

On the occurrence of White-naped Tit *Parus nuchalis* in southern India

ERIC J. LOTT AND CHRISTINE LOTT

The White-naped Tit *Parus nuchalis* is a species known to be endemic to India (Collar *et al.* 1994, Gaston, 1984; Ripley, 1955) evidently having a restricted and disjunct distribution (Ali and Ripley 1987) with two separate populations, in north-western India and the other in southern India (Ali 1942, 1955; Ali and Ripley 1987). At least six questions have been thrown up by recent literature on the species (Ali and Ripley 1987, Lott 1987a and 1987b, Hussain *et al.* 1992, George 1994, Shyamal 1995, Uttangi 1995): (1) What ecological factors account for the disjunct distribution of this species — in Rajasthan/Gujarat/Kachchh and in Karnataka/(Andhra Pradesh/Tamil Nadu?) — separated both by a distance of some 1,300 kms and by such apparently differing habitat? (2) Has this species evolved distinctive habits and physical features in these two separate regions? (3) Does this species in fact still survive in its southern relict region, and in how widespread an area? (4) What recent habitat changes would account for an apparent decrease in numbers of the species? (5) Is it possible that instead of the long-accepted thesis of 'disjunction', migratory movements could account for its appearances in the South, in spite of there having been no sightings in the regions between? (6) With which other species does it co-habit; in particular, does it overlap with Great Tit *Parus major*.

This article is confined largely to question (3) above. An extensive bird survey in 1942 in the South 'failed to come across this tit in spite of a very special look out for it' (Ali and Whistler 1942). In 1954, after referring to the very dry habitat of the species in Gujarat [broken, stony, hummocky semi-desert country ... well covered with jungle of babul, kandi *Prosopis spicigera* and peeloo *Salvadora persica* and *S. oleoides*, and bushes of gurgur *Balsamodendron mukul*, gangi *Grewia populifolia* and similar species], Ali (1954) described Jerdon's much earlier claim that the species keeps to the tops of heavily wooded hills in the Eastern Ghats as 'incongruous'. This echoed Whistler's doubt as to Jerdon's (since lost) specimen coming from the Eastern Ghats west of Nellore, in south-east Andhra Pradesh as he thought 'there must be some mistake' as it was definitely known to be an inhabitant of the dry country of Rajasthan (Whistler and Kinnear 1931). In that, today at least, most of the hilly country to the west of Nellore is dry deciduous, far from 'moist' and 'heavily wooded' — is in fact the home of the recently re-discovered Jerdon's Courser *Rhinoptilus bitorquatus* — there seems no reason to doubt *per se* the claim that a specimen was found in that region.

Ali and Ripley (1987) consider the species to be 'very rare' in the South, 'and recorded only once from each of the following localities: Eastern Ghats west of Nellore (Jerdon 1863), Bangalore (obtained by Dr. Stewart in Bangalore; Baker and Inglis, 1930, Jerdon, 1863), and Satyamangalam (Biligirirangana Hills; the specimen

collected by R. C. Morris now in the Natural History Museum at Tring, U.K.).

Hussain *et al.* (1992) referring only to these three much earlier sightings in the South, concluded that 'it is of considerable importance to establish whether this (southern) population still exists'. Incidentally, George (1994) affirmed that the species is now 'locally extinct' in Bangalore (this referring to the area within a 40 km radius of Bangalore City), but mentions the sighting of S. Subramanya in the Kaveri Valley, some 100 kms south of Bangalore, where he found the birds on 30 December, 1984 about 1 km downstream, south of the confluence of Arkavarthi and Kaveri rivers and on the east bank of the Kaveri, on the way to a picnic spot popularly known as Mekedhatu (Goat's leap) (S. Subramanya pers. comm.). In 1995, Uttangi (1995) reported seeing two White-naped Tits at Dharwad, nearly 400 kms north-west of Bangalore (thus nearly one third of the distance to Kachchh). However, Shyamal (1995), who reports having searched in vain for the species, cautions that it is not difficult to confuse *P. major* with *P. nuchalis*. Consideration of these accounts calls for a fuller and up-dated account of our sightings of the species in the Kaveri Valley south of Bangalore. A reference to our earlier sightings has already been made elsewhere (Lott 1986).

Between 1985 and 1995, we have seen this uncommon species on five separate occasions at two locations in the Kaveri Valley. On 1 December 1985 a pair was seen feeding in the dry thorny scrub habitat of the valley floor, flat and quite wide at this point, about 1 km beyond the small cattle hamlet of Bommasandra, which is on the eastern side of the Kaveri some 3 km upstream of the confluence (Sangam) of the rivers Kaveri and Arkavathi. This is about 5 km from the location of Subramanya's sighting in 1984. The diagnostic white markings of the wings, tail, sides and nape were outstanding against the dark black of the remaining plumage; identification was unmistakable. Keeping in touch with them was difficult, and useful photographs impossible to take, as they moved quickly across the valley floor, making for the hillside. But they still provided excellent views, in part because foliage was minimal. Then in November 1986 we saw a group of four birds in the somewhat thicker, scrub jungle of Heganuru State Forest — a point at which there are some small stands of Tamarind trees among the various acacias and thorns typical of the area — on the Kanakapura to Sangam road 8 km north of Sangam (the confluence). A pair observed by Subramanya (pers. comm.) was in undulating terrain extending along the river edge in dry deciduous jungle dominated by *Albizia amara* and *Acacia leucophloea*, and with sparse shrub growth dominated by *Solanum pubescens*. This is on the plateau above the valley. Across country, the sites of our two sightings are only 5 km apart, and joined by

continuous scrub forest. The four birds were presumably a family, as the black and white of two of the tits was less contrasting; coloration was still quite distinct from *P. major*, but in general there was an impression of less sheer jet black plumage than is portrayed in, for example, Ali and Ripley (1983). Their calls are quite distinctive, though clearly tit-like. Feeding in Tamarind and acacia trees, their general behaviour was very much like *P. major*, as recorded by Ali and Ripley (1987). Subramanya found the individuals were slightly dispersed and were calling 'excitedly' (S. Subramanya pers. comm.). Photographs were possible, though results were not of high quality due both to the high wind and the mirror lens (500 mm with 2 x converter) that one of us (EJL) was using at the time.

Our three subsequent sightings (January 1987, October 1995, November 1995) were all at this latter location. In two cases it was the diagnostic call that led to sightings. On the last occasion, one of the three birds we saw in a Tamarind tree appeared to be displaying by excitedly fanning out its tail from time to time, and they moved through the area a little less quickly than has usually been the case. Unfortunately, one of the many technical hitches that can occur in the life of would-be bird photographers prevented what should have been good pictures!

We have no record or recollection of seeing *P. major* either along with these White-naped Tits or even in the vicinity at any time. This is in spite of seeing a total of 186 bird species in this limited area (Lott 1987a & b), and *P. major* at several locations within 60 km. However, the claim by Salim Ali (Ali 1942) that these two species do not overlap is contradicted by the recent survey in Kachchh. This report also speaks of the bird as being 'very shy'. In the South it certainly moves off quickly; but it should be noted that the road running beside, even through, this Heganuru location is fairly busy and noisy, with traffic and pedestrians moving along it much of the day. It is on the edge of the State Forest area, bounded on two sides by typical Deccan hills and, in spite of the traffic and the close proximity of cultivation, still a regular haunt for elephants and leopards. During our sightings of *P. nuchalis* we have not noted the species being associated especially with any other birds. However, the pair sighted by Subramanya was part of a mixed hunting party of insectivorous birds, comprising Common Iora *Aegithina tiphia*, Golden-fronted Leafbird *Chloropsis aurifrons*, Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker *Dendrocopos nanus*, Grey-breasted Prinia *Prinia hodgsonii* and Small Minivet *Pericrocotus cinnamomeus* (S. Subramanya pers. comm.).

It may not be entirely unrelated to note that this Heganuru location is less than 1 km from an open

plateau of agricultural land where, for several weeks of the winter each year, European Bee-eaters *Merops apiaster* (migrating from the north-west) congregate to feed from the roadside telephone wires. In mid-December 1995 we counted 85 birds.

The sightings of *P. nuchalis* mentioned above in no way constitute a systematic survey, if only because we did not visit the area at all from mid-April to mid-September, and there are large tracts of the area — State Forests and other — that are still not surveyed. While there is no need to doubt, as Hussain *et al.* (1992), whether or not *P. nuchalis* still survives in the South, there is clearly an urgent need to establish both the extent and the nature of its survival, including any migratory patterns, in relation to changing habitat in the region.

REFERENCES

- Ali, S. (1955) The birds of Gujarat. *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* 52: 735-802.
- Ali, S. and Ripley, S. D. (1987) *Compact handbook of the birds of India and Pakistan*, (2nd edition). Bombay: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Ali, S. and Ripley, S. D. (1983) *A pictorial guide to the birds of the Indian subcontinent*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Ali, S. and Whistler, H. (1942) The birds of Mysore. *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* 43: 130-147.
- Baker, R. and Inglis, M. (1930): *Birds of Southern India*. Madras: Govt. Press.
- Collar, N. J., Crosby, M. J. and Stattersfield, A. J. (1994) *Birds to watch 2: the world list of threatened birds*. Cambridge: BirdLife International.
- Gaston, A. J. (1985) Is habitat destruction in India and Pakistan beginning to affect the status of endemic passerine birds. *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* 82: 636-641.
- George, J., ed. (1994) *Annotated checklist of the birds of Bangalore*. Bangalore: Birdwatchers' Field Club of Bangalore.
- Hussain, S. A., Akhtar, S. A. and Tiwari, J. K. (1992) Status and distribution of White-winged Black Tit *Parus nuchalis* in Kachchh, Gujarat, India. *Bird. Cons. Intern.* 2: 115-122.
- Jerdon, T. C. (1863): *The birds of India*, 2. Published by the author, Calcutta.
- Lott, E. J. (1987a) Birds of the Kaveri valley. *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* 27(1 & 2): 7-10, (3 & 4):12-16.
- Lott, E. J. (1987b): Birds of Kaveri Valley - Additions: *Newsletter for birdwatchers*: 27(9 & 10):16.
- Shyamal, L. (1995) The Whitewinged Tit *Parus nuchalis* in southern India and notes on the Great Tit *Parus major*. *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* 35: 114. [Karnataka]
- Uttangi, J. C. (1995) A rare occurrence of the globally threatened White-naped Tit, *Parus nuchalis*, in areas of Dharwad, Karnataka, India. *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* 35: 114-115.
- Whistler, H. and Kinnear, N. B. (1931) The Vernay Scientific Survey of the Eastern Ghats (Ornithological Section). *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* 35: 505-524.