

RECENT ORNITHOLOGICAL RECORDS FROM PAKISTAN¹

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One of the biggest problems for any keen bird watcher in Pakistan today is that of trying to determine the real status of less common birds because of the lack of recent records or reliable observations and ones reliance perforce on very old and sometimes doubtful records.

It is with this aspect particularly in mind, that this note is written, based as it is on my diary notes from the past two or three years which add new information to the records which the Society was kind enough to publish in a note I submitted three years ago (Roberts 1981). I have included some recent findings of several ornithologist friends in order to give as complete a coverage as possible.

Oceanites oceanicus

Wilson's Storm Petrel is described in Vol. 2 of the HANDBOOK series (Salim Ali 1968) to be not uncommon along the coasts of Sind and Mekran (Pakistan's seaboard), from May/June onwards till about September/November when birds returning to their Antarctic breeding grounds are sighted off the coast of Sri Lanka.

Of all the Antarctic breeding sea birds, the majority nest on isolated southern latitude islands and only three or four species (2 Penguins, 1 Sheathbill and 1 Wilson's Storm Petrel) largely confine their nesting activity to the

main Antarctic continental land mass. This little Petrel is reported to nest on high mountain crags further inland and under more extreme weather conditions than almost any other bird. This, coupled with its dainty appearance and "wave walking" habit, make it a particularly fascinating bird.

Along the Karachi seacoast it is not difficult to see this Petrel from certain promontories along the shore during the summer months. In the past two years with the help of a very experienced ornithologist friend, Rolf Passburg, we have been periodically surveying pelagic birds, by means of boat trips, during the winter months, and found to our surprise that considerable numbers of Wilson's Petrels feed along the coast throughout November, December and January (up to 15 and 22 birds sighted during a six hour voyage). Circumstances have prevented us from making surveys in February and early March but from late March and early April, Wilson's Storm Petrel can again be sighted, and it could be fairly assumed that a number of non-breeding birds remain during the Antarctic "summer" around the Arabian Sea and coastline of Pakistan.

Nettapus coromandelianus

The Pygmy Cotton Teal, it might be supposed, is largely a summer visitor to Pakistan like other endemic ducks such as the Spotbill (*Anas poecilorhyncha*) and Lesser Whistling Teal (*Dendrocygna javanica*). Volume I of the handbook describes it as rare or absent in

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the arid portions of Pakistan (Salim Ali 1968, page 191). Kenneth Eates who compiled the section of the Sind Gazetteer covering birds and mammals in the early 1950's (Sorley Edit., 1968), and who enthusiastically studied the Sind avifauna over more than thirty years service in that Province, described the Cotton Teal as very rare and only to be encountered in one or two swampy bush-studded "dhands" near Sujjawal in Thatta District. It would be fair to state that this little Pygmy Goose is on the increase in Pakistan, and that a considerable population is resident. For example on Hadeiro Lake some fifty-five miles northeast of Karachi, about 150 Cotton Teal can be seen throughout the winter and early summer months though there is some breeding dispersal during the monsoon. In the northern Punjab, near Kalabagh town in Mianwali District, I was surprised to encounter a group of ten Cotton Teal on January 23rd, 1981 in a seepage swamp upstream of the Islam Barrage on the Indus River, and this little group might well be resident also. There have also been frequent recent sightings from the Punjab Salt Range lakes.

Aythya marila

The Scaup Duck could be confused with other Pochards in winter or female plumage and it is known to be a rare duck on the sub-continent. Neither Brigadier Christison nor Dr. Ticehurst could find any records of this duck having been shot on passage in Baluchistan (Christison 1942, Ticehurst 1926-27). Similarly in writing about the birds of Sind, Ticehurst (1922) cast doubts on the reliability of J. A. Murrey's earlier records from Karachi (FAUNA OF BRITISH INDIA, Vol. IV page 462). Murray was curator of the museum at Karachi and a good all round vertebrate zoologist but not particularly experienced as an ornithologist. On

March 27th, 1982 when most palearctic ducks had migrated north from lower Sind, Rolf Passburg and myself watched for some time through a telescope a female Scaup on Haleji Lake which is about 45 miles northeast of Karachi. It was feeding and very reluctant to fly even when we tried to put it up. A few Scaup must winter in the Arabian Sea and overfly Pakistan on migration and thus escape attention.

Stercorarius pomarinus

The Pomarine Skua is a distinctly heavier and larger bird than the Arctic Skua with broader vertical cross barring on its rear flanks. Its central tail feathers are spatulate not pointed as in the Arctic Skua. Passburg and myself now have several sightings of this Skua off Karachi coastal waters. On January 8th, 1982 a pair hunting cooperatively (klepto parasitising) Sandwich Terns (*Sterna sandvicensis*). April 2nd, 1982 another pair observed closely from Cape Monze from the shore. January 4th, 1983 two single birds resting on the sea at the mouth of Ghizri Creek. On all occasions we found this Skua fearless of motor launches and tolerant of very close approach (this contrasts with Humes' experience with Arctic Skuas). Arctic Skuas (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) are less unusual along Karachi sea coast. For example 12 were noted on March 14th, 1982, but we now believe that the Pomarine has been overlooked possibly because of a lack of reliable off-shore observations. The HANDBOOK records only a single authentic sighting off the coast of Sri Lanka in 1912 (Waite 1931).

Apus pacificus

The Himalayan White Rumped Swift is recorded in Volume IV (page 49) of the HANDBOOK as "certainly breeding in the Murree Hills". The only written record is of a small

colony of this Swift discovered in July 13th, 1907 by Major H. A. F. Magrath at Changla Gali in the Galis. He could hear the young calling inside rock clefts. This record was not published by Magrath himself in his records of the Murree Hills and Galis (Magrath 1909) but cited by Whistler in his notes on the 'Birds of Rawalpindi District' (Whistler 1930). It is significant that Colonel Rattray who worked this region very thoroughly in 1903-1904 did not record this Swift (See below under 'Golden Bush Robin'). Swifts are notoriously difficult to identify under conditions of bright sunlight and when feeding, as they normally do, high up in the sky. Since purchasing a summer cottage in the Galis in 1960, I have always been on the lookout for this Swift and failed to find it, particularly during searches around Changla Gali. It seems fair to conclude that they no longer breed in the Murree Hills. However for the first time, on May 16th, 1982 after an unusually late and stormy spring in the Murree Hills region I encountered a flock of about 30 White Rumped Swifts hawking around the summit of Mukhshpuri Mountain. They were accompanied by about 5 House Swifts (*Apus affinis*) and about 15 Common Swifts (*Apus apus*) which greatly facilitated comparison and identification. Mukhshpuri peak is only 9,300 feet high and my cottage stands on its lower slopes so I cannot recall the many scores of times that I have been on its summit. I never saw this Swift after May 16th, despite remaining in the area.

Recent studies of the Common Swift (*Apus apus*) (Bromhall 1980) have revealed the enormous distances that these masters of the air will travel in one day to find suitable feeding space. Twenty-five to thirty miles daily traversal from one point to another being not unusual, so this Mukhshpuri sighting cannot be taken as clear evidence of breeding within

Pakistan and for me its status still remains enigmatic. *Apus apus* breeds throughout the drier Himalayan ranges of Pakistan but not in the Murree Hills. However occasional small groups of this species regularly visit the skies above the Murree Hill range.

Ceryle lugubris

The Greater Pied Kingfisher was once seen (Jan. 8th, 1926) by Hugh Whistler in the Leh Nullah just on the outskirts of Rawalpindi (Whistler, op. cit.) This nullah is now a foetid sewer and devoid of any Kingfisher species. Bates and Lowther in describing the breeding birds of Kashmir only encountered it on the Kishenjanga River in the extreme west (Bates & Lowther 1952). It still occurs today in Kashmir on the Kishenjanga now known as the Neelum River. Volume IV of the HANDBOOK records that it sometimes extends down to adjacent plains areas. In Islamabad, David Corfield has been indefatigable in collecting bird records over the past two years and he discovered a fine male specimen on a small feeder stream (Saidpur Nullah) draining into the newly created reservoir, Rawal Lake just on the outskirts of Islamabad. This was in February 1982. Subsequently a pair were seen by him on May 30th and again on September 29th, 1982 in the same locality. On January 4th, 1983 he kindly showed me both the male and female. The latter was distinctly maroon speckled in the pectoral region, whereas the male was marked with bolder black spots and both were haunting the same tiny stream within half a mile of the lake which lies at an elevation of about 1,000 feet. It seems possible that these birds actually nested last summer and obviously a keen watch will be maintained this year.

Picus chlorolophus

The Small Yellow-naped Woodpecker is re-

corded in Volume IV of the HANDBOOK as occurring in the Himalayas from Dharmasala eastwards through Himachal Pradesh but Pakistan is not mentioned and it was not observed by Whistler or H. Waite, both of whom collected extensively in the Murree Hills. Whistler rejects Captain Marshall's record of this species nesting in the Murree Hills (Whistler, op. cit.). On June 4th, 1982 whilst exploring the lower reaches of Kao Forest which clothes a valley draining northwards from Dunga Gali into the River Jhelum. I was very thrilled to encounter this Woodpecker. It was feeding in a fine stand of *Quercus incana* trees at about 6,500 feet elevation. Lower down the Kao Valley the slopes are bare of trees and terraced for cultivation until the banks of the Jhelum are reached but it seems probable that this rare straggler to the region must have wandered up the Jhelum River.

Pericrocotus roseus

Like the Himalayan White Rumped Swift, the Rosy Minivet had escaped me until last summer. There are skins in the British Museum at Tring from the Siran Nullah, in Mansehra Tehsil of Hazara District collected in 1870 by Unwin, but there were no sightings from the Murree Hills until H. Waite saw this species on May 24th, 1930 at the Forest Rest House in Ghora Gali around 6,000 feet elevation but was unable to collect a specimen (Waite, H. W., Ibis, 1930, page 37). This spot is on the outer or western flanks of the Murree Hills. In May and June 1982 I made several exploratory visits to a remote valley known as Manga which drains this same western slope and which is only accessible by Jeep track. Here on every occasion I encountered one or two Rosy Minivets and enjoyed close views of both sexes. Their contact calls, loud and carry-

ing, as in most minivets are quite distinctive, comprising a rather rapid flutey piping. All available records show a rather local and disjunct distribution for this Minivet throughout the Himalayas. Its preferred habitat seems to be *Pinus roxburghii* with a dense thorny understory of *Cotoneaster* and *Zizyphus mauritiana*.

Sturnus malabaricus

The Grey headed Myna has not been recorded in Pakistan or indeed northwest of Mount Abu in Rajasthan. A party of three birds were watched on January 14th, 1983 feeding on the nectar of *Salmaia malabaricum* flowers. This was along a roadside plantation inside Gharko Forest, a small patch of riverain forest alongside the Indus River in Thatta District of lower Sind. In this region juvenile Rosy Pastors could easily be confused for the Grey Headed Myna as they are the typical Starlings of the area in winter, but I was attracted to these birds by their rufous chestnut throats and bellies. *Sturnus roseus* has a grey-brown breast. Closer examination showed their milky white irides and the leaden blue basal half of their yellow tipped bills as further distinct features. A juvenile *Sturnus roseus* has brown irides and horn coloured bill turning to yellowish at the base. Perhaps a few birds have regularly been wandering in winter into lower Sind and have escaped notice.

Sturnus contra

The Indian Pied Myna is quite an aggressively eruptive species and has for example spread into the Konkan region of Maharashtra State within the past twenty years (Humayun Abdulali, pers. comm.). I myself saw numbers on the outskirts of Borivli. It occurs in Delhi and Ludhiana of the Punjab but had not so far been recorded within Pakistan (HANDBOOK,

Volume 5, page 173). Mr. Z. B. Mirza, the Curator of Islamabad's new Museum of Natural History discovered a colony of about four pairs in Changa Manga irrigated forest plantation in March 1982 and collected a specimen. This locality is some fifteen miles west of Kasur on the main Karachi to Lahore railway line. I searched without success in the same locality later in May 1982 whilst Mr. Mirza, meanwhile in April, had located another colony at Jallo where there is a forest plantation some 2 miles north-east of Lahore city and not far from the Indian border. Mirza has since sighted two Pied Mynas in Sheikhpura District west of Lahore and it appears that this Myna is extending its range westwards.

Megalurus palustris

The Striated Marsh Warbler was never observed along the Chenab River by Whistler who wrote about the birds of Jhang District (Whistler 1922). Volume 8 (page 97) of the HANDBOOK records it as breeding from Pakistan in the Punjab, east through northern India, but the distribution map on page 97 seems to show that it does not extend as far as the Ravi River and hardly enters Pakistan. I cannot trace any published records of its occurrence within what is now Pakistan, nor had I been able to encounter this species until March 29th, 1981 when exploring the marshes and seepage zone upstream of Balloki Barrage on the Ravi River, forty miles downstream from Lahore. I found a pair frequenting rather open *Juncus* sedge and the male was giving its loud and vehement display or song flight. If it had not been for this song I would certainly have mistaken it for a Striated Babbler (*Turdoides earlei*), which it resembles in size and plumage. The late Roger Holmes, with Z. B. Mirza, worked the Balloki Headworks and seepage areas fairly thoroughly in 1968/69 including

visits during the monsoon and they never recorded this bird at that time, so it must be considered as a rare and irregular visitor to Pakistan.

Tarsiger chrysaeus

The Golden Bush Robin is listed in Volume 8 (page 234) of the HANDBOOK as occurring from Hazara eastwards and including the Murree Hills. This is presumably on the basis of Colonel Rattray's account of Bird Nesting in the Murree Hills and Galis". He considered it very rare but located one pair and took the nest, near Murree (presumably in Punjab not Hazara) (Rattray 1904). I have had a lot of trouble with Rattray's records in that a number of birds which he claimed to have collected the eggs of, are never seen in the Murree Hills nowadays, whilst one or two examples can be proved to be mistaken identification. He used a number of local hill men as collectors and does not seem to have preserved any skins though he frequently claimed in his writings to have shot the female off the nest for identification.

Hugh Whistler also recorded finding a nest which he thought was of this species, but it was robbed before he could confirm his identification (Whistler 1930). Again over twenty years I have always hoped to encounter it in the Murree Hills. In 1980 I made a rare October visit to Dunga Gali and with two friends found a female Golden Bush Robin on October 16th alongside a stream in the Haro Valley (which drains southwards to the Peshawar Vale) at about 6,500 feet elevation. It was watched for over an hour making sallies after insects. In flight the golden yellow webs of the outer tail feathers were conspicuous as well as the broad golden eye-brow stripe and a tiny golden spot behind the ear coverts. It seemed rather furtive when not actually for-

aging and generally concealed itself inside a bush. Whether they actually breed in the Murree Hills remains to be substantiated by summer sightings but I have not come across any records after 1926.

Muscicapa rubeculoides

In my previous published note (Roberts 1981) I recorded the first discovery in Pakistan of a singing male Blue Throated Flycatcher on May 26th, 1979 in the Margalla Hills just west of Islamabad city. The following year in May, David Corfield found another male singing in an adjacent ravine some three miles north of my sighting. In 1982 we found one or two singing males in each of the three side ravines in the Margalla Hills, and on June 9th, 1982 I found them in the Manga Valley 15 miles northeast of Islamabad. This flycatcher is therefore, plainly a regular summer visitor to the Murree foothill zone. I never saw it above 3,000 feet elevation. It prefers the damper ravines having streams and a mixture of sub-tropical dry deciduous broad-leaved trees of Indo-Malaysian affinities. Because of its extremely skulking habits even when singing, it is very difficult to see and these records are a perfect example of the way in which an unusual or new bird suddenly seems to be widespread, once its call notes and song have become familiar to the observer.

Terpsiphone paradisi

The Paradise Flycatcher is described as a winter visitor to lower Sind (page 217, Volume 7, HANDBOOK) but the distribution map shows the main wintering population to be confined to Maharashtra and peninsular India. Based on records of Dr. Ticehurst and Kenneth Eates (op. cit.) it is obviously extremely uncommon even on passage in Sind. Ticehurst collected one on October 23rd, 1918, the only one he

ever saw, and J. A. Murray obtained a specimen on December 13th, 1877. For the past nine years that I have been living in Karachi I have noticed that the few remaining patches of riverain forest in Thatta District are the stronghold of this flycatcher both in spring and autumn passage but last year I realised that one or two individuals remained in Gharko Forest (see record above of Grey Headed Myna) throughout the winter. Again this year I have seen at least one female Paradise Flycatcher (probably the same individual, always located by its call) in every month, from early October to February 1st on visits to Gharko, and it can fairly be assumed to be a winter visitor. In fact this winter I also have a resident female Paradise Flycatcher in my garden at Malir and this is my first record of even a transient example of this species for this garden. Exactly the same remarks apply to sightings of the Grey Headed Flycatcher (*Culicicapa ceylonensis*), which I noted for the first time in mid January 1983 in Gharko Forest as well as one winter resident male (he sings territorially every morning) in our Malir garden. Perhaps this extension of wintering grounds into lower Sind for both these two flycatchers may be connected with the recent drought in the Thar Desert and parts of the Rann of Kutch region.

Tichodroma muraria

Not much has been recorded about the breeding of the Wall Creeper from any part of the Himalayan regions. The HANDBOOK mentions the sighting in July of newly fledged nestlings by Meinertzhagen in Ladakh at 6,400 metres. As my high altitude days are definitely over, I was really delighted to discover a Wall Creeper's nest at a comparatively low elevation on June 15th 1982 in the Kaghan Valley of Hazara District. The location was six miles

north of Burawai, at the bottom of the main valley on a sheer one hundred foot high earth and boulder cliff overlooking the river. The exact location is known as Tarli Seri as it is a popular camp for Gujar shepherds. I estimated the altitude at about 11,400 feet. The location was typical alpine habitat and I could only just make out the nest-hole entrance by crawling perilously out onto a ledge, but from a safer vantage point I could watch the parent birds arriving to feed their young. They appeared to be carrying beakfulls of insects with small moths and "lace wing" type flies. The female was browner and darker on the crown, the male noticeably white on the crown with darker and more contrasting plumage. Both birds on one occasion flew from the nest-hole with a faecal sack in their bill, so that parental care by both sexes and nest hygiene can be confirmed though I have not actually been

able to see this recorded in any of the reference books which I have been able to consult. Neither parent bird flew direct into the nest (a hole between a boulder and the eroded earth cliff face). They settled on a projecting rock slab leading up to the nest-hole thus giving some opportunity to examine through binoculars the quantity of insects in their long rapier-like bills. They hopped across the rock face with typical wing flicking motions as though they were still compulsively searching for insects even when their intention was clearly to enter the nest-hole. Hodgsons Mountain Finches (*Leucosticte nemoricola*) were all around and sometimes settled on the boulder protruding below the Wall Creeper's nest. The female ignored them but I saw the male aggressively chase one away before returning to feed its young.

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