

Food-sharing among passerines at Lava, eastern Himalaya

Ranjit Mitra, Dulal Chandra Pal & Arjan Basuroy

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Ranjit Mitra, Society for Wildlife, Avifauna and Nature Studies, The Nest, Saradapalli, Siliguri 734006, Darjeeling, West Bengal, India.
Dulal Chandra Pal, WWF-India West Bengal State Office, Tata Centre 1st Floor, 43 J. L. Nehru Road, Kolkata 700071, India.
Arjan Basuroy, WWF-India West Bengal State Office, Tata Centre 1st Floor, 43 J. L. Nehru Road, Kolkata 700071, India.

The eastern Himalayan region lies between 26°40'–29°30'N 88°05'–97°05'E and covers a total area of 93,988 km² comprising the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim and West Bengal. The eastern Himalaya is also designated as an Endemic Bird Area (EBA) (BirdLife International 2003).

We visited Lava (c. 2,200 m), in eastern Himalaya region of West Bengal, for a training programme in August 2005. It has rich sub-tropical and temperate forests dominated by species of *Quercus*, *Castanopsis*, *Magnolia*, *Michellia*, Birch, etc. Chatterjee & Ghose (2004) have recorded c. 280 species of birds from Lava.

In this note we describe what seems to be a food-sharing behaviour among small passerines. Our observations were made in an area of fringe forest, where shrubs of the *Cestrum* sp. (Solanaceae) were abundant and flowering / fruiting in profusion. The bright red flowers attracted a host of insects. Tits (Paridae) usually fed on these insects. The flowering season begins from mid-May onwards, with fruit (berries) maturing within the next seven to eight weeks. The matured berries are 1–1.5 cm long, oval shaped and dark red in colour. In the last week of August 2005 a few flowers were present along with mature berries. Therefore, it was assumed that the earliest fruiting started in mid-June and the last fruit would be ripe by November. It was seen that fruits were available to the birds like Green-backed Tit *Parus monticolus* and Black-spotted Yellow Tit *P. spilonotus* from June till the

end of October. We observed that these birds fed on the fruits in a particular style. Berries were eaten from the side that was unexposed to the sun and from the closest point to the stem, which caused the residual part to dry up early. Significantly, the tits left the berries half eaten, exposing the seeds inside, leaving the bottom of the fruit intact, which later became an anchor for the seeds. During monsoon, the common finches of this area, namely Yellow-breasted Greenfinch *Carduelis spinoides* and Red-headed Bullfinch *Pyrrhula erythrocephala*, fed on these exposed seeds. The residual part of the fruit and the seed which were of ovoid shape were left for the other birds, Dark-breasted Rosefinch *Carpodacus nipalensis*, Hodgson's Mountain-Finch *Leucosticte nemoricola*, Red-headed Bullfinch. Both, altitudinal migrants and resident finches fed on the exposed seeds. Finches that arrive in winter, from the Himalayas, also feed on these berries, whenever the area is prone to rain and dense fog in the month of October.

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Sighting of Green-billed Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus tristis* along Alaknanda River, Uttaranchal, India

Vidyadhar Atkore & Tamo Dadda

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Vidyadhar Atkore, Tathagat Nagar, Taroda (K), Malegaon Road, Nanded 431605, Maharashtra, India. Email: vidyadhar.atkore@gmail.com.
Tamo Dadda, Email: tamodadda@gmail.com

Green-billed Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus tristis* is a non-parasitic cuckoo (family Cuculidae). It is distributed along the Himalayan foothills, the terai, bhabar, and duars in the north and the east, south to Chota Nagpur Plateau and northern Eastern Ghats (Ali & Ripley 1981). However, its western-most limit in the northern part of the subcontinent is unclear. While Ali & Ripley (1981) state that

the bird is distributed west to Garhwal Himalayas in Uttaranchal, Grimmett et al (1998), Kazmierczak (2000) and Rasmussen & Anderton (2005) have curtailed its western-most limit to Kumaon. Here, we report its occurrence in Upper Bhagirathi valley in Garhwal, which is nearly 150 km west of Kumaon, corroborating the distribution range given in Ali & Ripley (1981).

On 4.i.2006, the bird was sighted at 16:15 hrs amidst thick undergrowth on the left bank of Alaknanda River at Swait village (550 m m.s.l.), near Srinagar town (Uttaranchal). The dense thicket of vegetation was mainly composed of *Lantana camara* and *Cordia myxa*. We were surveying the area for birds along the Ganges, Alaknanda, and Bhagirathi rivers as part of an ecological study organized by HNB Garhwal University, Srinagar (Atkore 2005).

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The fate of a small population of Indian White-backed Vultures *Gyps bengalensis* in Vadodara (Gujarat, India)

Raju Vyas

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Raju Vyas, 505, Krishnadeep Apartments, Mission Road, Fatehgunj, Vadodara 390002, Gujarat, India. Email: razoovyas@hotmail.com.

Since 1985, I have regularly observed a small population of Indian White-backed Vultures *Gyps bengalensis* roosting and breeding, in and around Sayaji Baug Zoo & Garden in Vadodara (Gujarat, India). Sayaji Baug Zoo is one of the oldest zoos in India, developed in 1879 by Maharaja Sayaji Rao Gaikwad III, on the banks of Vishwamitri River (22°19'N 73°13'E). The entire complex encompasses 110 acres and contains about 80 species of large trees. The vultures might have selected this area, for their activities, due to availability of tall palms and other species of trees, and the undisturbed riverside area. The vultures selected only high, straight trees that were above 15 m tall, and preferred only those palm trees, which are located in the zoo areas.

My data indicates that the vulture breeding population is crashing and will perhaps vanishing from the area (Table 1). During 1986 I counted over 36 roosting vultures of which 16 pairs bred on various tree species in the garden area (Table 2). The number gradually decreased to 11 birds and 5 nests within a period of 10 years. During 1996 only 5 nests were present of which 3 were at new locations—the 'traffic center' and opposite the third gate in the garden. A vulture's nest was also spotted on an *Ailanthus excelsa* ("vilayati arduso") in the EME school compound in 1996, which is about 1.5 km from the zoo. After that no vultures nested in the area. All that is now left of this colony, since the last seven years, is a single bird that stays in zoo area and feeds on the garbage

of the zoo. It has been known to disappear for a few days but has always returned—alone.

Some of the threats noticed during this period were the loss of large trees, especially those that were used by the birds. The birds were also deliberately disturbed by the garden management—with the view to prevent nesting and roosting. But the main threats for the cause of the vulture population decline seem to lie outside Sayaji Baug. The first is feeding on contaminated food in the area surrounding Vadodara city. And the second possibility is the expansion of the city airport. Earlier there was a small domestic airport at Vadodara, but after 1988 the Indian Air Force started new airbase and the domestic airport has been upgraded. The airport management began awarding an annual contract for scaring / shooting birds that were found in the vicinity of the airport—to prevent birds-related accidents.

At present (April 2005) the entire vulture population has vanished from the Sayaji Baug Zoo & Garden.

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