover in winter.

Recommendations to the conservation committee include a return to spring tilling, and an arable incentive scheme of enhanced grants to allow tangled retreats for vulnerable species to be left alone.

Global warming was being blamed last week for the devastation of another of the world's



most plentiful bird species, the sooty shearwater, which regularly flies to Ireland and Britain from habitats in California, South America and Australia. US scientists say that warmer seas have reduced the plankton that forms its staple diet.

The findings suggest that 4 million shearwaters vanished between 1987 and 1994. Dick Viet of Washington state university said: "This may be the first real evidence for a major natural change as a result of global warming."



Audubon's Marsh in France Endangered

CHARLES TRUEHEART



JOHN James Audubon, America's greatest observer, collector and painter of native bird life, used to neglect his studies in school so he could roam the fields and marshes around his French home town of Coueron.

Every evening, according to one of Audubon's biographers, "he would return with his lunch basket laden with the spoils of the day - birds' nests, eggs and curiosities of every sort destined for the museum into which his room had already been transformed."

Audubon left Coueron and France in 1806 to make his name in the young nation across the ocean, most famously with his majestic book *Birds Of America*. But the marsh that first inspired his art and his vocation still clucks and twitters in the estuary of the Loire Rivier, far downstream from the great chateaux.

Hawk and heron, teal and lapwing make a habitat in the tall brush and skimpy trees. But like many an unglamorous wetland in the great river estuaries of France, the Audubon Marsh is in danger of ecological extinction.

Tucked between Nantes and St. Nazaire, two once-great but now stagnant port cities on France's Atlantic coast, the 750-acre marsh that wraps around Coueron has been designated for future use as a dump for the nasty muck drained from the bottom of the Loire ship channel that serves the ports. Were that to happen, the flora and fauna that eke out a living where young Audubon played hooky would be rubbed out. The great birdman, at a guess, would be dismayed.

That is the reed at which Michel Chomienna is grasping as he seeks to protect the marsh from what he sees as an ill-considered economic development strategy and to preserve it as a piece of cultural heritage.

"Audubon has been completely forgotten in France," Chomienna said - just as his French roots are largely unknown in the United States. "Yet the French are proud of their contributions to humanity's 'grandeur' and convinced of the notion of 'French genius.' Our leaders have to recognize that you can't neglect the memory of a man who brought so much to the American nation."

Audubon was born Jean-Jacques Fougere Audubon in 1785 in what is now Haiti. His father was a French seaman, his mother an American Creole. He was taken to France in 1789, and, growing up here by the marsh, he began to draw birds at 15. When he was 20, he emigrated to the United States. His father set him up in business there, but Audubon soon

abandoned it for full-time bird portraiture and equally tireless promotion of his work.

To draw attention to the threatened marsh, Chomienna, a Coueron resident and former Nantes-St. Nazaire port authority executive, is trying to drum up a little pride in the illustrious native son - and to elicit the right kind of pressure from, among others, the president of France and the National Audubon Society of the United States.

France lags far behind its neighbors in its environmental protections. "One can say categorically that the French detest nature", French ornithologists Jean-Francois Terrasse told *Le Nouvel Observateur* magazine. "Those who protect it are always accused of being against people."

The European Union recently said it would pursue legal action against France for non-compliance with European directives in the area of bird-life conservation. Despite pressures from Brussels, the French government has yet to certify many of the most important wetlands in France as zones worthy of special protection, preferring to keep them available for potential industrial, shipping, nuclear power and other development.

Under pressure from the port and other pro-development politicians, the French government thus far has excluded the Audubon Marsh from protective zoning.

Lots of people in Coueron, Chomienna allowed, may not care much about bird habitats or Jean-Jacques Audubon. But they like a pristine place such as Audubon Marsh to fish and catch small game.

A succulent symbol of Francoavian relations is a ouning of the French southwest called the ortolan. No bigger than a child's fist, it is trapped, fattened in the dark, dashed with Armagnac, roasted and eaten whole, bones and all.

It is illegal in France to traffic in the ortolan, an endangered species. Nevertheless, people do. The current prime minister, Alain Juppe, spoke whimsically in a recent *Elle* magazine interview of having done a "wicked" thing: eaten contraband ortolans at a recent five-hour lunch-just to go along with a local custom, he said.

As they fly against such deeply rooted conventions, the people of Coueron are hoping that Audubon Marsh might be a modest attraction to ecotourists, birders and cyclists passing through this pleasantly level part of France. Chomienna and the other Audubon Marsh people have launched a Web site - <http://www.audubon-in-net.fr/> - to disseminate information about the endangered marsh.

Courtesy - *The Washington Post*