

## Bird observations from Sibsagar District, Assam, India

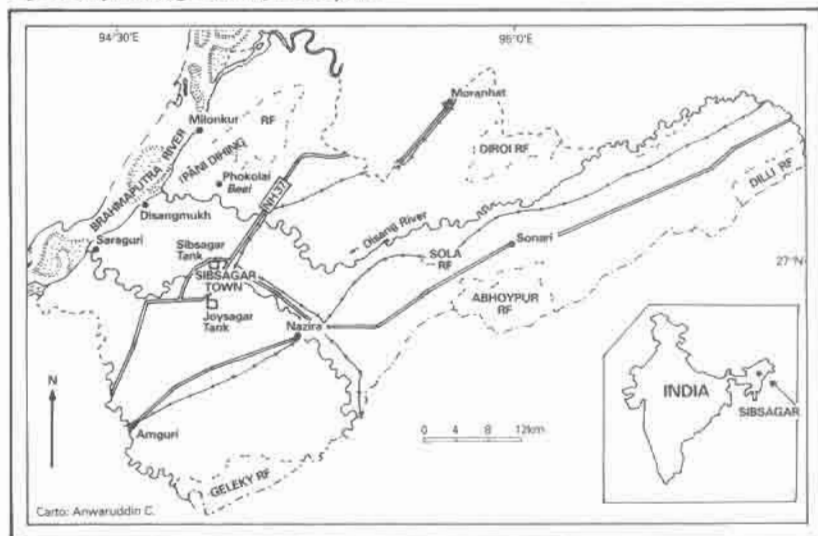
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Observations during a nine months period in Sibsagar District include the first records for the area of Eurasian Griffon *Gyps fulvus*, Eastern Marsh Harrier *Circus (aeruginosus) spilnotus* and Bank Myna *Acridotheres ginginianus*, and significant records of Common Crane *Grus grus*, Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* and White-vented Myna *Acridotheres grandis*. Habitat alteration and poaching are the two major factors affecting birds in the district.

Between 9 March 1987 and 16 February 1988 I spent about nine months in the Sibsagar District of Assam, India. During my stay I visited almost every part of the district. The avifauna of the area, in common with other parts of north-east India, is very poorly documented. Baker (1922-1930) mentions Sibsagar a few times but, since the boundary of the district has undergone various changes over the years (the latest in 1983), previous data are not directly comparable.

Sibsagar District (26°43' to 27°16'N and 94°24' to 95°22'E) (Figure), covers an area of 2,603 km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of about 1.2 million. The area forms part of the upper Brahmaputra plains, lying between 50 and 150 m above sea level. The small hilly areas are the foothills of the Naga-Patkai Ranges. The climate of the area falls under 'Humid subtropical with dry

Figure. Map of Sibsagar District, the study area.



winter' (Singh 1976). Summers are hot and humid while winters are cool and generally dry. The average annual rainfall is about 2,000 mm.

The original vegetation of the area was of tropical evergreen type. However, due to felling and encroachment such forests are found only in some small patches such as at Abhoypur, Dilli, Diroi and Sola Reserved Forests. Throughout the district there are good woodlands in the form of village forests. Some are basically evergreen, while most are mixed with deciduous trees and bamboo. Along the Brahmaputra bank and also on the *chaporis* (sandy islets and tracts) *Tamarix dioica* and *Arundo donax* are found. Silk-cotton trees *Bombax ceiba* are widely distributed.

Observations were carried out at the following main localities:

1. Dak Bungalow: my residence during the period, located at the western end of the north bank of Sibsagar Tank.
2. Sibsagar Tank: an artificial lake of about 52 ha located in the northern part of Sibsagar town. It is surrounded by busy roads and government buildings.
3. Joysagar Tank: a larger tank (63 ha) on the southern fringe of Sibsagar town. Also in a built-up area but quieter than that surrounding Sibsagar Tank.
4. Phokolai and Dorou *beels*: Phokolai *beel* is a large perennial lake near the confluence of the River Disang and Dimow. Dorou *beel* is much smaller and is connected with Phokolai.
5. Pani-Dihing area: a flat plain with innumerable channels and *beels*, bounded by the rivers Brahmaputra, Disang and Dimow. The main water channels are Boloma, Baliyan, Dighali, Singarajan, Tokia and Jarjaria. The main *beels* are Sagunpora, Kandhulijan, Borpathar, Fulai, Gai-guma and Mori-Disang. A large part of the area is a reserved forest, covering about 21 km<sup>2</sup>. There are large numbers of buffalo and cattle, and tiger pugmarks were noted during the survey.
6. *Chaporis* in the Brahmaputra: there is a large number of *chaporis* of various sizes in the Brahmaputra from Dihingmukh to Rupahimukh, the most important of which are Gopal, Doboli, Gokul Tikira, Dhenukana and Deogharia. Many cattle are grazed on these islets but they are inhabited only temporarily by graziers and fishermen.

#### SYSTEMATIC LIST

The following list includes all species noted during the survey but detailed information is provided only for the more interesting species.

**GREAT CRESTED GREBE** *Podiceps cristatus* A fairly common winter visitor, observed mainly on Sibsagar Tank and Joysagar Tank, also on Dorou *beel*. A maximum of 40 on 21 March. Extreme dates were 5 November and 15 May.

**SPOT-BILLED PELICAN** *Pelecanus philippensis* Apparently a local migrant with seven near Phokolai *beel* on 29 March, singles in the Pani-Dihing area on 15 and 26 July, and two between Gaurisagar and Dikhowmukh on 2 August.

**BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT HERON** *Nycticorax nycticorax* Found nesting on 15 July in a mixed heronry near Milonkur, Pani-Dihing. Associated with Little Cormorants, Grey and Purple Herons and Glossy Ibises.

**YELLOW BITTERN** *Ixobrychus sinensis* One seen near Saragua, Pani-Dihing, on 26 July.

**BLACK BITTERN** *Dupetor flavicollis* Single birds seen several times between 12h30 and 14h00 on 15 July near Milonkur.

**ASIAN OPENBILL** *Anastomus oscitans* A common resident with a maximum of 25 seen soaring over Hatighuli *beel* on 15 November.

**BLACK STORK** *Ciconia nigra* Two or three were seen on an islet near Dikhowmukh on 6 December.

**BLACK-NECKED STORK** *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus* One in a field behind the Dak Bungalow on 13 August and two near Rudrasagar on 8 September.

**GREATER ADJUTANT** *Leptoptilos dubius* Now scarce but many sightings, mainly of single birds.

**LESSER ADJUTANT** *L. javanicus* A common resident with a maximum of four seen in the Pani-Dihing area on 2 January. Two pairs were found nesting in a *Mangifera indica* tree in Saraguri on 11 January.

**GLOSSY IBIS** *Plegadis falcinellus* A fairly common resident with a maximum of 300 seen in the Pani-Dihing area on 25 October. Found nesting near Milonkur on 15 July.

**GREYLAG GOOSE** *Anser anser* A common winter visitor with a maximum of 109 on Sibsagar Tank on 23 January.

**BAR-HEADED GOOSE** *A. indicus* A common winter visitor with a maximum of at least 316 on Joysagar Tank on 25 December.

**FULVOUS WHISTLING DUCK** *Dendrocygna bicolor* An uncommon resident with a maximum of 45 seen on Dorou *beel* on 13 February. Small numbers were seen elsewhere in winter, on Phokolai *beel* on 29 March, near Milonkur on 15 July and between Sibsagar and Disangmukh on 19 July.

**RUDDY SHELDUCK** *Tadorna ferruginea* A common winter visitor with a maximum of about 700 on Gokal-Tikira *chaponi*.

**COMMON TEAL** *Anas crecca* A locally abundant winter visitor with a maximum of over 1,000 on Sibsagar Tank on 9 January.

**SPOT-BILLED DUCK** *A. poecilorhyncha* An uncommon resident but large numbers appear in winter. Maximum of 300 on Sibsagar Tank on 9 January.

MALLARD *A. platyrhynchos* Fairly common in winter.

GADWALL *A. strepera* A common winter visitor.

NORTHERN SHOVELER *A. clypeata* A winter visitor, occurring only in small numbers.

COMMON POCHARD *Aythya ferina* A common winter visitor on Sibsagar Tank but rare elsewhere. Extreme dates were 27 October and 3 April.

FERRUGINOUS POCHARD *A. nyroca* Twenty on Phokolai *beel* on 29 November, a few on Sibsagar Tank on 17 and 22 December, and groups of five and nine seen on Phokolai and Dorou *beels* on 13 February.

BAER'S POCHARD *A. baeri* The only record was of seven on Sibsagar Tank on 8 February.

TUFTED DUCK *A. fuligula* A common winter visitor with a maximum of 150 on Sibsagar Tank on 21 March. Extreme dates were 18 October and 12 April.

COTTON PYGMY GOOSE *Nettapus coromandelianus* A common resident.

OSPREY *Pandion haliaetus* One seen near Kandhulijan *beel* on 2 January.

PALLAS'S FISH-EAGLE *Haliaeetus leucoryphus* Only one seen – near Milonkur on 15 July.

EURASIAN GRIFFON *Gyps fulvus* Singles seen near the Dak Bungalow on 23 January and near Disangmukh on 2 February. Ali and Ripley (1983) state it occurs as far east as western Assam and so these are the first records for Sibsagar District and eastern Assam.

RED-HEADED VULTURE *Sarcogyps calvus* Two near Disangmukh on 25 October and one near Mori-Disang *beel* on 31 December.

EASTERN MARSH-HARRIER *Circus (aeruginosus) spilnotus* A male seen on Doboli *chaponi*, off Disangmukh, on 7 February was the first record for the Brahmaputra valley. Ali and Ripley (1983) record it only for Cachar and Manipur.

HEN HARRIER *C. cyaneus* Single males were seen at Hatighuli on 15 November, near Netaipukhuri on 20 November, near Ghoka-Singarajan on 27 December and on Doboli *chaponi* on 7 February.

PIED HARRIER *C. melanoleucos* Singles seen near Phokolai *beel* on 29 March and 29 November and at Balijan, Pani-Dihing, on 20 November.

GREATER SPOTTED EAGLE *Aquila clanga* Singles seen at Samukjan-Boloma, Pani-Dihing, on 20 November, Phokolai *beel* on 29 November and on Doboli *chaponi* on 2 December; two near Saragua on 27 December.

KALIJ PHEASANT *Lophura leucomelana* A confirmed report from Sola

Reserved Forest. Extinct in the Meteka area near Sibsagar town but may still exist in Diroi, Dilli and Abhoypur Reserved Forests.

RED JUNGLEFOWL *Gallus gallus* Rare but still widely distributed.

COMMON CRANE *Grus grus* Fifteen seen on Doboli *chaponi* on 2 February. A vagrant to Assam according to Ali and Ripley (1983).

NORTHERN LAPWING *Vanellus vanellus* A fairly common winter visitor with a maximum of 25 on Doboli *chaponi* on 2 February. Ali and Ripley (1983) state that it is rare and erratic in Assam.

GREY-HEADED LAPWING *V. cinereus* A fairly common winter visitor, arriving in October.

GREY PLOVER *Pluvialis squatarola* About 12 seen near Phokolai *beel* on 29 November. A vagrant to Assam (Ali and Ripley 1983).

SPOTTED REDSHANK *Tringa erythropus* One or two in the Balijan area, Pani-Dihing, on 20 November.

WHISKERED TERN *Chlidonias hybridus* A fairly common resident.

BLACK-BELLIED TERN *Sterna acuticauda* One at Disangmukh on 7 February.

LITTLE TERN *S. albifrons* One at Disangmukh on 7 February.

COLLARED DOVE *Streptopelia decaocto* An uncommon resident.

ORIENTAL PIED HORNBILL *Anthracoceros albirostris* Now rare, found in Diroi, Sola, Abhoypur and Dilli Reserved Forests.

GREAT HORNBILL *Buceros bicornis* Now very rare. A relict population may survive in Abhoypur and Dilli Reserved Forests.

ASIAN GLOSSY STARLING *Aplonis panayensis* Very rare. One near the Dak Bungalow, sometime in March or April.

BANK MYNA *Acridotheres ginginianus* First noted in the Fulai-Dighali area of Pani-Dihing on 25 October. Seen subsequently in several localities in Pani-Dihing and adjoining areas, mostly singles or pairs but twice small parties were seen. These were the first records for the area, extending the range of the species a considerable distance east. The previously recorded limit was Kamrup at 91°45'E (Ripley 1982).

JUNGLE MYNA *A. fuscus* Common resident.

WHITE-VENTED MYNA *A. grandis* First noted on 14 February when a pair was seen on a silk-cotton tree near the Dak Bungalow. Several pairs were seen in the same area during the next two days. The first record for the plains of the Brahmaputra and the second for Assam. The first record for Assam was of a pair observed by the author in the North Cachar Hills in February 1986.

Other species recorded were: Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*, Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*, Indian Cormorant *P. fuscicollis*, Little Cormorant *P. niger*, Oriental Darter *Anhinga melanogaster*, Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*, Purple Heron *A. purpurea*, Little Heron *Butorides striatus*, Indian Pond-Heron *Ardeola grayii*, Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*, Great Egret *Egretta alba*, Intermediate Egret *E. intermedia*, Little Egret *E. garzetta*, Cinnamon Bittern *Ixobrychus cinnamomeus*, Lesser Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna javanica*, Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*, Eurasian Wigeon *A. penelope*, Black Kite *Mikvus migrans*, Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus*, White-rumped Vulture *Gyps bengalensis*, Long-billed Vulture *G. indicus*, Shikra *Accipiter badius*, Tawny Eagle *Aquila rapax*, White-breasted Waterhen *Amauornis phoeniceus*, Watercock *Gallixrex cinerea*, Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*, Purple Swampphen *Porphyrio porphyrio*, Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra*, Pheasant-tailed Jacana *Hydrophasianus chirurgus*, Bronze-winged Jacana *Metopidius indicus*, Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus*, Asiatic Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva*, Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis*, Green Sandpiper *T. ochropus*, Wood Sandpiper *T. glareola*, Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*, Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*, Common Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*, River Tern *Sterna aurantia*, Yellow-footed Pigeon *Treron phoenicoptera*, Rock Pigeon *Columba livia*, Red Turtle-Dove *Streptopelia tranquebarica*, Spotted Dove *S. chinensis*, Emerald Dove *Chalcophaps indica*, Alexandrine Parakeet *Psittacula eupatria*, Rose-ringed Parakeet *P. krameri*, Common Koel *Eudynamis scolopacea*, Greater Coucal *Centropus sinensis*, Lesser Coucal *C. bengalensis*, Spotted Owlet *Athene brama*, Pied Kingfisher *Ceryle rudis*, Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*, Stork-billed Kingfisher *Pelargopsis capensis*, White-throated Kingfisher *Halcyon smymensis*, Chestnut-headed Bee-eater *Merops leschenaulti*, Blue-tailed Bee-eater *M. philippinus*, Green Bee-eater *M. orientalis*, Indian Roller *Coracias benghalensis*, Hoopoe *Upupa epops*, Lineated Barbet *Megalaima lineata*, Blue-throated Barbet *M. asiatica*, Coppermith Barbet *M. haemacephala*, Black-rumped Goldenback *Dinopium benghalense*, Fulvous-breasted Woodpecker *Picoides macei*, Oriental Skylark *Alauda gulgula*, Plain Martin *Riparia paludicola*, Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*, Large Cuckoo-shrike *Coracina novaehollandiae*, Common Iora *Aegithina tiphia*, Red-whiskered Bulbul *Pycnonotus jocosus*, Red-vented Bulbul *P. cafer*, Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus*, Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo *D. remifer*, Spangled Drongo *D. hottentottus*, Greater Racket-tailed Drongo *D. paradiseus*, Black-hooded Oriole *Oriolus xanthornus*, Rufous Treepie *Dendrocitta vagabunda*, House Crow *Corvus splendens*, Large-billed Crow *C. macrorhynchos*, Great Tit *Parus major*, Asian Magpie-robin *Copsychus saularis*, White-rumped Shama *C. malabaricus*, Common Stonechat *Saxicola torquata*, White-tailed Stonechat *S. leucura*, Striated Warbler *Megalurus palustris*, Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius*, Red-throated Flycatcher *Ficedula parva*, Grey-headed Flycatcher *Culicicapa ceylonensis*, White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*, Grey Wagtail *M. cinerea*, Yellow Wagtail *M. flava*, Yellow-hooded Wagtail *M. citreola*, Paddyfield Pipit *Anthus (novaeseelandiae) rufulus*, Rosy

Pipit *A. roseatus*, Ashy Woodswallow *Artamus fuscus*, Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus*, Grey-backed Shrike *L. tephronotus*, Chestnut-tailed Starling *Sturnus malabaricus*, Asian Pied Starling *S. contra*, Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*, Hill Myna *Gracula religiosa*, Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum cruentatum*, Oriental White-eye *Zosterops palpebrosus*, Eurasian Tree-Sparrow *Passer montanus*, House Sparrow *P. domesticus*, Baya Weaver *Ploceus philippinus*, Scaly-breasted Munia *Lonchura punctulata*, Chestnut Munia *L. malacca*.

## CONSERVATION

Habitat alteration and poaching are the major threats to the survival of birds in the Sibsagar District. Some forest species such as Kalij Pheasant and hornbills have become locally extinct due to the clearance of forest areas for cultivation and settlement.

In winter fishermen drain out water from most of the smaller *beels* and *ghulis* by cutting canals. Thus in late winter only the larger *beels* still hold water, substantially reducing the available habitat for waterbirds. The remaining water-bodies are greatly disturbed by the activities of fishermen but, fortunately, fishing is prohibited in Sibsagar and Joysagar Tanks by the temple authorities. Many hunters frequent the Phokolai and Dorou *beels*, the Pani-Dihing area and the *chaporis* of the Brahmaputra. However, the largest numbers of waterfowl are captured in specially woven nets. Netting takes place at night and just before dawn, especially when there is dense fog. Hundreds of birds are caught on some occasions, many of which are sold live in local markets at Akhoiphutia and Rajmai.

Pani-Dihing and the adjoining *chaporis* of the Brahmaputra have been proposed as a bird sanctuary and a few forest staff control hunting and poaching. However, the two important *beels* Phokolai and Dorou should also be included in the Pani-Dihing Bird Sanctuary.

Prabhat Yien of Alichiga, Puran Das of Jailgaon, Rana Bora of Akhoiphutia, Luhit Gogoi, Babakon Narah and others of Ujani Milonkur, Dharmeswar Das of Bokuldoba, B. Chakravarty SDPLO, Dhiraj Kolita SDC, R. Jain EAC, S. Nandi EAC, D. Choudhury SDC, Arun and Chandi Abang (drivers of the DC office), Kamal Bora (driver of the Statistics Department), Amulya Hazarika, Beat Officer of Sola, Deheswar Das, K. Das, C. Hazarika, D. Mili, B. Yien, U. Mili, P. Yien, N. Das, Naga Das, Nanda Das and Pada Haloi (Chowkidar of DB) all helped during various field trips. Special thanks are due to Jayanta Gohain, Election Officer, for introducing me to the bird-rich Phokolai *beel*.

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