

# Birds of Thakkhola, North Nepal

BY

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(With a photograph)

Observations are recorded on 22 species of birds found in December in the dry zone north of the Dhaulagiri and Annapurna massifs. Birds were studied in an altitudinal range of from 8,400 feet (2562 m.) to 18,000 feet (5485 m.). It was found that above 12,000 feet (3655 m.) species diversity decreases sharply. The Hill Pigeon, *Columba rupestris* Pallas, is reported from Nepal for the first time. In addition, the Stoliczka's Tit-Warbler, *Leptopoeile sophiae* Severtzov, the Eastern Great Rosefinch, *Carpodacus rubicilloides* Przevalski, and the Brown Accentor, *Prunella fulvescens* (Severtzov) were collected for the second time in Nepal.

## INTRODUCTION

Few ornithologists working in Nepal have reported on birds from north of the main Himalayan axis. Fleming (see Rand & Fleming 1957) visited Thakkhola in 1949, and Lowndes (1955) collected in the Managbhot area in 1950. The data presented here were gathered on a trip in Thakkhola during December 1963 and January 1964.

Travel in Nepal is greatly facilitated by scheduled flights of the Royal Nepal Airlines. We flew from Kathmandu to Pokhara where we engaged porters for the remainder of the trip. Muktinath, our ultimate destination in Thakkhola, is a comfortable 18 day round-trip trek from Pokhara. Birds were collected with a .22/410 over-under gun. Altitudes were determined with the aid of a Taylor altimeter. Scientific terminology follows that given by Ripley (1961). Specimens secured are now in the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, and in the Nepal Collection in Kathmandu.

Thakkhola is situated along the Kali Gandaki River, between 28 degrees and 29 degrees N. latitude, with Mustang on the north and Baglung to the south. Dhaulagiri (26,785 feet above msl) looms to the west and Annapurna (26,452 feet) rises on the south-east. This is the land of the Thakkhalis, a people widely known for their trading ability and hospitality.

Part of Thakkhola lies north of the Dhaulagiri-Annapurna massifs where the dry climate supports a number of xeric-type thorn bushes plus

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several grasses (see Kihara 1955). *Cupressus* occurs in the lower valleys with a recumbent *Juniperus* clinging to slopes up to c. 16,000 feet (4875 m.).

The remarkable Gandaki gorge between Dhaulagiri and Annapurna (see Hagen 1961) is a definite hindrance to human travel, but does not seem to be a noticeable barrier to the north-south movements of birds. For example we found common mynas, *Acridotheres tristis* (Linnaeus), just south of the gorge and also noted six perched on tops of roofs in Ghasa, the first village above the gorge.

North of the gorge, the river-bed rises for c. 10 kilometres, then abruptly levels off, narrows to about 50 metres at a point we call the 'gap', and then broadens into a valley approximately 800 metres wide. Here the river runs in several shallow channels across the stony floor. To the north of the 'gap' the landscape appears largely barren with dark dots of *Cupressus* and *Juniperus* (Photo), while to the south the valley sides are clothed with *Pinus* and *Taxus* over a shrub layer of bamboos.



Looking north from Jomsom. The altitude of the Kali Gandaki Valley floor is c. 9,000 feet (2745 m.). *Juniperus* dots the slopes in the background. 19 December, 1963.

The bird life also changes noticeably from south of the gap to north of it. The following sample illustrates this change :

Species noted up to within 1 km. south of the gap.

Whitecapped Redstart, *Chaimarrornis leucocephalus* (Vigors)

Spotted Forktail, *Enicurus maculatus* Vigors

Whistling Thrush, *Myiophoneus caeruleus* (Scopoli)



Species noted down to within 1 km. north of the gap.

Rock Bunting, *Emberiza cia* Linnaeus

Raven, *Corvus corax* Linnaeus

Redbilled Chough, *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax* (Linnaeus)

Species noted within 1 km. on both sides of the gap.

Jungle Crow, *Corvus macrorhynchos* Wagler

White Wagtail, *Motacilla alba* Linnaeus

Wall Creeper, *Tichodroma muraria* (Linnaeus)

A listing of species noted within 3 km. south and 3 km. north of the gap would show considerably greater divergence and the transition from the avifauna of the southern slopes to the birds of the dry northern slopes occurs in less than six kilometres.

The altitudinal distribution of birds is partially influenced by weather : a severe snow storm is known to drive birds down hill. In 1949 my father's party was caught in a heavy snow fall during which they collected a number of high altitude species down in the main Kali valley (Rand & Fleming 1957). We also prepared for snow but experienced 20 days of cloudless skies and consequently found birds at a higher altitude than those recorded in 1949.

TABLE 1

SPECIES DIVERSITY OF BIRDS AT DIFFERENT ALTITUDES IN NORTH THAKKHOLA IN DECEMBER

Altitude*	Number of species noted
9.0 (2745 m.)	15
10.0	12
11.0	12
12.0	11
13.0	5
14.0	6
15.0	7
16.0	7
17.0	2
18.0 (5485 m.)	0

\* in thousands of feet.

Table 1 shows the number of species observed in N. Thakkhola at intervals of 1,000 feet (305 m.) altitude. The most noticeable change in the species diversity occurs between 12,000 feet (3655 m.) and 13,000 feet (3960 m.). We felt that the reduction of birds above 12,000 feet is largely due to the timber line (of what few trees there are) at roughly 12,000 feet and to the absence of villages with fields and hedgerows above 12,000 feet. Relatively little change in the species composition occurs from



9,000 to 12,000 feet, but then there is a marked shift after which the small group of species occurring above 13,000 feet remains relatively stable. The birds recorded at 16,000 feet (4875 m.) were : the Golden Eagle, *Aquila chrysaetos* (Linnaeus) ; the Himalayan Griffon, *Gyps himalayensis* Hume ; the Snow Cock, *Tetraogallus* sp. ; the Yellowbilled Chough, *Pyrrhocorax graculus* (Linnaeus) ; Jungle Crow, *Corvus macrorhynchos* Wagler ; the Alpine Accentor, *Prunella collaris* (Scopoli), and the Red-breasted Rosefinch, *Carpodacus puniceus* (Blyth). Of these seven species, only the Jungle Crow was seen throughout the altitudinal range under consideration. As expected, all species noted above 9,000 feet (2745 m.) were of Palaearctic affinity.

#### ACCOUNT OF SPECIES

##### ***Aquila chrysaetos* (Linnaeus)**

Golden eagles have not been collected in Nepal for well over a hundred years, but they have been seen in Central and Eastern Nepal (Biswas 1960 : 287). We found them conspicuous but infrequent between 12,000 and 16,000 feet on the slopes above Tinigoan. On 22 Dec. we were climbing along the main path about 6 km. above Tinigoan when we came over a slight rise to surprise a Golden Eagle as it attacked a domestic goat. The huge bird, with its head bent forward, talons extended and wings flapping high over the shoulders, swiftly closed in on the ram which had strayed about 25 m. from the main herd. Evidently at the last instant, the eagle decided that the animal was too large for it swerved to the side and hit the ground less than a metre from the goat. At this point we thought the ram would launch a counter attack but it stood motionless, without even turning its head. After approximately two seconds the eagle took to the air and quickly ascended into the sky. Soon it was joined by another and after some minutes of aerial acrobatics, both birds flew to projections in the yellow-brown cliffs above us.

##### ***Gypaëtus barbatus* (Linnaeus)**

The Lämmergeier is not generally common in Nepal (Biswas 1960 : 290-291). North of Tukche we frequently met this large scavenger up to an altitude of 10,000 feet (3050 m.). On Dec. 18 we ate lunch behind a stone wall and simultaneously watched a lämmergeier as it fought the 40 mile per hour wind (which blows down from Dhaulagiri and up over Mustang) while looking for food on the valley floor.

##### ***Gyps himalayensis* Hume**

The Himalayan Griffon Vulture is the high altitude vulture of the Thakkhola area. We often saw it sailing up to at least 16,000 feet as it moved over the grassy hills of the region.



**Tetraogallus** sp.

Two flocks of Snow Cocks were seen on the ridges above Tinigoan. Eight birds were noted hopping up stone scree on a north slope while a group of three birds first ran and then flushed from a grass and juniper covered south slope.

We were anxious to find the Tibetan Partridge, *Perdix hodgsoniae* (Hodgson). Deva Nur Singh of Jomsom showed us where they had been collected in 1949 (Rand & Fleming 1957 : 60) but in 1963 neither birds nor tracks were apparent. Mr. Singh said that for some reason this partridge has been rare here for the last several years. It may be coincidental, but the partridge population apparently declined when a domestic yak herd formerly located here was wiped out through disease.

**Alectoris graeca** (Meisner)

We were told that the Chukor Partridge is common in the fields around Jomsom and that they are seen in large flocks. We did not see great numbers of this partridge, but did collect one bird from a barren slope at 9,000 feet (2745 m.) and saw others in the fields of Tinigoan.

**Columba rupestris** Pallas

The Hill Pigeon has not been reported from Nepal (Biswas 1960 : 530-531). On 19 Dec. we were approaching Zarkot village at 11,000 feet (3350 m.) when a flock of four of these birds flew over us and landed in a fallow field. We stalked to within 90 metres of the birds, but they were shy and flushed quickly so we were unable to secure a specimen.

**Columba livia** Gmelin

Blue Rock Pigeons were common near villages along the Kali Gandaki valley floor. It is of interest to note that Snow Pigeons, *Columba leuconota* Vigors, were not seen in Thakkhola for they had moved down to their winter quarters. We met them at 5,000 feet (1525 m.), south of the main Gandaki gorge, where we noted several large flocks frequenting the cliffs near Dana.

**Pyrrhocorax graculus** (Linnaeus)

The Yellowbilled Chough was common above Tinigoan and Muktinath. On the evening of 22 Dec., while at our camp above Tinigoan, we watched a hundred birds or more come noisily down the hill, feeding from one juniper bush to another. When one of these birds was shot, the rest immediately wheeled into the air and in less than two minutes had ascended three thousand feet elevation and disappeared over the ridge. The next day we collected another specimen at about 14,500 feet (4420 m.) as a flock, moving from juniper to juniper, passed us.



***Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax* (Linnaeus)**

Large flocks (of over 50 birds) flew about the walls of the Gandaki valley and fed in fallow and plowed fields along the river. In Managbhot these two species of Choughs are often in company (Lowndes 1955 : 30) but we did not see them together here.

***Corvus macrorhynchos* Wagler**

Jungle Crows were common around Tukche and were seen either singly or in pairs up to 16,000 feet (4875 m.).

***Corvus corax* Linnaeus**

Ravens have not officially been collected in Nepal (Biswas 1963 : 654) although they have been seen by many mountaineering parties. We noted solitary Ravens on two occasions, both times close to the waters of the Gandaki. It appears that Ravens regularly straggle south as far as Tukche (8,400 feet) during the winter.

***Leptopoeile sophiae* Severtzov**

The Stoliczka's Tit-Warbler is a common bird of Thakkhola. This species was first collected in Nepal by Dr. R. Fleming, Sr. and he reported it as rare in 1949 (Rand & Fleming 1957 : 173). We found these interesting little birds in the *Cupressus* stands just north of Tukche (at 8,400 feet) up to the hedges and bushes around Zarkot (at 11,000 feet). They were usually in pairs or small groups. At one point we watched a flock of six birds as they moved along close to the ground but with frequent pauses to climb atop small bushes. From here, with their tails cocked in the air much in the manner of the Magpie-Robin, *Copsychus saularis* (Linnaeus), they would call loudly and then fly off to the base of the next bush.

***Phoenicurus schisticeps* (Gray)**

The colourful Whitethroated Redstart was seen sparingly in three places : along the Gandak River just north of Tukche, around the Mukti-nath shrine at 11,300 feet, and near our camp above Tinigoan at 12,500 feet. On the evening of 23 December I was waiting near a spring when suddenly a bird 'whooshed' over my head in the manner of a diving falcon and landed on a *Juniperus* tree nearby. It immediately was collected and turned out to be a male Whitethroated Redstart that apparently was coming for a drink from the pool of water formed from the sun-melted ice.

***Prunella collaris* (Scopoli)**

Solitary Alpine Accentors were seen in several places. One frequented the ledges of the Mukti-nath dharamshala while others were seen



up to 16,000 feet. These birds often sat on a cold boulder in the midst of snow and never appeared very energetic. A specimen collected below our Tinigoan camp, at 11,000 feet, was the lowest altitude bird seen.

***Prunella rubeculoides*** (Horsfield and Moore)

The Robin Accentor did not appear to be common in this area. On the evening of 23 December we were huddled around our fire in a yak shelter when at sunset a bird that looked like a bush robin hopped up and perched on a vertical stick just outside the low door. Soon it dipped down into the cover of the surrounding bushes. When pursued it led a merry chase through and around several bushes, often doubling back on its path to emerge at a completely unexpected spot. Finally it was collected and identified as the Robin Accentor.

***Prunella fulvescens*** (Severtzov)

We found a small party of Brown Accentors near the path above Kag Beni at an altitude of c. 10,000 feet. Eight birds were feeding together on rock scree above the path. On the first stalk I disturbed the flock but they flew only a little way to settle again on the ground and in a small thorn bush. When a specimen was collected from the thorn bush, the flock disappeared over the ridge and was not seen again.

***Tichodroma muraria*** (Linnaeus)

Solitary Wall Creepers were often seen along the main Gandak valley but did not appear frequently above Jomsom.

***Passer montanus*** (Linnaeus)

Tree Sparrows were extremely common around all of the large villages in Thakkhola. The largest flock, of some 150 birds, was seen near Zarkot at 11,000 feet (3350 m.).

***Leucosticte nemoricola*** (Hodgson)

Hodgson's Mountain Finches were seen infrequently. Flocks with over 50 birds perched in bare trees both slightly above and slightly below Zarkot at 11,000 feet.

***Carpodacus rubicilloides*** Przevalski

The Eastern Great Rosefinch was collected in this area in 1949 (Rand & Fleming 1957 : 205). We found this species of Rosefinch in bushes bordering fields near Zarkot at c. 11,000 feet.

***Carpodacus puniceus*** (Blyth)

The Redbreasted Rosefinch was the high altitude finch above Muktinath. We met one party, consisting of two birds in brown plumage



and one in pale crimson plumage, amongst rocks at 15,000 feet (4575 m.). Another bird, a male, was observed as it sang a short, musical melody while perched on a large rock in the midst of a snow field at 16,000 feet. Several other Rosefinches were seen and collected in Thakkhola. They were especially common in hedges bordering fields where the most numerous appeared to be the Beautiful Rosefinch, *Carpodacus pulcherrimus* (Moore).

### **Emberiza cia** Linnaeus

The Rock Bunting was only recently collected in Nepal (Biswas 1963 : 191-192). We found it to be one of the commonest birds of Thakkhola up to an altitude of 12,000 feet (3655 m.) and as it must be common in other suitable areas, it is strange that it was not collected until 1949.

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