—*A flight down memory lane*—
The little brown puzzles

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In front of me is a table calendar produced jointly by WWF-India and the North India Bird Network. I specially ordered it because on the front sheet is a wonderful photograph of a pair of Crab-Plovers *Dromas ardeola* in flight. The calendar theme is 'waders', many of which are 'brown puzzles' but, the theme of this article is not these mud-dibbling puzzles, but another large group of birds collectively known as 'warblers'. The reason I mention this calendar is because all the photographs, and excellent ones at that, are shot with digital cameras, by a new breed of 'hunters' stalking the countryside. One of them has made ornithological history of sorts by photographing a warbler, recorded by some intrepid '*angrez*' sharpshooter, more than a century ago—the Large-billed Reed-Warbler *Acrocephalus orinus*. Apart from a specimen collected in the hot, rather barren gorge of the Sutlej in Himachal Pradesh, there has been no further record of what is nothing but an enigmatic species—till now. The enigma remains, but at least we now know that the species continues to exist. Quite possibly, with more such modern day hunters on the prowl, there is no reason why we should not have increasing reports of its occurrence and come to learn that it is not as rare as previously thought. This mysterious warbler has also been recently reported from Bangkok in Thailand and from the photograph of the bird held in hand, it is clear that it was caught in a 'mistnet'. Himachal–Calcutta–Bangkok suggests that we have here a migrant that breeds possibly along the foothills of the Himalaya, and migrates eastward over the flood plains of River Ganga to winter in South-east Asia.

Clement Francis

Ashy Prinia *Prinia socialis*

Why am I dwelling on something that is of very recent occurrence when this column deals with happenings in the earlier years of my life? The past has a bearing on the present and events in the present trigger memories of the past. This rather exciting discovery reminds me of the very first Thick-billed Warbler *A. aedon* that was snared during one of the mist-netting operations in Saurashtra. We held a warbler that we had never seen before, nor had it been known to occur anywhere close to our area! It was essentially an eastern species. We subsequently caught several more specimens and in the process started recognising it in the field where we had passed it over as the Indian Great Reed-Warbler *A. stentoreus*. Since then I always give a second look to every reed-warbler I come across. Possibly, the same thing will happen with intrepid photographers 'shooting' warblers. Mistnetting and photography are two very different levels of effort. The former is rather placid, where catching a bird is a matter of chance. The latter demands extremely determined pursuit and, of course, considerable expertise in operating the camera. From the excellent photographs, I am sure a determined birdwatcher plodding through marshland might start recognising more and more warblers as being the 'bird of the century'. But that is anticipating the future; it is the past that I have to write on.

The first edition (1941) of Salim Ali's *Book of Indian birds* described, if I recollect correctly, only three warblers: the Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius*, the Ashy Prinia *Prinia socialis* and the Plain Prinia *P. inornata*. The first two are familiar garden birds specially resorting to large-foliaged shrubs to construct their artfully stitched leaf nests. Both are easy to identify on account of their rather long, cocked tails and distinctive colours, the tailorbird being green on the upper parts and white below and the ashy prinia ash grey above with a pinkish-suffused-white below. During the onset of the hot season, both birds would start calling incessantly; the former with a rather loud repetitious '*Choup-choup-choup*' and

the latter with a more subdued, musical jingle. The Ashy Prinia would also produce a snapping sound that I had believed was produced by the bill; it was much later, when I had a pair regularly haunting my small arboured portico in Gandhinagar, that I realised it was produced by the flicking of the wings. The Plain Prinia never came into gardens, but was a bird that drew attention to itself as it flitted about, over stands of tall reeds in water, and irrigated sugarcane and sorghum and other millet crops that were so widely grown during the rainy season, before the introduction of groundnut—as a cash crop. I always marvelled at the long tail of this otherwise non-descript prinia. The other three prinias that I developed considerable fondness for are birds of thorn jungle with grass, which is a feature of the vegetation of the Saurashtra hills. They were: Franklin's Prinia *P. hodgsonii*, Rufous-fronted Prinia *P. buchanani* and Jungle Prinia *P. sylvatica*. Franklin's was the smallest of the prinias, with the shortest tail, but what it lost out in size and length of tail, it made up by its almost maniacal diving flight, from one exposed perch to another, constantly uttering a frenzied jingling song. It made its nest among the rank, large-leaved monsoon weeds, constructing a hybrid sort of dwelling comprising the stitched variety of the tailorbird and the grass purse design of the other prinias. I have spent delightful moments photographing these little birds in which the male is quite distinct with a grey band interrupted with white on the breast. I have also spent many hours photographing and observing the Rufous-fronted Prinia at its nest. The nest, a ball of grass with an entrance on one side, is invariably placed among light grass close to the ground and under a small thorny shrub. I have had only a couple of opportunities to sit up at a Jungle Prinia's nest, which is a loosely woven grass-blade purse placed among rather taller grass. The Plain Prinia constructs a similar nest, but among reeds and is more difficult to locate. Both, the Franklin's and Jungle Prinias display during the breeding season—with an undulating flight, from one vantage point to another, constantly uttering their distinctive, not unpleasant, jingles. The loudest is the Jungle Prinia, which also is the largest.

Clement Francis

Jungle Prinia *Prinia sylvatica*

I got to know the Brown Prinia *P. crinigera* during my earlier treks through the Garhwal foothills of the Himalaya. This is a rather large, dark prinia with heavy streaking on the upper parts, but like its *Prinia* cousins, calls incessantly from exposed perches, drawing attention to itself by its frantic, undulating flight, in which the long tail seems to, all the time, upset the bird. I had greatly wanted to see the small Graceful Prinia *P. gracilis*, which I read was a bird of semi-desert country, haunting the smallest of desert shrubs and grass tufts. I came across the delightful little bird, with its long tail and almost insect-like jingle, among tall grass of sand dunes on the several coral islands of the Gulf of Kachchh.

What has struck me is the fact that all these resident warblers have very specific niches, or vegetation types, to thrive in, and their numbers have drastically fallen on account of the heavy denudation of the countryside. This coupled with uncontrolled use of pesticides and inorganic manures are the causes, I fear, of all the otherwise rather plentiful species being extirpated over wide areas of country.

Initially, members of this group seem triflingly confusing. However, their individual characteristics soon become apparent and, as I mentioned, their habitat preferences make identification easy. I came to understand the two words used by ornithology: 'jizz' (a bird's distinctiveness) and 'niche' (the species' preferred habitat). I have for long been emphasising the absolute need to steer away from monocultures in agriculture and aforestation precisely because we tend to destroy niches and impose a dreary uniformity that is not conducive to the natural diversity of life forms that otherwise occupy even the smallest of such areas. Needless to say, application of pesticides must be frowned on since a variety of birds depend on insects and their grubs and pupae; even the mainly seed-eating sparrows, weavers and finches feed their young on insects that are abundant during the monsoon rains. Sound conservation simply must emphasise natural regeneration of vegetation cover.

Recently, bird names have been quite arbitrarily changed, and the wren-warblers of old are referred to as long-tailed warblers or just prinias. In the subcontinent we have half a dozen more species, to see which I would have to travel to the swamps bordering the *terai* along the Himalaya and the swamps of the Indo-Gangetic plain. In the eastern Himalaya are two species of rather colourful tailorbirds—but tailorbirds certainly do not qualify being considered 'little brown puzzles'. In fact, even prinias are not that confusing. However, they are birds that guide us to the other warblers that are indeed confusing to the extreme. These are all winter visitors across the lowlands south of the Himalaya and many breed at various elevations, during summer, up the valleys of the great mountain range. My tryst with these truly confusing birds will form matter for the next issue of *Indian Birds*.