

# RECENT ORNITHOLOGICAL RECORDS FROM PAKISTAN<sup>1</sup>

T.J. ROBERTS<sup>2</sup>  
(With a text-figure)

This note is complementary to previous contributions to the *Journal* on the available information about the distribution and status of certain bird species from this region. Vide: Roberts 1984, *JBNHS* Vol. 81 and Roberts *et. al.* 1985, *JBNHS*, Vol. 82.

## Slavonian Grebe *Podiceps auritus*

In mid-January 1984, I carried out waterfowl surveys around the two principal lakes in central Baluchistan, which province covers the south-western region of Pakistan. Due to good rains Zangi Nawar Lake (29° 27' N, 65° 47' E) comprised an extensive series of lagoons which could only be surveyed effectively from a boat, which in this instance was an ill-designed bath-tub sized affair. While returning on January 17th evening from an extended afternoon in this craft, during which more than 200 Blacknecked Grebes (*Podiceps nigricollis*) had been counted, a single bird, swimming by itself, at once attracted attention by its seemingly more contrasting black and white plumage and more upright neck carriage. It appeared to all intents to be a Slavonian Grebe. Due to the precarious nature of the boat, neither prolonged nor careful observation was possible, and this, coupled with general fatigue, I am ashamed to confess, made me decide to forget the incident, knowing that the species had never before been recorded from the subcontinent. However, on January 20th a visit was made to the much smaller Kushdil Khan lake in Pishin district, where it was possible to conduct waterfowl counts from the shore, using a tripod mounted telescope. Imagine my delight, therefore, when in a secluded arm of the lake I found a pair of Slavonian Grebes, which I was able to sketch and to watch for over an hour.

My home, on the island of Anglesey (North Wales), offers shelter each winter, around the coast, to a number of Slavonian Grebes and Rednecked Grebes (*Podiceps grisegena*). I was therefore well

aware of the extreme similarity in appearance between *P. auritus* and *P. nigricollis* from past experience. Indeed, juvenile birds might well be indistinguishable in their first winter unless observed at very close range. Some commentary on their distinguishing field marks may therefore be of interest to the reader.

*P. auritus* has the same rather dumpy appearance and fluffy rear end as the Blacknecked Grebe. It is smaller, shorter necked and looks more black-and-white than the Rednecked Grebe in winter plumage. It is only slightly larger than *P. nigricollis* but tends to appear more straight necked and larger in the head with a heavier bill. This bill is straight or slightly recurved along the culmen, black in colour, with a pale, horny tip. The tip is very small in area and difficult to see in the field. In *nigricollis* the bill is more slender than that of *auritus* and is slightly uptilted along the culmen without any paler tip. The white wing bar in *auritus* is considerably wider than in *nigricollis*; but this is generally not helpful unless the bird flies, as it is invisible in most swimming birds.

Perhaps the best distinguishing characters relate to the pattern of black on the crown and white on the cheeks and foreneck. In *auritus* the white area on the cheeks is much more extensive, especially extending towards the hindneck or auricular region and extending up around the base of the eye. In *nigricollis* the black of the crown tends to extend to just below and around the eye and onto the auricular region. It is significant that the dark colour of the crown and hind neck in the Asiatic population of *P. auritus* is less silvery grey and more black than in the North American population, in winter plumage. I have, however, seen juvenile wintering specimens of *auritus* in Anglesey with equally extensive amounts of grey-black on the hind crown as in *nigricollis*. The view of *auritus* from the back of its head and neck does, however, present a very characteristic pattern when compared with *nigricollis*, and to my mind, is the best distinguishing field character. (Fig.1).

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<sup>2</sup> Cac Gors, Rhoscefnhir, Near Pentraeth, Anglesey, Gwynedd, LL75 BYU, UK.

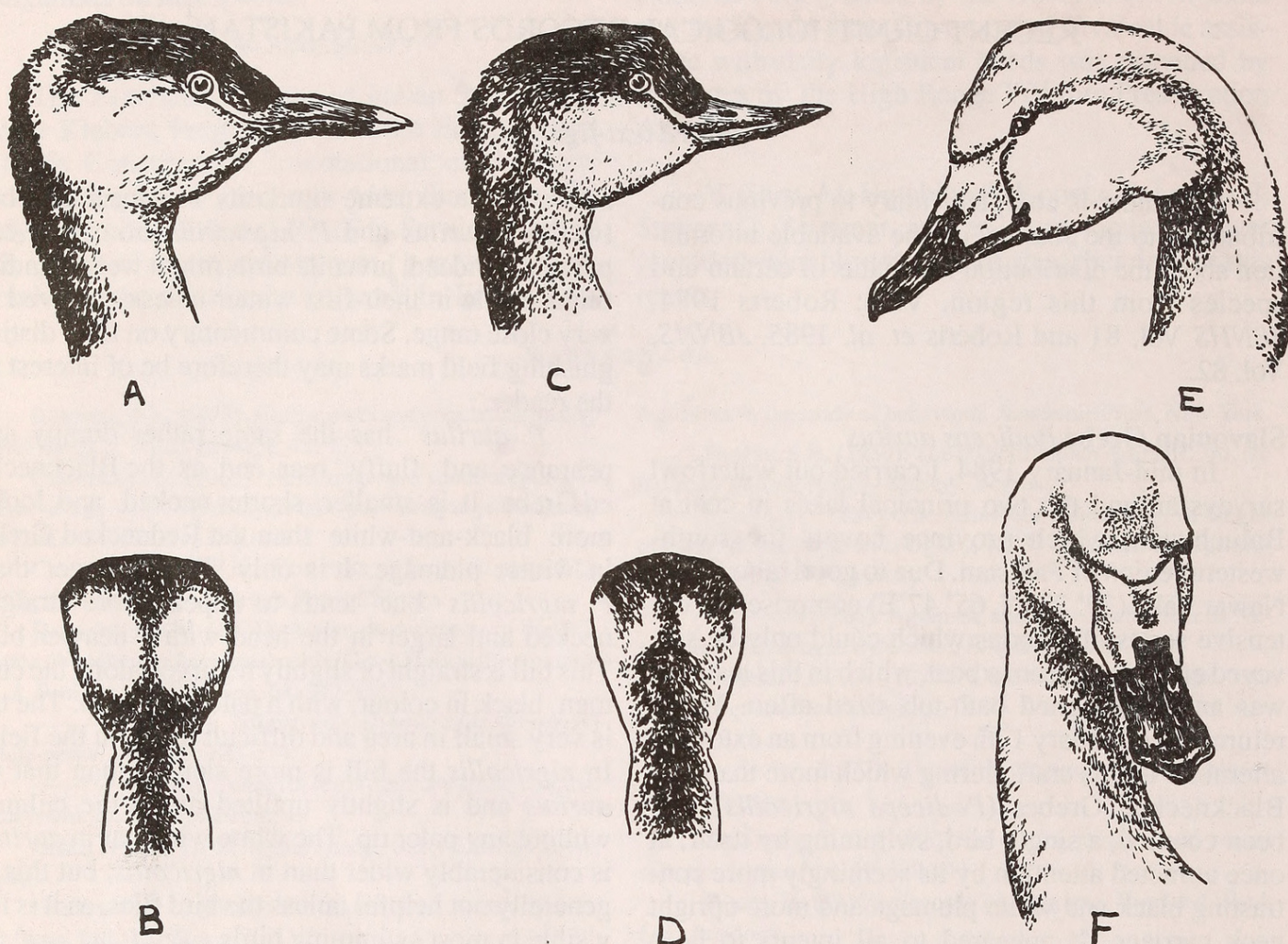


Fig. 1. A-F: A: *Podiceps auritus* —winter plumage; B. Same, view from rear of head; C. *Podiceps nigricollis* — winter plumage; D. Same, view from rear of head; E. Captive Bewick's swan, copied from photograph presumed to be Jankowski's Swan *Cygnus columbianus jankowskii*; F. Same, front view.

Due to other writing commitments, I failed to submit any account of this (presumed) first record for the species. In January 1987, Mr. Mark Mallalieu and Mr. Ashiq Ahmad, while conducting waterfowl counts in the Punjab Salt Range lakes, encountered a pair of Slavonian Grebes on Khabbaki lake (M. Mallalieu, *pers. comm.*, February 1987) and this new record has been submitted for publication.

Coincidentally, a single Slavonian Grebe was captured on film in January 1986 by Mr. Naseer Tareen, the distinguished wildlife photographer. This bird was filmed on Kand lake, a very small body of water close to the sea coast in Las Bela district of Baluchistan, near the village known as Habb Chowki. Mr. Tareen was unaware of the species he

was photographing until he showed his film to me in February 1987. It was a close-up view and followed earlier shots of a party of 7 or 8 Blacknecked Grebes. This film clip was then shown to R. Passburg, an ornithologist with considerable experience of *P. auritus* from its wintering grounds on the Caspian sea, and he confirmed my identification. This, therefore, constitutes the third reliable record for this species within the past several years.

Normally the species spends the winter along coastal areas and in the sea and for this reason has probably not been recorded hitherto from the Indian subcontinent. Now that some of its haunts have been located, it may well turn out to be a regular, though uncommon, winter visitor.

**Alpheraky's Swan or Jankowski's Swan***Cygnus columbianus jankowskii*

There is still some disagreement amongst taxonomists and experts about the classification of this eastern Siberian breeding population of Bewick's Swan. The Editors of Volume I, BIRDS OF THE WESTERN PALEARCTIC (S. Cramp *et al* 1977) do not consider *jankowskii* to be a valid subspecies (p. 385), but it is listed separately as Jankowski's Swan in Ali and Ripley's HANDBOOK (Vol. I, 1968, p. 135).

The winter of 1984-85 was a swan year for the region, with several local newspaper reports of swans (not identified as to species) being sighted in Baluchistan and Sind. Two were seen in January of that year on a temporary lake near Turbat, in southern Baluchistan, by Ashiq Ahmad, one of them (regrettably) killed by a local hunter (A. Ahmad, *pers. comm.* to author, 1986). A single swan was observed and photographed by a number of keen bird watchers in January 1985, on Haleji Lake, a wildlife sanctuary 72 km northeast of Karachi. It later flew to the adjacent Hadiero lake, approximately 16 km further east. Its relatively small size and short neck suggested that it was a Bewick's Swan rather than a Whooper Swan (Rolf Passburg *in litt.* to author, January 1985).

When I visited Pakistan in May 1985, I discovered this same bird being exhibited in Karachi zoo, having been trapped and sold to the zoo by local professional fishermen who live on the shores of Hadiero Lake. I took photographs of this captive bird and sketches are presented herewith. Regrettably it succumbed during the hot weather of 1985. Alpheraky's Swan is not distinguishable from other populations of the Bewick's Swan by differences in body size, but rather by the more extensive area of yellow on the upper mandible (J. Delacour, WATERFOWL OF THE WORLD, Vol. I and Démentiev and Gladkov, BIRDS OF THE SOVIET UNION, Vol. 4, 1952). Based upon these published descriptions and Peter Scott's painting in Delacour's book, the swan which visited lower Sind was from this eastern Siberian breeding population, and could be described as Jankowski's, Bewicks, or Whistling Swan.

**Indian Cuckoo *Cuculus micropterus***

In Ali and Ripley's HANDBOOK (Vol. 3, 1969, p. 205) the distribution of this cuckoo implies that it

does not occur in the Himalayan foothill region of Pakistan, but that it does occur in the less arid plains portions of the country and in the foothills from Kashmir eastwards. The author, during 34 years of continuous residence in Pakistan, mostly in the Punjab, never came across it, nor did Hugh Whistler include it in his published account of the birds of Rawalpindi district and the Murree hills (Whistler, *Ibis*, 1930, p. 252). In the late summer of 1984, however, one did turn up around Islamabad and haunted the wooded shores around Rawal Lake during late June upto early August, where David Corfield saw it and tape-recorded its calls. Playback of its calls heard in August 1984, compared with my own recordings made from Malaysia, revealed no dialectical differences, the four-noted song being identical in time sequence and pitch in both the Rawal Lake and Malaysian birds. It would appear to be a rare straggler this far west in the outer foothill or Shiwaliks zone of the Himalayas.

**Spotted Piculet *Picumnus innominatus***

In Ali and Ripley's HANDBOOK, the distribution of this piculet is given as extending from about Abbottabad in Hazara district and eastwards (Vol. 4, 1970, p. 172). In fact, around Abbottabad, there is no suitable habitat as it is a relatively open, wide, treeless valley with rice and tobacco cultivation in the summer, and wheat crops predominant in winter. It is known, however, as an occasional wanderer into the outer foothill zone around the Murree hill range with two definite sightings in recent years in the Margalla hills (covered by dry tropical deciduous scrub forest). This region has been well surveyed by birdwatchers since the establishment of Islamabad as the capital city. A single bird was seen in July 1977 by Kamal Islam (*pers. comm.*, 1977) and in April 1982 (again a single bird, probably a female) by D. Corfield (*pers. comm.*, 1982). The author never encountered it in the Margalla hills during over 15 years of intermittent observations at all months of the year and spanning many hundreds of hours, nor did H. Whistler include it in his account of the birds of the region (Whistler, *Ibis*, 1930).

In April 1984, Richard Grimmett and Craig Robson, whilst conducting pheasant surveys in the Kaghan valley (Hazara district), saw several piculets in Malkandi forest (34° 41'N, 73° 35'E),

which is located at the bottom of the valley at about 1200 m elevation and 64 km northwest of Abbotabad town. This patch of forest is atypical for the region in having a preponderance of deciduous tree species and a luxuriant undergrowth with bushes of Sumac (*Rhus cotinus*), many Sycamore (*Acer pentapomicum*) and Mountain Ash (*Fraxinus xanthoxyloides*) trees. Realising that this was a most exciting discovery I made a visit to the same locality in June 1984, and after staying two days in the forest hut, was able to locate 3 or 4 pairs, which were again seen in May 1985. Judging from calling males, there might be a small colony at Malkandi comprising of as many as 7 or 8 pairs and they undoubtedly occur here as an isolated and disjunct population, as also is the case in northeastern Afghanistan, where a small population was discovered by Dr. Kulmann in 1963 near Pechtal, Nuristan. These were again located in the same locality in Nuristan in 1965 by Jochem Niethammer (Niethammer, *J. Journ. Fur Ornith.*, 1967).

#### **Grey Hypocolius** *Hypocolius ampelinus*

This strange and little-known bird is a desert adapted frugivore, endemic to the harshest regions of the Middle East. It is believed to be quite nomadic in its habits, according to local rainfall pattern and food availability and there are hardly 3 or 4 records for the whole subcontinent since it was first discovered on 6 March 1875 by W.T. Blanford from a wintering bird found in the Kirthar hill range on the Sind/Baluchistan border (Blanford, *Stray Feathers*, 1875, p.352).

In the winter of 1983-84 there must have been an irruption of this species westwards across Baluchistan, as it was regularly encountered on the Sind/Baluchistan border in the Habb river valley by the author during several visits to the area, from early February up to mid-March. In a day's search, 5 or 6 could always be located and on one occasion with R. Passburg a flock of 17 birds were watched feeding at close range. Their principal food was the ripe berries of *Zizyphus mauritiana*, but the last mentioned flock settled in a grove of *Prosopis spicigera* trees where they were actually nipping off and eating the leaf buds of this thorny Acacia.

In the winter of 1984-85, diligent search in the same area failed to reveal any. During a visit to Zangi Nawar lake in the Chaghai desert of western

Baluchistan in early May 1985, the author was thrilled to encounter, at sunset, a flock numbering between 30 and 40 of these birds, which came into roost together in a patch of tamarisks and tall Phragmites reeds. This area, some 644 km northwest of the Habb valley, comprises an extensive sand-dune desert tract, seeming to lack any suitable fruit bearing bushes or trees such as would attract these birds. They might have chosen the area for roosting because of the proximity of water and thick cover. They are very strong flyers, preferring a fairly high trajectory when moving from one feeding spot to another, which does suggest that they are well able to forage over a wide area, and that like all birds adapted to exploit an abundant food source (such as berries), once located, they probably find that gregarious roosts outside the breeding season are advantageous. Unlike the relatively silent birds encountered in the Habb valley, these birds in May were very noisy, the males singing persistently and excitedly and individuals already consorting in pairs as they went to roost. This suggested that they were getting ready to breed soon.

#### **Blackbrowed or Golden Spectacled Flycatcher Warbler** *Seicercus burkii*

Though Ali and Ripley's HANDBOOK (Vol. 8, 1973, p. 182) gives the distribution of this species as including Murree, I had never come across it in Pakistan. Having consulted H. Whistler's comprehensive manuscript notes, lodged in the Bombay Natural History Society's library, I knew that he had come across no records or specimens from the Murree hills and considered that the western boundary of its range was around Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh. Bates and Lowther did not come across it in Kashmir (BREEDING BIRDS OF KASHMIR, 1952) and the only known record is the reported sighting by Dickinson of a bird near Sonmarg, Kashmir (*J. Bombay nat. Hist. Soc.*, Vol. 63, 1966, p. 204).

In late December 1982, D. Corfield came across a single bird in a stream bed ravine just on the borders of Islamabad city and at the foot of the Margalla hills. It remained in this locality until the end of March 1983 and was shown to the author. It was seen alongside *Seicercus xanthoschistos* which is common in the area, and it was interesting to note that, whilst *xanthoschistos* foraged often in the upper canopy of fairly tall trees, *burkii* had a

preference for the shadier forest understorey and especially shrubs and tall weeds along the stream bank. It was quite tame, allowing close observation, and its continued occupancy over nearly 3 months of this small area indicated that they maintain relatively confined winter territories. In late March 1985, two years later, I saw another individual in one of the side ravines of the Margalla hills some 1.5 km north of the previous bird.

Richard Grimmett and Craig Robson saw this species during pheasant surveys in the Kaghan valley. This was in late April 1984, just below the summit ridge of Kadir Gali at an elevation of slightly under 3000 m. It is presumed that at such a high elevation and late date, they would be approaching, or near to, their intended nesting territory. I made two subsequent camping trips to this spot (Kadir Gali) but failed to locate any *Seicercus burkii*. It is certainly very rare in Pakistan but probably a small breeding population exists in Hazara district and winters in the foothills around Rawalpindi. During a visit to Pokhara in western Nepal, the author found this species quite abundant in late March at lower elevations.

#### **Brown Flycatcher *Muscicapa latirostris***

This is a very widely distributed flycatcher in southeast Asia, extending as a winter visitor down to Sri Lanka, and eastwards to Taiwan, Thailand, southern Burma and Malaysia (Ben King *et al.*, FIELD GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF SOUTHEAST ASIA, 1975). On the Indian subcontinent it occurs mostly down the eastern parts, rarely extending into the dryer northwestern region. In the HANDBOOK (Ali & Ripley, Vol. 7, 1972, p. 146) its breeding range is given as spreading across the Himalayan foothills from Chamba in the west (Himachal Pradesh) to Kulu. It occurs in the autumn on passage in the eastern Punjab parts of India, e.g. in Ludhiana and Hoshiarpur (specimens in the Waite collection, British Museum).

I first encountered it in the summer of 1983 on the summit ridge of the extreme southern spur of the Murree hill range, above Lehtrar. Here a single bird was seen in a mature stand of sub-tropical 'Chir' pine (*Pinus roxburghii*) at 1370 m elevation in mid-May. Later a pair were found nesting near Samli forest rest house on 3rd June, about 9 km from the previous location. A pair were again watched on 23

May 1986 in the same locality (Samli Forest Rest House) with Mark Mallalieu, who was able to take very clear photographs.

This species is almost identical in size and appearance to the Sooty Flycatcher (*Muscicapa sibirica*) with which it is quite sympatric in tropical pine forest during the early summer, so that it was only after repeated sightings that I was able to convince myself that it was not *sibirica*. The best field characters which distinguish *latirostris* are the clear, bright yellow lower mandible which is dark and horny in *sibirica*, coupled with the absence of distinctive dark greyish streaking along the flanks and in the pectoral region, which can always be seen in specimens of *sibirica*. Both species tend to show a comparatively large dark eye with a paler whitish eye ring.

The habits of *M. sibirica* in Pakistan are intriguing. It is typically a forest nesting flycatcher but chooses the upper limit of the tree-line by preference, normally being encountered between 2400 m right up to the sub-alpine birch forest zone at 3500 m, where I have watched it nest building as late as mid-June. But in early summer it can be encountered in the sub-tropical Chir pine zone up to late May even though I have no evidence as yet that it breeds at these lower altitudes. On the same day (23rd May) that Mallalieu and I saw and photographed the pair of Brown Flycatchers at 1200 m, we had watched a single Sooty Flycatcher lower down the slope at 900 m. Their very gradual migration in summer to higher breeding areas may therefore somewhat parallel the habits of *Carduelis spinoides*, the Himalayan Greenfinch, which nests both at low and high altitudes over an extended breeding season.

#### **Jungle Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos* and Carrion Crow *Corvus corone orientalis***

In May 1984 I managed to visit the Shingar range in the extreme northern boundary of Baluchistan province, in Zhob district. This fascinating range of hills is clothed with a forest of the Edible Seed Pine or Chilghoza (*Pinus gerardiana*), and rises to 2600 m in height. It was here that A.F.P. Christison encountered crows and found a nesting pair on the summit ridge. He took these to be Carrion Crows, even shooting a specimen (not preserved) for identification (Christison, *J. Bombay nat. Hist. Soc.*,

Vol. 43, 1942, p. 478). This distribution range for *C. corone* is also given in Ali and Ripley's *HANDBOOK* (Vol. 5, 1972, p. 259). The Crows are still there, but to the author's surprise and even disappointment, they were all Jungle Crows, at once distinguishable by their longer wedge shaped tails, more heavy bills with distinctively recurved culmen and especially by their repertoire of calls exactly similar to familiar Himalayan birds.

Puzzled by this, I was later able to get in touch with Sir Philip Christison (as he now is) who was kind enough to invite me to his home in Scotland in November 1985. After discussing the problem he expressed the opinion that he was probably mistaken in his identification and that they had in fact been Jungle Crows. This southern extension of their range is not so surprising as the Jungle Crow breeds commonly above 2400 m on the Safed Koh range fur-

ther north (Whitehead, *J. Bombay nat. Hist. Soc.*, Vol. 20, p. 177 and author obs.). The only places where Carrion Crows breed in Pakistan are at the upper end of the Kurram valley in the villages around Parachinar at about 1770 m elevation. This is at the bottom of the valley below the coniferous forest level. Similarly, it nests in Baltistan (to the west of Ladakh) around some of the villages in the larger, wider valleys such as Shigar and Shyok (Mathews, *JBNHS*, Vol. 42, p. 658)

In winter at Parachinar and in Baltistan in the Indus valley, Carrion Crows and Jungle Crows are sympatric, the latter frequenting valley bottoms and the outskirts of villages, but in summer *macrorhynchos* ascends to the forested slopes to nest and the nest found on the Shingar by General Sir Philip Christison was 9 m up in a Chilghoza Pine at 2600 m elevation.

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