

(and almost imperceptibly) outlined with dark brown.

The rufous toned nape was indistinctly marked with dark vertical flecks. The tail was narrowly tipped pale – a greyish colour that shaded to whitish at the extreme tip and had a broad dark brown subterminal band. There were two other dark brown tail bands, both about half as broad as the subterminal band, and all were separated by cleaner greyish bands. The central tail feathers were slightly shorter than the others and the tail bands were slightly less distinct when viewed from below. The tertials were a mid-brown colour, slightly paler than the primary tips and shaded greyer towards the base. The longest tertial had an obvious whitish crescentic tip, a tip that was almost twice as broad on the outer web as on the inner. The folded secondaries were also narrowly tipped whitish and had at least two dark brown bands and intervening brown bands of equal width separating them. The lower scapulars were mottled brown and had whitish patches erratically scattered through them in a pattern reminiscent of several species of *Accipiter*. The smaller wing-coverts were similarly patterned, though slightly more rufous toned. Few details of the underwing pattern were discernible in the brief flight views that we had, though the general impression was of a strikingly pale underwing and a more orange-rufous tone to the underwing coverts and blackish tipped primaries. A hint of a pale comma, reminiscent of that a Red-shouldered Hawk *Buteo lineatus*, was visible on the upperside of the central primaries in one flight view.

Bare parts

Both birds had pale yellowish legs and dark claws and a brighter more intensely yellowish iris. The bill was dark with the cere appearing subtly paler and perhaps with a bluish hue.

Calls

One of the birds gave a quiet and easily overlooked, slightly melancholy, plaintive *pe-weeeo* call, three or four times on one of the occasions that it flew from one perch to another.

On returning to the Koshi Tappu Wildlife Camp, Prakashpur, some six hours later, we checked our notes against the plates and text in Grimmett *et al* (1998). We remained confident of our identification.

Although Jerdon's Baza has not been seen in Nepal before, its north-east Indian range takes it as far west as Darjeeling in West Bengal, and its occurrence was not totally unexpected. It was one of the birds predicted to occur in Nepal by Inskipp and Inskipp (1991). Jerdon's Baza is listed as Near-threatened by BirdLife International (Collar *et al.* 1994).

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Aseasonal flocking in the Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris* in India

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The Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris* is distributed throughout much of the temperate and Arctic parts of the Holarctic region (Peters 1960). Within India, it occurs in the Himalaya and trans-Himalaya, where it is subject to some altitudinal movements. It is one of the commonest birds in its stony upland habitat. The species is reported to keep in pairs or trios during the breeding season, between May and July, and subsequently to form flocks of up to 50 individuals (Ali and Ripley 1987).

Kibber Wildlife Sanctuary (32°5' to 32°30'N and 78°9' to 78°32'E) in the Spiti region of Himachal Pradesh, India, spans an area of 1,400 km², encompassing an altitudinal range of 3,600 to 6,700 m above mean sea level. In the breeding season the species is particularly common between 4,200 and 5,000 m, and breeding pairs are found from May onwards. It lays two eggs in a cup-like, unsheltered depression on the

ground, at the beginning of June. During the 1996 breeding season, two nests with eggs were found on 8 and 12 June; the eggs in one nest hatched on 9 June, and the first young bird fledged on 19 June. The period between May and September in the study area is usually snow-free, except for very mild snow occasionally at the beginning of May. The species starts flocking around the second or third week of August, usually in groups of 10 to 50, but up to 100 have been recorded (pers. obs. and H. H. T. Prins pers. comm. 1998), and the birds move out of the breeding areas at the onset of winter in October.

In June 1999, there was unusually heavy snowfall (cf. Fig. 1, based on data from a meteorological station at Kaza (3,600 m), which is 20 km from Kibber and receives much greater snowfall). Snow started in the study area on the evening of 10 June and continued

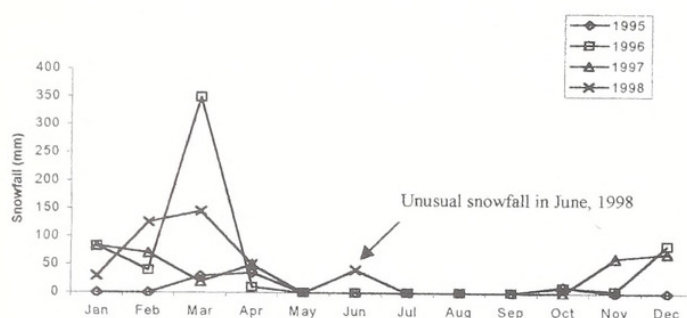


Figure 1. Snowfall recorded between 1994 and mid-1998 at Kaza, Spiti, Indian trans-Himalaya

until the afternoon of 12 June, when about 45 cm had fallen. On the morning of 11 June, Homed Larks started flocking, after apparently having abandoned their nests. At least two flocks of between 100 and 150 birds were observed, but no singles or pairs were to be found. However, as soon as the snow melted on 13 June, the birds reverted back to pairs, the characteristic social structure for the season. They presumably nested again, as indicated by the presence of at least a few fledglings later in the season.

What could be the reason for this temporary, unusual change in social structure? The burial of the nests in snow and subsequent abandonment presumably must have initiated the flocking. Is it plausible that the presence of snow cover initiates post-breeding altitudinal movements in the species? Did the heavy snowfall, together with nest abandonment, activate a pre-migratory response? Had the snow cover lasted much longer, would this flocking have culminated in movement away from the area? Or is it simply that the birds temporarily flocked in patches of relatively greater

food availability or where the weather conditions were less inclement?

Whether any other migratory species in the area displayed such flocking behaviour is not known. Observations on the Homed Lark were facilitated by its rather ubiquitous presence, including around human habitation. On a 5 km trek through the snow during this period, single individuals and pairs of the Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*, Tibetan Snowfinch *Montifringilla adamsi* and Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia* were observed. However, the nests of these species are better protected than those of the Horned Lark, either in cavities between rocks (Black Redstart and Tibetan Snow Finch, pers. obs.), or in a sheltered site, e.g. a shrub thicket in the case of the Rock Bunting (Ali and Ripley 1987). Thus, while this observation of unusual flocking in the Homed Lark succeeds only in raising some questions, it nevertheless indicates that small, open ground nesting species are likely to be especially vulnerable to such climatic singularities.

I observed this unusual event while conducting research on grazing dynamics in the trans-Himalaya, financed by the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO), a body residing under the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). The 1996 observations were made while I was funded by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), New York, through the WCS India Program. My gratitude to the Himachal Pradesh Forest Department for permission to work in the area.

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Cronism in the Forest Owlet *Athene blewitti*

FARAH ISHTIAQ and ASAD R. RAHMANI

Until its rediscovery in November 1997 by P. C. Rasmussen and her colleagues (King and Rasmussen 1997) near Shahada, Maharashtra, India, the Forest Owlet *Athene blewitti* was almost unknown in life. Lack of information on the basic biology and ecology, status and distribution of this Indian endemic species led to a survey starting in June 1998 in which the first vocalizations were recorded and some preliminary behavioural observations made (Rasmussen and Ishtiaq

1999). Since then, we have collected information on the breeding biology, foraging behaviour and vocalizations, which will be discussed in separate papers. Here we report on cronism in the Forest Owlet.

In October 1998, we found a pair engaged in courtship and display and followed them for several days, until they had selected a nest hole. The nest was then monitored throughout the breeding season. Two chicks hatched in December and, 10 days after hatching, they



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