

# SOME OBSERVATIONS OF SCARCE BIRDS IN NEPAL<sup>1</sup>

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Sightings of three species of birds previously unrecorded in Nepal are documented. Brief details of a further eleven species of ornithological significance to Nepal are also presented.

## INTRODUCTION

From December 1978 to February 1979 the authors, R. Filby, C. Murphy and L. Norton visited Nepal to observe birds. C. Murphy and N. J. Redman made a return visit from April to June 1979. During these two periods 585 species of birds were identified, three of which: Baer's Pochard *Aythya baeri*, Sanderling *Calidris alba* and Common Gull *Larus canus*, were recorded for the first time in Nepal. The main purpose of this paper is to document these sightings. Brief details are also given of other species seen for which there are very few previous Nepalese records or for which information on breeding or unusual behaviour was gathered.

A wide variety of habitats and altitude zones in central and eastern Nepal was visited. Areas of significant ornithological interest included the Jomosom trek (January), Helambu/Gosainkund trek (May), Kathmandu Valley, central tarai, Ilam district and Kosi Barrage. The latter proved to be of particular interest since many scarce species were found here, including all three new species for Nepal. We visited Kosi

Barrage on four separate occasions, 10-13 February, 20-21 February, 17-20 April and briefly on 23-24 April. During these four short periods totalling eight full days, the majority of our time was spent in areas on the north side of the barrage.

## NEW SPECIES FOR NEPAL

### BAER'S POCHARD *Aythya baeri* (Radde)

Baer's Pochard was first identified on 12 February 1979 when two males and one female were seen on open water just north of the Kosi Barrage amongst a flock of several hundred *Aythya* spp. On 20 February we saw this species again and counted at least 17 males and 3 females. Prolonged observation of both sexes was possible and comparisons were made with accompanying Tufted Duck *A. fuligula*, Common Pochard *A. ferina* and Ferruginous Duck (White-eyed Pochard) *A. nyroca*.

In shape Baer's Pochard was comparable to Ferruginous Duck and Common Pochard, and intermediate in size.

Males were readily identifiable by the combination of iridescent green head and rich chestnut breast, unlike any other *Aythya* species. Other features included white belly, dusky brown flanks, white under-tail coverts and gleaming white eye. Females were similar in coloration to the males but duller, the

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dusky head showing only a slight greenish gloss. At a distance, female Baer's Pochard appeared confusingly similar to other female *Aythya* species. Common Pochard and Tufted Duck, however, both lacked white undertail coverts and Ferruginous Duck could generally be separated by its uniform chestnut colouration, less white on the belly and flanks, and smaller size.

Baer's Pochard breeds in eastern Siberia wintering primarily in eastern China. In the Indian sub-continent, Ripley (1982) states that it is an uncommon and erratic winter visitor to Manipur, Assam and associated states, Bangladesh and Bengal; also recorded from Bihar and Maharashtra. Ali and Ripley (1978) suggest that it may be less rare than records indicate. There are no previous records from Nepal and this species was not seen at Kosi in the subsequent three winters (C. and T. Inskipp *in litt.*).

#### SANDERLING *Calidris alba* (Pallas)

A single Sanderling was discovered at Kosi Barrage on 11 February 1979 feeding on a mudbank with nine Dunlin *Calidris alpina* and fifty Little Stints *C. minuta*. It was not seen on subsequent days.

In size it was considerably larger than Little Stint and about the same as Dunlin but with a shorter, straight bill. Bill and legs were black. The very pale plumage, pale grey above and pure white below, served to distinguish the bird at some distance. A small black shoulder patch and black primary tips were also noted, and in flight it showed a more prominent white wing bar than Dunlin or Little Stint. A distinctive feature was its rapid feeding action. All the observers are familiar with this species in Europe.

Sanderling breeds in the Arctic, wintering on coasts almost throughout the world.

Although a regular winter visitor to the coasts of India, it has apparently not been previously recorded inland in the subcontinent (Ali and Ripley 1980). Our sighting constitutes the first record from Nepal.

#### COMMON GULL *Larus canus* Linnaeus

On 12 February 1979 a Common Gull was found amongst a group of Black-headed Gulls *L. ridibundus* resting on a sandbank at Kosi Barrage. It remained in the area all day and allowed direct comparison with the Black-headed Gulls and also with Brown-headed Gulls *L. brunnicephalus* and a single adult Slender-billed Gull *L. genei*. It was still present on 21 February. Despite its rarity in Nepal, Common Gull is a familiar bird in Europe and was readily identified by all the observers as a first-year bird.

In appearance it was an elegant, medium-sized gull with a rounded head and a small yellowish bill with a dark tip. The head, neck and underparts were white with some faint brownish markings on the sides of the breast and head. A pale whitish oval patch on the closed wing contrasted with the grey mantle. The protruding primaries were dark brown and the legs were pale yellowish. In flight it showed a broad whitish band across the inner wing, contrasting with the brown flight feathers. The tail was white with a broad dark terminal band.

The Common Gull was easily separated from all other gulls present by its size, shape and colour of bare parts. Black-headed Gull was noticeably smaller and slimmer with reddish bill and legs. Brown-headed and Slender-billed Gulls, although of similar size, were different in shape and also had reddish bills and legs. The only species of gull likely to cause confusion within the Indian subcontinent is the Herring Gull *L. argentatus*, but this species is considerably larger and deeper-

ched with a more angled head and much stouter bill. Its wings are broader and flight heavier.

Common Gull is a widely distributed and abundant holarctic species breeding across the northern palearctic and moving south in winter. Surprisingly it has rarely been recorded from the Indian subcontinent. It is not included in Ali and Ripley (1981) or Ripley (1982) and the only records from the Indian subcontinent of which we are aware are two individuals from the Punjab area of Pakistan: L. J. Dijkzen, F. Koning and A. Vittery saw an adult at Rasul Barrage on 27 January 1974 and A. Vittery identified a first winter bird at Rawal Lake, near Islamabad on 17 February 1974 (A. Vittery, pers. comm.). Our sighting represents the first record from Nepal. Subsequently, an adult in winter plumage has been observed at Phewa Tal near Pokhara on 21 January 1981 (del-Nevo and Ewins 1981).

OTHER RECORDS OF OUTSTANDING INTEREST  
FULVOUS WHISTLING DUCK (Large Whistling Teal) *Dendrocygna bicolor*

A single individual of this species was identified amongst a flock of 1500 Lesser Whistling Duck (Teal) *D. javanica* at Kosi Barrage on 12 February 1979. This record constitutes the only sighting of Fulvous Whistling Duck in Nepal this century. Although overlooked by recent authors, a Hodgson specimen from Nepal is listed by Sharpe (1894). The specimen is still present in the British Museum and was located by C. Inskipp in 1981. In the Indian subcontinent this species is scattered widely, but sporadically in many areas and everywhere rather scarce. It is apparently more common in Bengal and Bangladesh (Ali and Ripley 1978).

RUDDY SHELDUCK *Tadorna ferruginea*

A pair with 8 newly-hatched young was

present on a lake at Gosainkund on 27 May 1979 at an altitude of approximately 4300 m. This represents the first positive breeding record for Nepal (R. L. Fleming Jr., pers. comm.).

WHITE-TAILED (SEA) EAGLE *Haliaeetus albicilla*

Seven birds were seen from December to February including three at Kosi Barrage. An adult at Begnas Tal near Pokhara on 2 January 1979 was seen to catch a Purple Gallinule (Purple Moorhen) *Porphyrio porphyrio* in flight. The gallinule was subsequently dropped and defied repeated attempts at recapture by diving. Attacks on flying birds are apparently rare (Cramp *et al.* 1980).

BLACK-TAILED GODWIT *Limosa limosa*

A flock of 29 was seen at Kosi Barrage on 18 April 1979. In the 19th century Hodgson obtained at least one specimen in April and five between mid-August and late October (no year given), from the Kathmandu Valley. He wrote: "small flocks feed by day on chours or moist cultivated plots". J. Scully obtained a specimen on 7 September 1876 or 1877 in the Kathmandu Valley (Scully 1879), stating that "the godwit is a winter visitant to the Nepal Valley, but does not appear to be common there". In this century, a single bird was observed in the Kathmandu Valley in August 1978 (Fleming *et al.* 1979) and a specimen was taken at Chobar on 30 August 1981 by H. S. Nepali. There have been at least five other records at Kosi Barrage in Spring since 1979 (C. and T. Inskipp *in litt.* 1983).

LITTLE OWL *Athene noctua*

A single Little Owl was found at Kagbeni in the upper Kali Gandaki Valley on 14-15 January 1979 at an altitude of approximately 2800 m. This species was first recorded in Nepal

in July 1978 when two specimens were collected in Dolpo (H. S. Nepali pers. comm.). It has been seen subsequently at Kagbeni and nearby at Muktinath by several observers (C. and T. Inskipp *in litt.* 1983).

INDIAN CLIFF SWALLOW *Hirundo fluvicola*

Up to ten birds were present at Begnas Tal near Pokhara on 3 January 1979. This constitutes the second record from Nepal, the first being a single bird at Kosi on 10 April 1975 (Fleming *et al.* 1979). There have been at least five subsequent records (C. and T. Inskipp *in litt.* 1983).

RUFIOUS-BELLIED ROBIN *Tarsiger (Erithacus) hyperythrus*

A pair was feeding young on 24-25 May 1979 at about 3500 m on the west side of the Gandak-Kosi watershed. The nest was not seen but was sited on or close to the ground at the side of a shady wooded ravine. A second female was found nearby. Fleming *et al.* (1979) state that the species is known from the Kosi-Gandaki watershed ridge eastward but there have subsequently been several records west to the Kali Gandaki (C. and T. Inskipp *in litt.* 1983). The nest is undescribed (R. L. Fleming, Jr., pers. comm.).

EYE-BROWED THRUSH (DARK THRUSH)

*Turdus obscurus*

Two birds were identified at Kokarna in the Kathmandu Valley on 20 December 1978 amongst a flock of thrushes comprising five species. Excluding a Hodgson specimen of unknown origin this was the first record of this species for the Kathmandu Valley. All other records are from East Nepal (C. and T. Inskipp, pers. comm.).

DUSKY THRUSH *Turdus naumani*

An adult was found at Lete in the Kali

Gandaki Valley on 22-24 January 1979 in the company of a flock of sixty Dark-throated Thrushes *T. ruficollis*. A second bird, duller in plumage and presumed to be in first winter plumage, was discovered on 4 February 1979 at Gokarna in the Kathmandu Valley, also amongst a flock of Dark-throated Thrushes. In the 19th Century at least two specimens were obtained by Hodgson in the Kathmandu Valley in January (Gray and Gray 1846, Seeborn 1881). The only subsequent reference to Dusky Thrush in Nepal is a report of large parties on Nagar Jong at about 1500 m in Spring 1948 and a few in the Kathmandu Valley the following winter (Proud 1949). There have been several individuals reported since our observations, in both the Kali Gandaki and Kathmandu Valleys (C. and T. Inskipp *in litt.* 1983). In the Indian subcontinent, Dusky Thrush is stated to be an irregular winter visitor, rare in the west and more frequent in the east (Ripley 1982).

YELLOW-BROWED TIT *Sylviparus modestus*

An occupied nest hole of a pair of Yellow-browed Tits was found on 2 May 1979 on the slopes of Phulchowki in the Kathmandu Valley, at an altitude of 2000 m. The pair was feeding young. This was only the third nest ever discovered of this species. Full details have already been published (Lohrl 1981).

SCARLET-BACKED FLOWERPECKER *Dicaeum cruentatum*

A male and two females were seen at Dharan in East Nepal on 21 April 1979. This is only the second record of this species in Nepal (Fleming *et al.* 1979).

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