

## Birds Around Mussoorie<sup>1</sup>

The rich and exotic avifauna of the western Himalayas makes Mussoorie a birdwatcher's paradise. Its colourful avifauna comprises, inter alia, several species of thrushes, woodpeckers, barbets, flycatchers, swifts and tits. And one mustn't forget the peculiar -- and ubiquitous<sup>2</sup> - jet black jungle crow of Mussoorie. On the road journey from Dehradun to Mussoorie in late 1982 Salim Ali told me that there was something intriguing about these Crows that merited further study. I think he meant they were a distinct sub-species, or perhaps evolving into one. It is now too late to ascertain what he meant.

The avifauna of Delhi and Mussoorie, not very distant from each other, is strikingly different. Apart from the seasonal (winter) migrants from the hills, including a variety of flycatchers, the only birds which seem to be plentiful in both these places are the *common mynah*, whiteeye, the *black drongo* and the *pariah kite*. The *purple sunbird*<sup>3</sup> and *rufous shrike* also occur, but are not quite as common as they are in Delhi. Crows, sparrows and doves are to be found in abundance in Mussoorie, but the species are quite different. The *house crow* is mostly replaced by the bigger end gruffer *jungle crow*, which intrigued even the renowned

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the field observations were made between September 1982 and August 1983, when I was an IAS probationer in the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration (LBSNAA). Done mostly in the area between LBSNAA and Clouds End, these were supplemented and updated 28 years afterwards, when I spent a chilly winter month in LBSNAA between mid December 2010 and mid January 2011 as part of my final - phase V - training stint to groom me for top level responsibilities in the Indian Civil Service. The 2010-11 observations are in the footnotes.

<sup>2</sup> Although common, I did not quite find them ubiquitous in the winter of 2010-11. They also seemed rather shy of human presence, their presence being mostly revealed from a distance by their rather loud and throaty kaa kaa kaa kaaa, or overhead flight.

<sup>3</sup> On January 2, 2011, I briefly spotted what I think was Mrs. Gould's Yellow Backed Sunbird, with its metallic blue and purple upper parts and throat, and bright yellow breast streaked with crimson. I could not see the diagnostic yellow rump however. I had recorded an unconfirmed sighting of a yellow backed sunbird in the early eighties as well.

ornithologist Salim Ali. While *house sparrows* are to be found around human habitats here, as in most parts of India, they are not at all plentiful, being replaced by the *chestnut crowned tree sparrow* and the *cinnamon tree sparrow*.<sup>4</sup> In the case of doves, the *ringed* and *little brown doves* give way to the *rufous turtle dove*, with its pretty ocellic wing pattern. The *Indian Robin* and *red vented bulbuls* are not present at all, while the *whitecheeked bulbul* of the hills is the crested (*p.i.leucogenys*)<sup>5</sup>, and not the *p.i. Leucotys* of the plains. The Himalayas also have their own species of (*Himalayan*) *tree pie*. The ubiquitous *spotted owlet* yields place to the *Himalayan barred owlet*. If Delhi is the land of larks, bee-eaters, shrikes, munias, babblers and partridges, Mussoorie is flycatcher, tit, warbler, thrush and woodpecker country.

It is, of course, the variation in ecological niches that lies behind this vast difference in bird life between two places not very far apart. The crucial variable here is the climate, which determines the nature of vegetation and of 'life zones'. "Vertical zonation", writes the renowned ornithologist Salim Ali in his 'The Book of Indian Birds', ".....is most striking on mountains standing in the tropics. Here the transition from a tropical to a temperate flora becomes far more abrupt in a few thousand feet of ascent than in the many hundreds of miles of latitude required to compensate for the fall in temperature experienced in the ascent. It may be said that conditions on the side of high mountains are a syncopated or telescoped replica of those that obtain elsewhere over much greater distances of latitude. The alpine and arctic conditions encountered in the higher Himalayan zones .....are not repeated till one reaches

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<sup>4</sup> I found both these in abundance again in 2010-11.

<sup>5</sup> These were indeed quite common, even on the LBSNAA campus, and I saw several flocks, sometimes mixed with black bulbuls, in 2010-11.

the northerly latitudes of Asia quite 2000 miles away."

On my daily morning walk along the long winding road from the town to the familiar Mussoorie landmark called Company Garden, my senses were overpowered by the frenetic and noisy bird activity around me. Most stridently noticeable were the mixed avian hunting parties comprising tits, warblers, flycatchers, nuthatches, tree-creepers and woodpeckers: chip-chip, chirp, chirr, churr tit, tsip, relieved occasionally by the strident cackle of the *blacknaped green woodpecker*. These small, restless and rather noisy songsters flitting from oak to oak are perhaps the most visible feature of bird life in Mussoorie.<sup>6</sup>

Although all the birds mentioned above are insectivorous, they do not catch their prey in the same manner, and exploit different niches of the same tree or microecozone. Flycatchers have excellent eyes and they catch insects in flight, generally returning to the same perch, which might be an electrical wire, after the foray. Tits can often be seen clinging to twigs upside down. Tree creepers, nuthatches and woodpeckers spiral upwards and downwards on the trunk, searching for insects under the bark. Their claws and square stout tails are especially adapted for this purpose. Nuthatches also eat seeds and nut kernels by repeatedly hammering at these objects with their strong bills.

Several species of tits are found in Mussoorie. The *grey, yellow cheeked, green backed and red headed tits* are quite abundant and easily identified, while the *black tit* is not very

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<sup>6</sup> And they continue to be, as I found in 2010-11. However, I found noisy flocks of the handsome black bulbuls, with their unruly jet black hair on the crown, black wing patch and pink beak and legs on an otherwise grayish look, even more conspicuous during my walks between LBSNAA and Clouds End in the winter of 2010-11.

common.<sup>7</sup> They are all sparrow minus in size, the *red headed tit* being the smallest (10 cms). The *grey tit* is grey and black all over with white cheek patches and flanks. The *yellow cheeked tit* is a magnificent bird with a rather striking black and yellow crest, and yellow cheeks and flanks. The *green backed tit* has a black head, throat and collar, white cheek patches and a yellow belly. Its green back is diagnostic. The *red headed tit* is an enchanting and gregarious bird. Apart from its red head, the black mark around its eyes and black breast patch stand out conspicuously against its white throat and belly and orange-washed flanks.

Rather surprisingly, I saw a very limited number of warblers in Mussoorie. I have seen more species of warblers in Delhi, where many are winter visitors, than what I saw in Mussoorie. The warblers that I saw, I found very difficult to identify, especially since species distinction between them is often very subtle, the odd wingbar and eyebar making all the difference! Warblers, moreover, are shy, extremely restless, entirely arboreal and apt to get lost in thick foliage. I saw at least two or three species of willow warblers, and possibly the *lesser whitethroat*. The *brown hill warbler* was a familiar sight in Mussoorie. This dark-brown sparrow-sized bird, with its conspicuous striated back, greyish white belly, black beak and eye, was often be seen perched with its long tail drooping down making strident calls.

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<sup>7</sup> While three of these were again seen in abundance as part of mixed avian hunting parties in 2010-11, the grey tit was not. I was however a little surprised to come across, for the first time, a big flock of brown crested tits (*lophophanes dichrous* Blyth) feeding in the company of the smaller red headed tits and whiteeyes on the road below Company Bagh towards Hathipaon. A dull brown bird with a pointed black beak, pale yellow legs, prominent black eye, and paler underparts, it has a white collar on its hind neck, a touch of rufous on its wing and of course a diagnostic jaunty dark brown crest. I say surprised because this is what Salim Ali had to say about this bird: "This beautiful little tit is neither common nor abundant about any of the ordinarily visited Himalayan summer resorts....I have not heard its call, neither does this seem to have been described." (Salim Ali, **Indian Hill Birds**, Fifth Impression 1987, p.15). Since I saw the bird in early January, it is possible that it had come down from higher elevations where it is generally found according to Salim Ali. It was not at all shy, and its call is perhaps a sharp, musical tsi-tsip or tsi-tsi-tsip, almost like a whistle. There is a small possibility that I could have confused this bird with the Yellow Naped Yuhina.

Mussoorie is a haven for flycatchers, and I saw seen seven species there. The most common was the ubiquitous *greyheaded flycatcher*, not to be confused with *the greyheaded flycatcher warbler*<sup>8</sup>, both of which are grey above and bright yellow below. The grey of the former extends to the chin and the throat, and a distinct white ring around the eye is its chief distinguishing feature. The *verditer flycatcher* is a light blue bird with a black eye-band. The *sooty flycatcher* is dull greyish brown all over<sup>9</sup>, with a diagnostic white ring around the eye. The diagnostic feature of the *whitebrowed fantail flycatcher*, which is a black and white bird, is self-evident. The *whitebrowed blue flycatcher*, on the other hand, is a sparrow-minus blue bird, with a conspicuous white eyebrow, tail, wing base and breast. The flash of blue extending from the wings to its neck is diagnostic. The *rufous tailed flycatcher* is another sparrow minus flycatcher, generally light olive brown above and whitish below, with a characteristic rufous tail, particularly striking as it takes flight. When perched, it has the general appearance of a chiffchaff. Its eyes, legs and thin pointed beak are glistening black, and it has a pale ring around the eye.<sup>10</sup>

The behavioural pattern of *the grey headed flycatcher warbler* is intermediate between flycatchers and warblers. There are of course several other species whose behaviour is reminiscent of flycatchers, such as *the redflanked bush robin*<sup>11</sup>, *stonechat*, *dark grey bushchat* and the

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<sup>8</sup> I found them again present in large numbers in 2010-11.

<sup>9</sup> Ditto

<sup>10</sup> Some of the flycatchers were obviously on seasonal migration to the plains during the time of my December 2010-January 2011 visit. However I found what I thought was the blue throated flycatcher, which I had not seen earlier, to be fairly common. The dark blue plumage above extends down the throat, being clearly demarcated from the striking orange-rust breast. The tail has a dark tip when seen from below. It was not at all shy.

<sup>11</sup> Not at all shy, I found the Red-flanked Bush Robin in abundance in January 2011, frequently feeding in low bushes and on the ground in the company of the pied-bush chat. I managed to take a good look at the

*pie*d bushchat. I managed to see only the female *redflanked bush robin* - a sparrow sized dull brown bird with a bright blue tail, with flanks washed with yellow. The male is bright blue above and orange flanked. The *stonechat* is a winter visiter. The male has a conspicuous white collar which is thrown into sharp relief against its black head, neck, throat, back and tail and an orange breast, giving it its second name, *collared bushchat*. It also has a conspicuous white shoulder patch and belly. The *dark grey bushchat* is quite common and has a habit of sitting on electricity wires. I also recorded a solitary sighting of the *pie*d bushchat<sup>12</sup> - generally black, with white patches on wing and abdomen. Its movement was restless, with the chest and tail moving in succession.

Both the *chestnut bellied*<sup>13</sup> and *velvet fronted nuthatches* are found in Mussoorie, although the former is undoubtedly more abundant. The *Himalayan tree creeper* is common. Mussoorie probably has several species of woodpeckers, although I was able to see only four, possibly the more common ones. These are the *garhwal pie*d woodpecker, the *brown fronted pie*d woodpecker<sup>14</sup>, the *black naped green woodpecker* and the *scaly bellied green woodpecker*. The colourful and noisy *great hill barbet* is present in Mussoorie in large numbers. Apart from its typically thick yellow barbet beak, it has a very dark grey, almost black head, dark brown back and green wings and tail. It also has a very

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male also this time. It is easy to confuse the male with the slaty blue flycatcher, although the distinctive frog-like trr trr alarm is a giveaway.

<sup>12</sup> However, I found the *pie*d bushchat in great abundance in the winter of 2010-11, including at the summit of Benog Tibba. A sparrow sized black and white bird, with a pointed black beak and prominent dark grey to black throat, clearly delineated from its white abdomen.. It has a long wedge shaped white tail, and a touch of white on its black wings. Its dark grey crown stands out against its black upper body.

<sup>13</sup> I spotted the chestnut-bellied nuthatch in a mixed avian hunting party between LBSNAA and Company Bagh on January 1, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> I sighted several again as part of mixed avian hunting parties between LBSNAA and Company Bagh in the winter of 2010-11, with their diagnostic gold and crimson crown.

prominent red vent.<sup>15</sup>

Mussoorie is prime thrush country, although only the brown *streaked laughing thrush* and the *whistling thrush* are usually seen, and they are ubiquitous<sup>16</sup>. Thrushes are elusive birds. They forage in bushes, and are more often heard than seen. They are not strong fliers, preferring to hop into bushes when disturbed. The *brown streaked laughing thrush*, with a diagnostic bright chestnut cheek patch and white tipped tail, has an impressive repertoire of notes. So does the rather crow-like metallic cobalt-blue *whistling thrush*. It is finely spotted with white, has a prominent yellow bill and unusually long yellow legs. The *blue headed rock thrush* can often be seen perched on tree-tops and electricity wires<sup>17</sup>. The *black throated thrush* is not a resident species but it is a very conspicuous winter visitor. Not at all shy, it can be seen hopping about in gardens, from where it flies up to a high tree when disturbed. It is a very noisy bird and has the habit of repeatedly twitching its tail.<sup>18</sup>

To see other thrushes, one has to get away from the town, to the forested tracts between Municipal Garden and Clouds End. The *white throated* and *striated*<sup>19</sup> *laughing thrushes* can be seen here. They are both striking birds, the first visually, and the second vocally. The diagnostic white throat of

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<sup>15</sup> While I spotted the great hill barbet again on January 1, 2011, I also chanced upon the colourful blue-throated barbet for the first time. A predominantly bright green mynah sized bird, it has a diagnostic crimson crown and blue neck and throat. It was feeding silently on a tree overhanging the hillside next to the road near Clouds End, quite unmindful of my extended presence only a few feet away.

<sup>16</sup> I could not spot the brown streaked laughing thrush in the winter of 2010-11, although I saw a few whistling thrushes. Although thrushes were ubiquitous and forced their presence on you from a distance through their loud and melodious calls in the early eighties, the only thrush I found in large numbers in December 2010-January 2011 was the black throated thrush. Where have the Thrushes of Mussoorie gone?

<sup>17</sup> This is where I saw one again, sitting quietly near a tree top on the road between LBSNAA and Company Bagh on January 1, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> I found it again in abundance in December 2010-January 2011.

<sup>19</sup> I came across the magnificent striated laughing thrush, with its prominent unruly brown crest quite near to Company Bagh on January 9, 2011. It has a general brown appearance, with chestnut on wings, and paler below. The entire body is streaked with white.

the *white throated thrush* stands out in sharp relief against its general grey and orange brown appearance. It has a characteristic sibilant call. The *striated laughing thrush* has an incredibly musical six to seven note whistling call which betrays its elusive presence hundreds of metres around. The *blue rock thrush* is also present, although I have not seen it often. It is blue all over, tending to black at the wings. It has a very melodious four to five syllable whistling call. I saw a pair chasing each other through a horse chestnut tree.

There are several other thrush-like birds to be found in Mussoorie<sup>20</sup>. The *black throated jay* is a handsome pigeon sized bird which tends to move in flocks.<sup>21</sup> It has a conspicuous black crown. Its body is an unusual pinkish brown. It has a long white tipped tail. Its upper plumage is a very smart combination of blue, black and white, while the wings are slightly checkered. The wing pattern on the *red crowned jay* is reminiscent of the black throated jay. It is similar in size but largely pale brown. It has a diagnostic black check patch. The female black bird is a slim mynah sized dark brown bird with a bright yellow beak and eye. It has a very prominent pale ring around the eye. Absolutely noiseless, it was resting high up in the fork of a silver-oak. I could not clearly see the male, which is black in colour.<sup>22</sup> The black bulbul is an elegant but noisy bird. It is greyish black all over with a prominent crested ("puffy") head. It has a bright pink beak and legs and a red eye.

I must, of course, make special mention of

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<sup>20</sup> I came across the Black Headed Sibia, another Thrush-like bird, in Mussoorie for the first time at Company Bagh early morning on January 8, 2011, sitting high up on a tree, with its distinctive bright black head standing out against its general rufous appearance and dark wings.

<sup>21</sup> I spotted it a few times in the winter of 2010-11.

<sup>22</sup> I saw a large flock of grey-winged blackbirds at Company Bagh on January 8, 2011. These are jet black mynah sized birds with grey wings, yellow pointed beak and leg, and a black eye encircled in pale ring. The female is brown, not black.

three majestic passerines commonly found in large flocks around Mussoorie, namely, *the scarlet minivet*, *the slaty headed parakeet* and *the red billed blue magpie*<sup>23</sup>. *The scarlet minivet* and the *redbilled blue magpie* are very brightly coloured indeed. The male *scarlet minivet* is a bright scarlet below while the female is yellow. *The red billed blue magpie* is a much bigger bird, has a red beak, a white, black and blue body, and a diagnostic unusually long striated tail comprising a few long feathers which are fanned out in flight. The bird is very noisy, its notes versatile, ranging from very musical to strident.

Another pie to be found is *the Himalayan tree pie*, a large grey bird. It has a grey head and nape with a black mask around the beak which subsumes the forehead and chin. Its breast is grey, and gets pinkish brown at the vent. It also has a pinkish brown back. The wings are black with a white tip. The beak is black, short, thick and slightly curved. Its long ashy tail has black outer tail feathers. *The blossom headed parakeet*, with its fluty tooi-tooi call and long white tipped tail is also present, although I did not see a big flock like that of the *slaty headed parakeet*.

*White and grey wagtails*, *plumbeous* and *white capped redstarts*<sup>24</sup>, are to be found all along himalayan streams. The area around Kempty falls is the place to look for them. These birds hover above noisy mountain streams hunting insects which they catch fluently in flycatcher fashion. *The white breasted king fisher* is present. However, large water birds, which are so plentiful in the Delhi-Bharatpur region, are conspicuous by their

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<sup>23</sup> I did not see minivets or slaty headed parakeets in the winter of 2010-11, although I did come across a few red-billed blue magpies – the bill appeared more orange than deep red to me; could this have been the yellow-billed species?— near Clouds End on January 1, 2011, and again on the weekend of January 8-9, but they were silent and not in flocks.

<sup>24</sup> I spotted a black redstart with its diagnostic red tail on top of Benog Tibba on January 8, 2011.

absence in Mussoorie, as indeed in other parts of the Himalayas.

Of the soarers, the *long billed* and *himalayan griffon vultures* are the most common, although the more familiar *white backed* and *scavenger vultures* also occur. The *Himalayan Griffon* closely resembles the *long billed vulture*<sup>25</sup> when seen from underneath (pale underside) but the latter can be identified by its diagnostic black tipped wing tips splayed out like open fingers bent backwards<sup>26</sup>. The lammergeyer can be seen, but very occasionally. The *pariah kite* is common, as it is in Delhi. Swifts are also very strong fliers, and I have seen flocks of (*Blyth's*) *white rumped swifts* diving down into the valley and climbing up again on winter mornings. *Red rumped swallows*, so very common in Delhi, can also be seen.

There are several species of green pigeon, and the one I saw in Mussoorie is undoubtedly the *yellow legged green pigeon*. This species has bright and unusual shades of various colours. Its head and belly are greenish. Its neck and throat are yellow. It has a yellow band on an otherwise greyish tail when viewed from behind its back, wings and tail has a slaty appearance, except for the diagnostic bright mauve shoulder patch. I also saw a nest high up on a deodar tree.

The *common hill partridge* could be seen on the bare hill sides behind clouds' end. Its loud call, heard from a long way off, is a squeakier version of that of the *black partridge*, and is preceded by a 'trit'. It is hide-bound creature and exceedingly difficult to flush out of bushes. I followed it for

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<sup>25</sup> I saw a few long-billed vultures soaring high above from George Everest's bungalow, on the hill across from Clouds End, on December 26, 2010.

<sup>26</sup> I saw both the long-billed vulture and Himalayan Griffon in the winter of 2010-11. A few Griffons were soaring high above the valleys surrounding Benog Tibba, while the long-billed vulture was a common sight above LBSNAA itself.

hours during a solitary encounter.

The *Indian Cuckoo* fits the bill of William Wordsworth's cuckoo, "oft heard but never seen". I spent long hours trying to get a good look at this elusive bird with a haunting four note whistle, without success. It could be heard over vale and hill, but its habit of constantly changing its high perch makes it exceedingly difficult to spot.

This is, of course, very far from being an exhaustive checklist of birds around Mussoorie. The list is impressionistic, detailing only the more common birds readily identifiable birds by an amateur birdwatcher. I have also excluded some (unconfirmed) naked eye observations of an accentor, a *rose finch*, and a lark. The lark was *doing aerial displays reminiscent of the redwinged bushlark*, but I did not see its diagnostic red wings.

Then, of course, there is the elusive mountain quail, which was last sighted in 1876, and I believe in Mussoorie. It was my privilege to have gone down to Dehradun to escort the (late) great Salim Ali to the Academy in Mussoorie for a talk. He was of the view that if the mountain quail is not extinct, it could be somewhere in Benog Tibba. And so I spent several hours on the bare summit of *Vinod Tibba*<sup>27</sup>, in a futile bid to track down the *mountain quail*.

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<sup>27</sup> I went right up to the summit of Benog Tibba again on January 8, 2011, with unsurprisingly similar result!