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## 20. UNUSUAL NUMBERS OF BLACK-HEADED CUCKOO-SHRIKE *CORACINA MELANOPTERA* AT POINT CALIMERE, TAMIL NADU

An unusual congregation of c. 25 Black-headed Cuckoo-Shrike *Coracina melanoptera* was witnessed during a bird watching session on December 21, 2001 at Pt. Calimere. This was our first day of the ten-day BNHS Bird-banding Training Programme and we were being guided by Dr. S. Balachandran, Scientist, BNHS. At 1745 hrs, after an eventful evening with birds, we approached the fringes of the Kodikadu village and passed through some open area with a few *Thespesia populnea* trees where we saw three Black-headed Cuckoo-Shrikes in flight, and two in a nearby *Thespesia* tree. Suddenly, several more cuckoo-shrikes began to leave the tree, and as we approached they moved to a *Prosopis juliflora* shrub on the other side of the road. We noticed a flight of more than 15 cuckoo-shrikes in a follow-the-leader fashion. They were restless, and flying between the *Thespesia* and *Moringa* trees in a backyard. Of the twenty-five birds, about six were males and the rest females.

This sighting is significant, as the Black-headed Cuckoo-Shrike is not known to congregate in large numbers. Ali and Ripley (COMPACT HANDBOOK, 1987) do not record such behaviour for the species. The group appeared like a pre- or post-migration flock, but there is no evidence to this account except their restless behaviour. These birds are not known to congregate even during the breeding period. According to Dr. Balachandran, the Black-headed Cuckoo-Shrike is a common local migrant to Pt. Calimere, arriving in winter from the nearby areas, but the numbers seen on this particular occasion were unprecedented. The coastal area at the time of observation was under the effect of a cyclonic depression in the Bay of Bengal.

March 19, 2002

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## 21. ON THE BEHAVIOUR AND HABITAT PREFERENCE OF STOLICZKA'S BUSHCHAT *SAXICOLA MACRORHYNCHA* (STOLICZKA)

Ali and Ripley (1973) described the endemic species Stoliczka's Bushchat or Whinchat as 'rare and very local'. Presently it is not seen in its former haunts, though it is not uncommon in the Desert National Park, Rajasthan. This species was first discovered in Kutch in the 19th Century by Dr. Ferdinand Stoliczka, who collected two specimens, one near Bhuj and the other from Rapar. He described the species and published it in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* in 1872. Since then, it was not sighted by the earlier chroniclers of the Birds of Kutch Hugh Pallin and Capt. Lester. Dr. Sálím Ali and others who followed in their surveys of Kutch or in bird ringing programmes failed to record *S. macrorhyncha*.

On receiving information from Mr. R.D. Jadeja (Range Forest Officer, Naliya) that he, along with Mr. Tejpal D. Shah,

had seen a pair of bushchats, which they thought was Stoliczka's Bushchat, I went to Naliya in Western Kutch on January 4, 2002. Accompanied by Jadeja and Tejpal Shah, I went to the location where they had seen the birds. We came across the male in the morning and saw the female in the evening.

The male was in winter plumage and in both the birds the common features were the prominent long supercilium extending from the forecrown to behind the ear coverts and the distinct whiteness of their chins and throats. While the general behaviour of this species was similar to other bushchats, in the manner of gathering food one dissimilar feature observed conforms to what is stated by Roberts (1992) quoting Grimmett's personal communication, that after



alighting on the ground after espying some insect, the bird would puff out its breast and start swaying it from one side to the other and then pick up an item of food. After moving on a little, the performance would be repeated once or twice. This behaviour was performed by both sexes. They also launched aerial sallies once in a while to catch some flying insect and at times darted vertically upwards. The puffing out of the breast feathers and the swaying motion on the ground give the appearance of a threat display, but it is more likely that this is a resort to flush out the insects from their sparse grass ground cover. The habitat preferred by this species consists of ground sparsely covered by short grass and dotted about by stunted bushes of *Prosopis chilensis* (= *juliflora*), *Ziziphus* sp. etc. To the north of the area under observation was a closely planted row of *P. chilensis*, beyond which were some closely

planted vegetation and thick cover of grass. Stoliczka's Bushchat perched on the bare twigs of *P. chilensis* repeatedly, but scrupulously avoided entering the area of thick ground cover. After every foray for food, whether aerial or on the ground, these birds generally returned to the same perch. As described by Ali and Ripley (1973), the habits of this Bushchat are similar to the other members of the genus. However, owing to its extreme rarity, it has perhaps not been possible to study all aspects in this regard. The very fact that the species was observed in Kutch after a lapse of over a century and a quarter proves its rarity.

March 20, 2002

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## 22. OCCURRENCE OF THE GREY BUSHCHAT *SAXICOLA FERREA* (GRAY) NEAR NANJANAGUD, MYSORE DISTRICT, KARNATAKA

A male *Saxicola ferrea* was observed close to Narasambudhi lake, a large irrigation tank with a 2000 acre waterspread near Nanjanagud town (12° 5' N, 76° 43' E; 20 km south of Mysore city), on December 9, 2001.

The bird had a striking white supercilium and a black 'mask' around the eyes, ears and cheeks, whitish throat and a light grey wash on the underparts. Crown and back were a very dark grey, appearing almost black from a distance, but with faint brownish-white vertical striations at close range. The tail was black with faintly visible white edges. A white shoulder patch was distinct in flight, scarcely visible when alight. Bill and legs were blackish.

The bird was observed at 0745 hrs, hunting from a perch on an *Acacia leucophloea* tree beside the outlet canal of the lake, amid open area and close to a coconut grove. The surrounding area was open, partially irrigated land. The behaviour was characteristic of bushchats, but it was twice noted, unusually, to venture into the tree crown and feed like a warbler. This behaviour is atypical of bushchats and perhaps not common in this species, but we have observed it on two separate occasions previously in the Pied Bushchat *Saxicola caprata*.

The Grey Bushchat is "a common resident, subject to altitudinal and short-range seasonal movements. The Himalayas from NWFP to Arunachal Pradesh, thence south through Nagaland (?), Manipur, Meghalaya and Mizoram... Winters from.... into the Gangetic plain south to the Yamuna river and throughout Assam and Bangladesh" (Ali and Ripley 1987). It has been subsequently recorded from the Kanha National Park (Newton *et al.* 1986), Bandhavgarh National Park (Tyabji 1990) and Karera Bustard Sanctuary, all in Madhya Pradesh, and Bharatpur in Rajasthan (Kannan 1993). These represent the southernmost recorded extension of this species. The record from Nanjanagud is the first from southern India. The intense cold wave in northern India at the time of sighting might have been the cause for the flight of the bird so far south, where it is usually not found.

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