

12. NOTES ON FEEDING BEHAVIOUR OF *AMAUORNIS* *PHOENICURUS* AT POINT CALIMERE

On 4th January 1986, at the water's edge of a small pond at the Avifauna office compound, we noticed a Whitebreasted Waterhen feeding on small water insects and fish. It was seen turning its head left and right at very low angles, at the same time its short stumpy tail was cocked up and down. Even though it was moving vigorously in search of food it could not get any for about 15 minutes. It slowly walked into the water and then started swimming in the deep water to the centre of the pond where there was a school of fish fry. While swimming, the white underbody was completely invisible. Like duck swimming on water it was swimming as well as pecking some

food material from the water surface. Each time the swimming continued for a few minutes and at the end it came to the shore and shook its body vigorously to get rid of water particles. The same process was repeated about 5 times during our 30 minutes observation. The feathers did not seem to be wet. This type of feeding behaviour in Whitebreasted Waterhen has not been recorded before in literature.

As per the HANDBOOK Vol. 2, pp. 171 their habitat is rice fields, ponds, ditches, backwaters etc. In Point Calimere we have come across them feeding in places where the salinity of water was over 4 ppt.

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13. A NEW NESTING COLONY OF RIVER TERNS AND PRATINCOLES

The point that this note wishes to make is how one chance observation can lead to a succession of others that link up all of them into a complete picture.

Over the last several years E. K. Bharucha has been observing the changing patterns of bird populations at the Mula-Mutha bird sanctuary in Pune. The population of terns has been steadily increasing since around 1975. Earlier, the Gull-billed terns were much commoner than River terns. However, during the last 2 to 3 winters the river terns have shown periods of sudden increase in their population. Last year they outnumbered the Gull-billed terns for several months.

In Aug.-Sept. it was further noticed that many of these River terns were immature birds. Counts taken on several visits to Mula-Mutha showed that the ratio of adults to juveniles was about 2 to 1, and on one visit it was as high as 1:1. This gave the impression that perhaps the river tern had set up a new breeding colony nearby. Presuming that the nesting area should be only a couple of miles away at most, islands downstream near the Mundhwa bridge and at Kaudi were inspected, but nothing was found.

However, in April, 1986, while observing the Flamingoes at Bhigwan 100 km downstream from Pune, two large islands were found to be

the nesting colonies of a mixed group of River terns and Pratincoles. The villagers claim that the birds have been nesting there over the last 2 to 3 years, thus accounting for their rise in population upstream.

The greater proportion of nests are found in the middle of the islands which are about 2-3 feet above and several yards from the present water-line. This area is covered by sparse grasses and other weeds and the nests are close to each other, varying from 1 to 10 feet apart. The proportion of tern nests to pratincole is about 2 or 3 to one. Most of these centrally situated nests contain river tern chicks of varying ages while some still have one, two or occasionally 3 eggs (4 in one case). Pratincole nests in this area have at present 2 to 3 eggs each and only a few have new born chicks.

The periphery of the island shows a different pattern. The concentration is lower and the nests appear new as most of these still have eggs, and only a few have one or more chicks. This indicates that the peripheral parts of the islands have been exposed by the receding water during the last 20 days or so.

The nests of the river terns (*Sterna aurantia*) are found on the crust of algae and underwater weeds that has been exposed and dried up to form a one or two-inch layer on the underlying mud. The surface has deep cracks and fissures, and impressions of old human footprints. Many nests are on the open flat crust, or are mere depressions, while some are surrounded by dry underwater weed stems, grass or other vegetation found on the island itself. A few are surrounded by tiny shells, or fish bones which seem to serve no purpose and in fact attract attention to the nest. Occasionally nests were situated within depressions of old human footprints and in a few cases within the dried feeding grounds of flamingo. The eggs were very variable in colour — being buff

with brown and green irregular splotches, to green with dark grey-green or brown splotches. A few eggs were mud covered and thus of a deeper brown shade. We observed chicks which were in the processes of hatching, upto a stage when they could run and swim strongly but were unable to fly. There were also several juveniles flying around. Nestlings often hid or kept away from the sun by sheltering under algal crusts that had been lifted up like a tent by the growth of new weeds under them.

The Pratincoles made themselves very obvious with their broken wing displays. Their nests were usually tiny cuplike depressions. In the grassy areas one side often had a screen of vegetation. These grasses seemed to have been purposefully loosely entwined. However, this may have been a pre-existing condition that made the birds choose the site. They had small light brown eggs with darker brown speckling. A few were darker at one end than the other with a sharp delineation between the two shades. There are still very few chicks, most of them being only newborn hatchlings.

Since many empty river tern nest sites were seen as evidenced by patches of excreta marks the colony must have been there for some time. The presence of juvenile river terns also shows that we are perhaps at the tail end of their nesting period, and in the middle of the nesting period of the Pratincoles on the islands.

We also found several nests with much smaller eggs that resembled those of the river terns. These may be those of the little terns that we also observed in the area. However, though we saw one of them approach the site of one of these nests, it was not seen incubating. This thus requires further follow-up.

There were also a few Kentish plovers and little ringed plovers on the island which may be nesting as well.

An interesting feature was the finding of three adult dead terns. This could be account-

ed for by predation by raptors such as the Osprey and Marsh harriers seen frequenting the area.

We found many footprints of otters on the island which may also account for the remnants of terns. Otters have been sighted off and on at Bhigwan and at times get caught in the fishermen's nets, when they are unfortunately killed by them.

With the water still receding, a problem is sure to occur unless the area is cordoned off. Within a short while both the islands will be linked to the shoreline of the lake. This will lead to an influx of cattle that will be attracted

to the only patch of green in the area. Inevitably the nests will be trampled upon and destroyed. Village dogs will get access to the area and finish off eggs and chicks. Human intervention in the form of schoolboys, herds-men, fishermen etc. will do the rest.

The access to the islands must thus be guarded in some way to prevent shortening of the present nesting season.

The disturbance should be kept to a minimum so that the birds will habitually set up a colony here year after year. We hope that the proposed bird sanctuary to be established at Bhigwan will speedily solve this problem.

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14. SIGHT RECORD OF STARLING *STERNUS VULGARIS* IN ANDHRA PRADESH

According to Ali & Ripley (1983) the winter distribution of Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* is in Pakistan and North India east to Bangladesh, south to Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. Vagrants and stragglers are liable to be met in far-flung localities; thus two were recorded from Madras (Whistler, quoted by Ali & Ripley 1972). On 10.xii.1985, at 1715 hours outside the 800-hectare grassland plot maintained for the Great Indian Bustard, near

Rollapadu village (15° 52' N and 78° 18' E), Nandikutkoo taluka, Kurnool district, Andhra Pradesh, a flock of eight Starlings was seen along with 8-10 Rosy Pastors (*Sturnus roseus*). Soon the two species flew off in different directions. The Rosy Pastors settled in another field but the Starlings were lost sight of. Though the Rosy Pastors were seen throughout the period of my stay at Rollapadu (10 days), Starlings were not seen again.

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