

a 22x wide-angle lens and 8 x 32 Leica binoculars at a distance of perhaps 50-100 m (some of the birds were further away). Light conditions were good, with the early morning sun coming from just behind my right shoulder.

After consulting *BIRDS OF THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT* by Grimmett *et al.* (1998), I was confident enough to identify the birds as grey-headed lapwings (*Vanellus cinereus*), which according to that book had not been recorded in Andhra Pradesh before.

On Friday February 23, at a different site, just east of Machilipatnam, 5 more grey-headed lapwings were seen, in groups of 2 and 3 in paddy

fields on either side of a small road going down to the sea.

With the exception of the wing pattern (the birds did not fly) all the same features were observed, and in addition the black tip to the yellow bill was noted.

Six grey-headed lapwings were seen again just north of Chilakalapudi, Machilipatnam on March 13, 2001 and one on April 3, 2001.

March 24, 2001

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## 19. THE GREY-HEADED LAPWING IN TAMIL NADU - A REJOINDER

In his note on the grey-headed lapwing *Vanellus cinereus* (Blyth), [*JBNHS* 97(2): 277], Gopi Sundar writes that in peninsular India, this species has only been recorded in Bangalore in 1987 prior to his sighting in Kaliveli Tank near Pondicherry in 1997. He further writes, "Perennou and Santharam have conducted detailed ornithological surveys in this region and have not come across this species."

I would like to point out that this is not true. Gopi Sundar has only referred to two of our publications and hence overlooked my note published in *Blackbuck* 3: 25-27 (1987). In this note, I had recorded the sighting of the grey-headed lapwing in Madras city (now Chennai) on January 11, 1987. The bird was spotted on a

mud flat of the Adyar Estuary from the Theosophical Society estates. T.R. Shankar Raman had spotted it and all the nine bird watchers present on that occasion had a good look at the bird, which was a juvenile. The lapwing was not seen on subsequent visits. This record also finds a mention in the *BIRDS OF THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT* (Grimmett *et al.*, 1998 Oxford).

May 4, 2001

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## 20. A SIGHT RECORD OF BUFF-BREASTED SANDPIPER

### *TRYNGITES SUBRUFICOLLIS* IN GOA

At about 1225 hrs on November 18, 2000, while birdwatching with a Sunbird tour group in recently irrigated paddy fields at Santa Cruz, Tiswadi taluka, Goa, Rick Heil found a buff-breasted sandpiper *Tryngites subruficollis*. The bird performed superbly and was watched, by RH and five other observers including Paul I. Holt, David Hemmingway and Mark Newsome,

uninterrupted for about 50 min and at ranges down to c. 75 m. We used a variety of binoculars and telescopes, some of the latter with eyepieces of up to 60x magnification. RH and PIH both had extensive experience of the species and all observers were completely confident of RH's initial identification. RH, PIH and MN took field notes and PIH did a hurried sketch (copies of



these are held by PIH). Unfortunately, the bird, a juvenile showing no signs of moult to first-winter plumage, could not be located when other observers searched for it later the same afternoon.

Throughout the observation we were aware that, although the buff-breasted sandpiper is a very distinctive shorebird, it has, on occasion, been confused with the ruff *Philomachus pugnax* (several of which were present nearby) and with the extralimital Baird's sandpiper *Calidris bairdii*.

**Description:** The following description is a synthesis of notes taken by PIH, RH and MN.

**Structure:** A medium sized wader, fractionally smaller than the accompanying wood sandpipers *Tringa glareola* and proportionately slightly larger-headed and with a shorter and thicker neck than that species. The bird's head nevertheless appeared relatively small and its size, in combination with its plumage pattern and shape (in particular its steep forehead, flat crown and angular nape), created a soft, open-faced and almost dove-like impression. The bird's body also appeared slimmer, sleeker and more attenuated at the rear than those of the wood sandpipers.

The folded wings extended beyond the tip of the tail by a distance approximately equal to half the length of the bill, while two, and just possibly three, primary tips were visible beyond the longest, lanceolate and remarkably wispy tertial.

The bill, proportionately shorter than that of the wood sandpiper, was approximately equal to the length of the head. It was very straight, the lower mandible having an almost imperceptible arch along its lower edge, and tapered to a rather fine tip. The legs were similarly proportioned to those of the wood sandpiper.

**Plumage:** The whole face, front and sides of the neck and virtually the entire underparts were a remarkably uniform fawn-, or cinnamon-buff colour while the feathers of the upperparts

were dark centred and neatly scalloped.

**Head:** A rather large, dark eye was very conspicuous on an otherwise plain, 'open' face. The ear-coverts were slightly duskier, setting off paler buff supercilia and there was a pale buff, broken eye-ring, more noticeable above the eye. The forehead was unmarked, though the crown, nape and hind-neck to mantle were marked with fine blackish streaks.

The upperparts were attractively patterned. Dark, almost blackish centres to the mantle, scapulars, wing coverts and tertials contrasted crisply with their broad buff or whitish-buff fringes. Compared to the rest of the upperparts, the centres to the wing coverts were paler, the fringes broader and more diffusely demarcated. The resulting pale wing panel contrasted quite well with the lower scapulars. The wing coverts also exhibited the anchor-shaped internal markings that are typical of juvenile buff-breasted sandpipers (A narrow blackish shaft being connected to a broader blackish sub-terminal crescent that traced the feather's shape). A similar pattern was also discernible in some of the lower scapulars. There were no signs of any moult, all of the upper-part feather tracts appeared rather fresh and were arranged in neat, linear rows. Individual feathers, particularly the larger wing coverts and rear lower scapulars, were easily identified and counted.

**Wings:** Although the bird was seen only very briefly in flight, it opened its wings, to stretch or to preen on a couple of occasions, and we were then able to discern some details of the wing pattern. The flight feathers were dark and contrasted well with the paler inner wing-coverts. A narrow, very indistinct, or even obscure (RH), pale-buff wing-bar was just apparent across the tips of the greater coverts. The under-wing coverts appeared clean white, contrasting with the underside of the flight feathers and especially with a relatively conspicuous blackish comma, or crescent, formed by the primary under-wing coverts.



**Underparts:** The chin was fractionally, but perceptibly, paler than both the face and the fore neck, and while the fawn-buff neck, breast and belly were concolorous the remainder of the underparts gradually faded paler and whiter from the rear belly through the vent to the undertail coverts. Isolated patches of bold, blackish flecking or spotting extended to either side of the breast.

**Bare parts:** The bill appeared dark and there was possibly a very small, slightly paler area at the extreme base of the lower mandible. The legs were a uniform olive-yellow, the colour of English mustard, and had a slightly more orange hue than those of all the accompanying wood sandpipers.

**Behaviour:** During our observation the bird fed busily. It was almost constantly on the move, walking around the paddies with a distinctive head-bobbing, almost dove-like motion and high stepping, tripping gait. No interaction was noted between it and any of its equally busily feeding companions. As is typical of the species, the bird remained silent.

**Status:** Buff-breasted sandpiper is almost exclusively Nearctic in its distribution. It breeds across the Arctic belt of North America from Alaska to western Canada, as well as on Wrangel Island and perhaps the Chukotskiy peninsula, Siberia (Cramp and Simmons 1983). It winters in northeast South America. Brazil (1991) listed 12 records from Japan and, although the species has not been recorded anywhere in southeast Asia (Robson 2000), there is at least one report from the east coast of Taiwan (MacKinnon and Phillipps 2000), and at least eight sightings in Australia (Pringle 1987). There are four previous records from the Indian subcontinent. Three of

these reports are from the east coast of Sri Lanka - a specimen collected by T.S.U. De Zylva at Kalametiya near Hambantota on the March 5, 1960, and two subsequent sight records, one near Trincomalee in November 1974 and the other at the Bundala Sanctuary on the January 19-23, 1985 (*CBCN* 1960: 14, *CBCN* 1974: 41, *CBCN* 1985: 2, Hoffman 1991 and Lamfuss 1998). The only previous record from India was of a bird seen by Per Undeland at Harike Bird Sanctuary, Punjab on the May 18, 1995 (Robson 1996). Perhaps even more surprisingly, there are three recently accepted records (12.iii.1981, 31.x. – 14.xi.1997 and 13-19.xi.1999) from the Seychelles (David Fisher pers. comm. and Adrian Skerrett *in litt.* to PIH).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Krys Kazmierczak kindly provided information on the previous subcontinent records, supplied several references, contact addresses and reviewed a draft of this note. Guenter Lamfuss responded speedily to our requests for further information on the Sri Lankan records and both David Fisher and Adrian Skerrett provided information concerning the species' status in the Seychelles.

March 24, 2001

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## 21. GROUP FISHING OF HOUSE CROWS (*CORVUS SPLENDENS*) WITH RIVER TERNS (*STERNA AURANTIA*)

(With one plate)

On July 6, 2000, during a visit to Bigwan, Indapur taluka, Pune district, Maharashtra State for bird watching, I noticed a flock of about 40 river terns (*Sterna aurantia*) and 10 house crows (*Corvus splendens*), flying together at one spot, in the backwaters of Ujani Dam. As I approached closer, I saw fishermen emptying their catch from the nets.

The house crows and river terns were diving for the dead fish, which had fallen from the fishing nets, and were floating on the water. The crows had mastered the technique of hovering and accurately picking up the fish, just like the river tern.

The house crow is not a water bird; whether

this was a natural instinct or it had mastered the technique while observing the river terns is a big question. Crows are known to be territorial and aggressive, but in this case they neither harmed nor quarreled with the terns.

Another observation worth noting was that while the river tern picked up and swallowed the fish in flight the crow would pick up a fish, fly to the shore to eat it, and then fly back to catch another one.

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## 22. TERNS OF THE VENGURLA ROCKS, A REVIEW AND UPDATE

The breeding colony of maritime terns on the Vengurla Rocks is arguably the Indian subcontinent's most important one, if not for the sheer quantity of nesting birds then for the number of constituent species. Though it has been known for at least 125 years that a ternery exists on Burnt Island, one of the islets forming the Vengurla Rocks, all knowledge about it rested on local lore, second-hand accounts and circumstantial proof. No ornithologist had ever seen terns there before 1981.

The Vengurla Rocks are a tiny archipelago of rock outcrops situated 16.5 km off the South Konkan coast from a point about halfway between Vengurla and Malwan (Sindhudurg district, Maharashtra State, India), situated at 15° 43' 24" N and 73° 27' 42" E. The four largest ones form a group of precipitous rocky islets at a

distance of several hundred metres from each other. Among them, the smallest and westernmost is crowned by the ruins of the old lighthouse. This was replaced around 1935 by a more modern one on the largest of the rocks, manned by a crew of eight that resides on it throughout the year. Burnt Island, the second largest of the islets, lies closest to the mainland. It is about 300 m long, 100 m wide and 30-50 m high, and sparsely covered by coarse grass and a few stunted bushes. The islet remains free from human interference and A.O. Hume's (1876) detailed description is as accurate and valid today as it was 125 years ago.

The group of islets as a whole presents a forbidding aspect, access is limited to the fair season, October to May, and landing is risky even at the best of times. In January 1998, permission given to me to stay at the Inspection Quarters of





Holt, Paul I and Heil, Rick. 2003. "A Sight Record of Buff breasted Sandpiper Tryngites Subruficollis in Goa." *The journal of the Bombay Natural History Society* 100, 123–126.

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