

Nepal Wren Babbler *Pnoepyga immaculata* nest-building in the Langtang Valley, Nepal

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In June 1999, Ben King and I visited the Langtang Valley, Nepal to search for the Nepal Wren Babbler *Pnoepyga immaculata*. In the early morning of 5 June we walked east from Syabru village for about 45 mins, until we reached a stream, the preferred habitat of the species. The stream bank comprised huge rocks and boulders, and thick vegetation. BK played a tape recording of the song of the species and, after nearly an hour, we obtained a response. We located a single bird calling from the west bank of the stream and, after some time, we saw it fly across the stream to perch on the east bank, which

was damper than the west bank. The bird went into a small hole for a while and finally re-emerged. After another five minutes, the bird returned with nesting materials and disappeared inside the hole. We suspected that it was nest-building, and continued to watch for 45 mins and confirm that the bird was indeed constructing a nest. The site was located at an altitude of 1,962 m near a small waterfall, and was about 3 m above the streambed. This constitutes the first record of any breeding behaviour for the Nepal Wren Babbler.

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Jerdon's Baza *Aviceda jerdoni* – a new species for Nepal

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At about 08h00 on the 20 March 1999, while leading a Sunbird birdwatching tour on a day trip to the Dharan Forest (near the village of 13 R D, besides the Chatara Canal, Sunsari District near Chatara, eastern Nepal), we flushed two medium-sized brownish raptors. Hurriedly climbing out of our vehicles we soon located the birds, which had now perched, and identified them as Jerdon's Bazas *Aviceda jerdoni*, the first record for Nepal. All ten of us watched them for about 20 minutes at ranges down to about 80 m. Several members of the group took a series of photographs while SB and PH made some field notes and hurried sketches.

The birds were very distinctive. Judged to be approximately the same size as a Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus* but with proportionately much broader wings, a heavier body and a markedly different jizz. The birds were clearly considerably larger than Crested Goshawk *Accipiter trivirgatus*, which occurs in the area, and smaller than a Crested Serpent Eagle *Spilornis cheela* we had just been watching.

Structure

A long wispy crest of two blackish lanceolate feathers conspicuously tipped with white (and two other elongated feathers about half as long) was held prominently erect at the rear of the crown in a manner that reminded us of Mountain Hawk Eagle *Spizaetus nipalensis* and of the nominate subspecies of Changeable Hawk Eagle *S. c. cirrhatus* (which has not been recorded in Nepal).

The medium length tail was slightly notched at the tip, though this was so subtle as to be invisible in flight. There were five primary tips visible in the folded wing – two closely spaced near the tip and three equally closely grouped near the tip of the longest tertial. All five visible primaries were tipped whitish. The folded wing tip fell just short of the tip of the tail (about half-way to two-thirds of the way down the dark brownish subterminal tail band).

The bill and legs were unremarkable in size. The birds made several short flights among the trees from one perch to another – the wings were very broad, clearly rounded and slightly 'nipped' in at the base, but little other patterning was discernible.

Plumage

Both birds were very similar in plumage. The head was strikingly pale greyish fawn with a rufous tone becoming more dominant towards the rear crown and on the nape. This rufous colour shaded out into paler ear-coverts, while the chin, throat and upper breast were conspicuously white.

A narrow dark brown or blackish mesial stripe, made up of a series of short feather shaft streaks, extended almost from the base of the bill down to the lower throat. The upper breast was very finely and faintly dappled with pale orange-rufous, while the sides of the chest, the flanks, sides of the belly and upper thighs were quite conspicuously and broadly barred with this same rufous colour. Each of these seven or so bars was very narrowly

(and almost imperceptibly) outlined with dark brown.

The rufous toned nape was indistinctly marked with dark vertical flecks. The tail was narrowly tipped pale – a greyish colour that shaded to whitish at the extreme tip and had a broad dark brown subterminal band. There were two other dark brown tail bands, both about half as broad as the subterminal band, and all were separated by cleaner greyish bands. The central tail feathers were slightly shorter than the others and the tail bands were slightly less distinct when viewed from below. The tertials were a mid-brown colour, slightly paler than the primary tips and shaded greyer towards the base. The longest tertial had an obvious whitish crescentic tip, a tip that was almost twice as broad on the outer web as on the inner. The folded secondaries were also narrowly tipped whitish and had at least two dark brown bands and intervening brown bands of equal width separating them. The lower scapulars were mottled brown and had whitish patches erratically scattered through them in a pattern reminiscent of several species of *Accipiter*. The smaller wing-coverts were similarly patterned, though slightly more rufous toned. Few details of the underwing pattern were discernible in the brief flight views that we had, though the general impression was of a strikingly pale underwing and a more orange-rufous tone to the underwing coverts and blackish tipped primaries. A hint of a pale comma, reminiscent of that a Red-shouldered Hawk *Buteo lineatus*, was visible on the upperside of the central primaries in one flight view.

Bare parts

Both birds had pale yellowish legs and dark claws and a brighter more intensely yellowish iris. The bill was dark with the cere appearing subtly paler and perhaps with a bluish hue.

Calls

One of the birds gave a quiet and easily overlooked, slightly melancholy, plaintive *pe-weeeo* call, three or four times on one of the occasions that it flew from one perch to another

On returning to the Koshi Tappu Wildlife Camp, Prakashpur, some six hours later, we checked our notes against the plates and text in Grimmett *et al* (1998). We remained confident of our identification.

Although Jerdon's Baza has not been seen in Nepal before, its north-east Indian range takes it as far west as Darjeeling in West Bengal, and its occurrence was not totally unexpected. It was one of the birds predicted to occur in Nepal by Inskipp and Inskipp (1991). Jerdon's Baza is listed as Near-threatened by BirdLife International (Collar *et al.* 1994).

REFERENCES

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Aseasonal flocking in the Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris*

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The Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris* is distributed throughout much of the temperate and Arctic parts of the Holarctic region (Peters 1960). Within India, it occurs in the Himalaya and trans-Himalaya, where it is subject to some altitudinal movements. It is one of the commonest birds in its stony upland habitat. The species is reported to keep in pairs or trios during the breeding season, between May and July, and subsequently to form flocks of up to 50 individuals (Ali and Ripley 1987).

Kibber Wildlife Sanctuary (32°5' to 32°30'N and 78°9' to 78°32'E) in the Spiti region of Himachal Pradesh, India, spans an area of 1,400 km², encompassing an altitudinal range of 3,600 to 6,700 m above mean sea level. In the breeding season the species is particularly common between 4,200 and 5,000 m, and breeding pairs are found from May onwards. It lays two eggs in a cup-like, unsheltered depression on the ground, at the

beginning of June. During the 1996 breeding season, two nests with eggs were found on 8 and 12 June; the eggs in one nest hatched on 9 June, and the first young bird fledged on 19 June. The period between May and September in the study area is usually snow-free, except for very mild snow occasionally at the beginning of May. The species starts flocking around the second or third week of August, usually in groups of 10 to 50, but up to 100 have been recorded (pers. obs. and H. H. T. Prins pers. comm. 1998), and the birds move out of the breeding areas at the onset of winter in October.

In June 1999, there was unusually heavy snowfall (cf. Fig. 1, based on data from a meteorological station at Kaza (3,600 m), which is 20 km from Kibber and receives much greater snowfall). Snow started in the study area on the evening of 10 June and continued until the afternoon of 12 June, when about 45 cm had