Letters to the Editor

Single extralimital bird records do not constitute range extensions

Categorising a single record from outside a bird's normal distribution as a range extension is a common mistake made by authors. We have found several reports where range extensions were declared inappropriately or prematurely (Acharya & Vijayan 2007; Narayanan *et al*. 2008; Srinivasan *et al*. 2009; Singh 2010; Sondhi 2011; Ganpule 2013; Kaushik 2013). In this note, we highlight this issue and suggest better ways to make a case of range extension. We also present examples of reports where authors exhibited the right amount of caution in interpreting their records, or sufficiently delved into the literature to present records other than their own to bolster their case.

Just as "one swallow does not make a summer," a single extralimital bird record is just a 'snap-shot' and does not by itself constitute a range extension. It often requires a series of records in that general area over an extended period of time, augmented by reports from intervening areas (between the known distribution and the current record), to warrant a range extension. This is especially true in the case of more vagile species capable of long distance flights. Birds often show up singly or in small numbers far from their normal range as strays or storm-blown vagrants. These records would be "outliers" on a map. Ornithologists do not plot bird distributions by connecting the farthest points of occurrence, as they would for plotting territories of nesting birds. Imagine the confusion that would prevail if every storm-blown inland pelagic bird sighting is treated as a range extension—the bird would likely be declassified as pelagic! Reports from intervening areas also help fill the 'gaps' (*see* Barve 2010), although they are not absolutely necessary because disjunct populations exist within the normal range of many species.

Single bird records are mere bricks that help us construct the overall edifice of a bird's distribution. But they are invaluable, especially for a country like India, where, unlike in countries where birding is very popular, we have glaring gaps in our knowledge of bird distributions. Authors wanting to make a strong case of range extension must compile several records in addition to their own, and show maps contrasting the published known distribution with locations of all reported records since then (*see* Fig. 1 for a model example). Three notable compilations were made by Sadananda *et al*. (2010), Praveen (2011), and Mashru (2012) for White-naped Tit *Parus nuchalis*, Lesser Fish-Eagle *Ichthyophaga humilis*, and Ultramarine Flycatcher *Ficedula superciliaris*, respectively. All three of these reports were strengthened by maps showing the exact locations of new records, although none of them showed the known published range. Similarly, Siddiqui & Balachandran (2009) convincingly presented a series of Bar-headed Geese *Anser indicus* sightings from southern Tamil Nadu, far south of its known wintering range, as "further evidence of the increased range" of the species in southern India. Note that these authors demonstrated a pattern of occurrences outside the known range.

When there are just a few records outside the known range, it is best to alert birders of these occurrences and refrain from declaring it a range extension. Tiwari & Varu (2010) reported new records of Brown-breasted Flycatcher *Muscicapa muttui* in Gujarat and appropriately conclude, "In the absence of more and regular sightings, it would be prudent to suggest that the above sightings are of vagrant birds." They also alert birdwatchers to "the possibility of these birds occurring towards the west of their known migratory route in peninsular India." Veena & Mehta (2012) presented a photographic record of Green Imperial Pigeon *Ducula aenea* 130 kms from the nearest published site from Maharastra and called for further surveys "to determine if this sighting represents a vagrant or a resident population outside its known range." Mashru (2012) urged birdwatchers in Gujarat to look, in winter, for the Ultramarine Flycatcher, "as only further sightings will ascertain whether it is a regular migrant, and merits an extension of its wintering range." Similarly, De Souza & De Souza (2010) speculated that their Goa record of the Oriental Bay Owl *Phodilus badius* "raises questions about its status, and wider distribution within the Western Ghats," and may extend, "its range considerably further north, than has been earlier supposed." Note that these authors were duly cautious in interpreting their sightings, and many also urged birders to increase their surveillance for these species in those areas.

If a range extension is suspected, it is perfectly all right to speculate to that effect and even predict where the bird could occur (Kannan 1993; Kannan & Santharam 2012). Such conjecture may instigate more searches in those and the intervening areas. Since Kannan's (1993) first sight record of the Bay Owl in Anaimalai Hills, the species has been seen elsewhere in the Western Ghats, including areas where Kannan predicted it could occur (Sugathan & Jacob 1995; Raman 2001; Vasudeva *et al*. 2005; De Souza & De Souza 2010). Authors are also

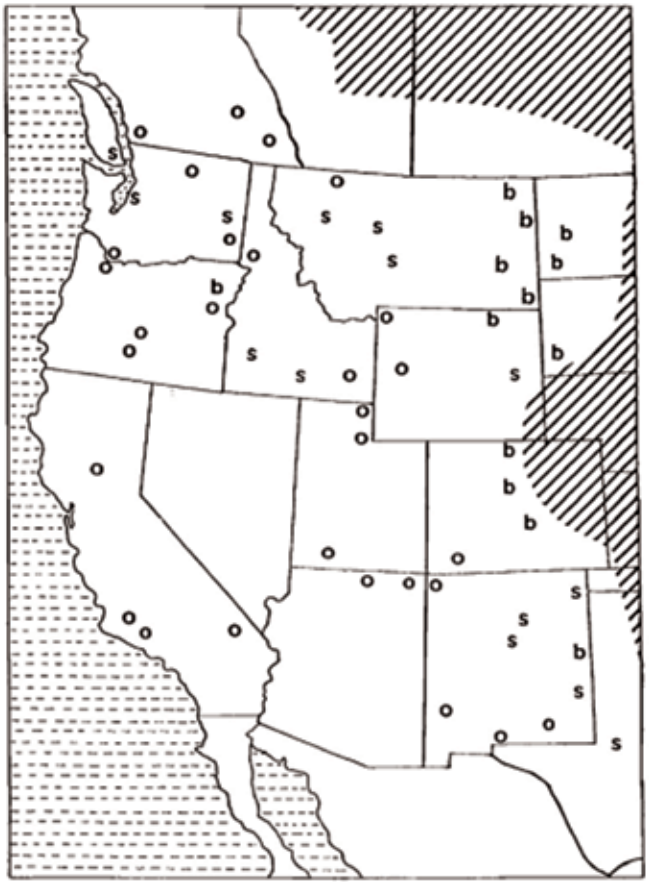

Fig. I. Expansion of the Blue Jay *Cyanocitta cristata* into western North America since 1957 (reproduced with permission from Smith 1978). Crosshatched area was the approximate published range at that time (A.O.U. 1957); b = confirmed breeding localities; o = occurrence of one or two individuals; s = areas where nearly annual occurrences and/or winter concentrations have been reported since 1970.

encouraged to discuss whether the bird has actually expanded its range, e.g., *Lophura* pheasants seen now in higher altitudes in Thailand, perhaps due to warming climate (Round & Gale 2008), or if it is merely being discovered in an area where it may have existed incognito before, e.g., Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* in southern India (Santharam 1989), and Oriental Bay Owl in the Western Ghats (Kannan 1993).

This note should not discourage those wanting to report extralimital occurrences, even those of a stray nature. They are vital in helping us piece together the overall ranges of birds, especially in areas not properly surveyed, or for species of conservation concern (Kannan & Santharam 2012). Such reports are also needed because of the rapidly changing ranges of certain birds in the face of global climate change (Round & Gale 2008). After all, what could be a "vagrant" today may represent the beginning of a legitimate range expansion, which may even become global (e.g., Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* and Eurasian Collared-dove *Streptopelia decaocto*). We are only cautioning against indiscriminately claiming range extensions.

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Nesting of Indian Eagle-owl *Bubo bengalensis* in Aravalli Biodiversity Park, a restored site in Delhi

The Aravalli Biodiversity Park (28°32′–28°34′N, 77°7′–77°10′E) is part of the Aravalli hill range continuing into the Delhi Ridge. It was over mined for sandstone, mica, and clay and grew infested with *Prosopis juliflora*, a Mexican species and also a rampant weed. The development of the park began in 2004 to restore lost biotic communities and biodiversity of the area through regeneration of native vegetation. The restoration effort paid off and in due time the park has seen the return of many faunal species. We have been monitoring the park as part of development activities for a few years now, and in 2011, recorded the nesting of the Indian Eagle-owl *Bubo bengalensis* at this site. Five chicks hatched and all survived. There are no records of the owl's presence from 2004—2008, but we have recorded the presence of one or two individuals till 2010 at different roosting areas in the park. The 2011 nesting record was also a first from south Delhi and we felt it was worthy of mentioning. Kalpavriksh (1991) has reported breeding record of this species from other parts in Delhi.

While the protection and regeneration of the park has provided the owl a nesting habitat, the park's location in an urban area has left the species open to threats. In their excitement, nature enthusiasts frequently disturb the owls. Several times, trapping nets have been found in the vicinity of the nesting area and were removed. Use of owls in sorcery and witchcraft linked to superstitious beliefs is widespread in nearby states of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh apart from other states. These disturbances have an adverse effect on the presence and nesting of the species, and regulation of public movement in the area of owl territory will yield better chances of ensuring a safe breeding haven for the species.

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