

In search of Jerdon's Courser *Rhinoptilus bitorquatus* in Vidarbha, Maharashtra

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Background and Introduction:

Notwithstanding the anxiety and genuine apprehension expressed by well wishers like Sridhar (Publisher, NLBW) and Dr. Asad Rahamani (Director, BNHS), we embarked on a short expedition into Gadchiroli district, which forms the eastern part of Maharashtra. We were wandering into notorious trouble-torn area risking our lives, only hoping to rediscover the critically endangered Jerdon's Courser (*Rhinoptilus bitorquatus*) in Maharashtra!

Jerdon's Courser is a small cursorial bird and inhabits open patches in scrub jungle. It is endemic to southern India, where it is principally known from southern Andhra Pradesh. It has an extremely limited geographical range being known from the Godavari river valley near Sironcha and Bhadrachalam, and from the Cuddapah and Anantpur areas in the valley of the Pennar River (Ali and Ripley) (Birdlife International, 2001). It is mostly active at dusk and during the night. It was first recorded in the mid 19th century, it was then considered to be extinct for more than 80 years, until it was rediscovered in 1986 at Cuddapah District, Andhra Pradesh. In Maharashtra it was reported at "24 km east of Sironcha, near the Godavari river, three birds, undated (Blanford 1867, 1869), and sometime in the 20-year period before 1935 (D'Abreu, 1935)".

We undertook a three day (9th June to 11th June 2006) expedition into the Naxalite hit Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra, which was once upon a time a favorite haunt for the critically endangered Jerdon's Courser.

Planning:

We planned the itinerary well in advance. We took certain steps in view of the omnipresent Naxal activity in the study area. The steps included: not to dress in camouflage (greens, khakis, commando type), not to pose as government officials (we were not!), not to use government vehicles, not to discuss anything about Naxalites, to have locals with us every time etc. We obtained the gadget containing the recorded calls of the Jerdon's Courser from Jeganathan, the Senior Research Fellow working for his doctoral thesis on this rare bird at Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary, Cuddapah, Andhra Pradesh. The gadget is a small box that plays the call ten times. The call can be vocalized as "kwik-koo...kwik-koo" (Jeganathan, 2005a,b,&c).

Edited.

We got the call enhanced the by 100 times from professional studio for better replay. We prepared a colour photo folder having pictures of Jerdon's Courser, Red-wattled Lapwing (*Vanellus indicus*) and Yellow-wattled Lapwing (*Vanellus malabaricus*) face-to-face. We carried a powerful searchlight with us besides binoculars, spotting scope, cameras and video camera equipment.

Risk:

Whenever we used the searchlight, there was every probability of Naxalites mistaking us for Police on combing operations and police thinking us to be a brigade of Naxals on move in the forest. Both ways we could have got killed. Every time we used the searchlight fear gripped us!

Day-1 (9th June 2006):

Gadchiroli district is the easternmost tip of Maharashtra. The river Pranahita forms the southern boundary and the river Indravati forms the eastern boundary of the district. On first day, we traveled along this route to reach our first major stop, that is, Sironcha: Nagpur, Umred, Bhiwapur, Nagbhid, Bramhapuri, Armori, Gadchiroli, Chamorshi, Ghot, Ainapur, Somanpalli, Konesari, Ashti, Chaprala Sanctuary, Alapalli, Mosam, Bamni and Sironcha.

When we crossed Vainganga River before Armori town we saw nearly 60 Asian Openbills (*Anastomus oscitans*) in the river basin. At Konesari, there is a small piece of beautiful forest. Here we saw the Giant Squirrels and their nests. Giant Squirrel is the state animal of Maharashtra. Mr. Medpalliwar, the RFO was a knowledgeable person and informed us that previously there were 64 nests of Giant Squirrels and now there are 74 nests of Giant Squirrels.

In this small jewel, we also saw birds like Mottled Wood Owl (*Strix ocellata*), Common Hawk Cuckoo (*Hierococcyx varius*), Asian Paradise Flycatcher (*Terpsiphone paradisi*), Rufous Treepie (*Dendrocitta vagabunda*), Crested Treeswift (*Hemiprocne coronata*), Black-rumped Flameback (*Dinopium benghalense*) and Oriental White-eye (*Zosterops palpebrosus*). After Alapalli the landscape resembles to that of Andhra Pradesh. The main crop is paddy, many speak Telugu, and the forest looks like that of Eastern Ghats.

We reached Sironcha in the late afternoon. Here Mr. Shaikh, the helpful RFO, arranged for our stay. First we called some knowledgeable locals. They were Sinu, Shafi and Shankar Gauraa Dongri. From the photos and call replays from the call box, we got 'positive' information. Raju showed illustrations from Grimmet et. al's (2000) guide to locals and asked for names in local Telugu language. From this discussion with locals we understood that in Telugu language (here) Red-wattled Lapwing is known as "Kandlei Pittya" and "Sitwa", Indian Courser is known as "Kaalū Tellaga Untai" and "Pedda Sitwa". But except "Kandlei Pittya" the remaining three names might be wrong as the locals often got confused with the names and pictures. Also we got three names for Jerdon's Courser viz., *Kaamjulu*, *Gabilam* and *Ahkdobera* (at Kopela). But nobody could understand the meaning of "Adava-wuttu-titti", the Telugu name given to the Jerdon's Courser in the Fauna of British India.

In the evening (7pm to 9pm) we played the call many times in open scrub jungle near Sironcha and waited for the response. At one moment Mr. Thosar and Ashish Bhole felt they have heard the response of the Jerdon's Courser! However others did not hear it. We clearly heard calls of Spotted Owlet (*Athene brama*), Red-wattled Lapwing, Yellow-wattled Lapwing, Brainfever bird, and four species of Nightjars.

We stayed at the old Sironcha forest rest house. I had a small creepy guest in my room in the form of a snake, which I photographed.

Day-2 (10th June 2006):

On 10th June, we got up at 4 am. At 5pm we started the call replays in the open scrub jungles of Nandigaon, near Sironcha. Here, because of encroachments the open scrub jungle patches are getting converted to agriculture. Then we proceeded towards Marigudam and Tigalgudam. Here the forest is dense and hence the habitat did not look promising. While

coming back we replayed the calls near Rajiv Nagar and Arda villages but to no success. In this session we saw two families of Small Green Bee-eaters (*Merops orientalis*), Yellow-wattled lapwings, Black Ibis (*Pseudibis papillosa*) & Black-headed Ibis (*Threskiornis melanocaphalus*) in the cultivation, Indian Robins, Common Woodshrike (*Tephrodornis pondicerianus*), Bay-backed Shrikes (*Lanius vittatus*) on perches, Indian Roller (*Coracias benghalensis*), Large Grey Babbler (*Turdoides striatus*), House Swifts (*Apus affinis*), Asian Palm Swifts (*Cypsiurus balasiensis*), Black Drongos (*Dicrurus macrocercus*), Eurasian Collared Doves (*Streptopelia decaocto*), Jungle Crows (*Corvus macrorhynchos*) and Yellow-legged Buttonquail (*Turnix tanki*). A tree of Toddy Palm had around 40 nests of Baya Weavers in construction phase.

With the sweetest song among babblers, Yellow-billed Babbler (White-headed Babbler) (*Turdoides affinis*) was a treat to see and listen here. The sweet long calls confused us as it is different from other babblers.

On the road to Asaralli (approximately 15 kilometers east of Sironcha) near a Christian cemetery a Neem tree had around 40 nests of Baya Weavers (*Ploceus philippinus*). Here the habitat was open scrub jungle and the two species of Lapwings were seen all around.

In the afternoon we moved to Asaralli range, east of Sironcha. We had no option but to travel by the forest department's jeep, as there was no fuel available for our car at the lone petrol pump in Sironcha. The journey was along the river Pranahita. We saw the riverbank and agriculture land which was completely overtaken by *Parthenium* grass.

Now our guides were Mr. Narayan Bore, in his sixties and Mr. Tirupati Dhannore, 28. In the evening, we traveled back to Ankisa, 11 km west of Asaralli towards Sironcha. We expected this area to be the same where the Jerdon's Courser was sighted earlier. While going to Asaralli we had spotted a good scrub jungle here. The evening was tense, as we did a 'transect' along an undisturbed patch of scrub jungle. Here also the Lapwings were numerous. We saw a Jungle Owlet (*Glaucidium radiatum*) here and heard calls of Nightjars (*Caprimulgus affinis*, *C. asiaticus* and *C. indicus*) and Spotted Owlets. The evening saw a wave of frantic excitement when Raju declared to have a Jerdon's Courser in sight. It wasn't. We did the call plays from 6 pm to 9 pm. We stayed for the evening at Ankisa forest rest house.

Day-3 (11th June 2006):

At 5 am we started the transect survey along the road towards Kopela village. However after a kilometer the scrub jungle landscape changed to teak forest and then to evergreen forest of the Eastern Ghats. We continued the route via Bodla Nullah, Somanpalli and stopped at Kopela. Forester Mr. Jangamwar helped us meet the shy locals and discuss the birds. The locals knew only Telugu, Mr. Tirupati came to our help as an interpreter. The calls of Jerdon's Courser did not elicit any response from the forest as well as from the locals.

Not much bird activity was seen, till the village Somanpalli. However after few kilometers from Somanpalli there was lot of bird activity and the forest was green and dense. Here we saw Yellow-footed Green Pigeons (*Treron phoenicoptera*), White-breasted Kingfisher (*Halcyon smyrnensis*), Spotted Doves (*Streptopelia chinensis*), White-bellied Drongos (*Dicrurus caerulescens*), Crested Serpent Eagle, Indian Pittas (*Pitta brachyuran*), Eurasian Golden Orioles (*Oriolus Oriolus*), Blue-tailed Bee-eaters (*Merops philippinus*), Eurasian Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*) and many commoner species. We saw many Giant Squirrels and their nests on trees.

Information about vultures received here:

Mr. Shaikh, the RFO, Sironcha gave us important information about the avifauna. Five years back (2000-2001) the Municipality had killed around 40-50 stray dogs in Sironcha by poisoning them. These were thrown on the bank of Pranahita river. Nearly 150 vultures died after consuming these poisoned carcasses! He also added that he had personally seen around 15 vultures a month back near Sironcha. But he could not identify the species from the bird books.

The RFO of Asaralli, Mr. Gahokar gave us similar information. Around 1999-2000 some cattle of the village died after consuming poisoned grains. These were thrown on the village fringe. The fateful vultures in turn devoured these carcasses. More than 100 vultures died in this single incidence! He also informed that he had not seen vultures for at least last 3-4 years. He also shared one incidence in which a villager had killed and devoured one Malabar Pied Hornbill (*Anthracoseros coronatus*).

Some general observations:

1. Very few birds could be seen near villages.
2. Locals do hunting using a horn, which produces 'kirrrrr' sound and a searchlight.
3. Two groups of boys were seen in Sironcha hunting birds with a catapult.
4. Asian Palm Swifts (*Cypsiurus balasiensis*) are very common in villages.

Names of birds in local Telugu language:

Here is a list of local names of the birds in local Telugu language as told by villagers.

All Quails: *Kured Pittya*

Common Bustard Quail: *Puradpittya*

All Partridges: *Kounjipittya*

All Egrets: *Konga*

Grey Heron: *Police Konga*

Domestic Hen: *Kodi*

Common Peafowl: *Nemeli*

Red Junglefowl (male): *Karkodi Punju*, (female): *Kaarkodi*

Grey Junglefowl (male): *Chedalkodi Punju*, (female): *Chedalkodi*

Jerdon's Courser: *Kaamjulu*, *Gabilam* and *Ahkdobera* (?)

Red-wattled Lapwing: *Kandlei Pittya*, *Sitwa* (?)

Yellow-wattled Lapwing: *Chinna Sitwa*

Indian Courser: *Kaalu Tellaga Untai* and *Pedda Sitwa* (?)

Eurasian Thick-knee: *Puradpittya*

Common Hoopoe: *Adla Pittya*

Indian Roller: *Paalpittya*

Malabar Pied Hornbill and Grey Hornbill both: *Soompnath*,

Eurasian Eagle Owl: *Gudla Gufa*, *Pedapitta*

Spotted Owlet: *Gudla Gufa*

Barn Owl: *Pied Kantha*, *Phaidi Kaanthe*

Nightjars: *Nelatappidi*

Roseringed Parakeet: *Ramchilka*

Alexandrine Parakeet: *Khakiroba*

Blossom-headed Parakeet: *Chilka*

All Eagles: *Kookkoosam*, *Dega*

Common Pariah Kite: *Gadda*

All Vultures: *Pantaregadi*

White-breasted Waterhen: *Poolakodi*
Small Green Bee-eater: *Relapittya*
Yellow-legged Green Pigeon: *Polgu*
Blue Rock Pigeon: *Payram*
Doves: *Goowa*
Baya Weaver Birds: *Jakor Pittya*
Black Drongo: *Nalla Pitta*
Red-vented Bulbul: *Piklennka*
Black Ibis: *Neer Kaaki*
House Crow: *Kaaki*
Indian Koel: *Koyalam*
Greater Coucal: *Samur Kaaki*
Common Myna: *Gorenka*
All Babblers: *Putta Sitwa*
Asian Palm Swift: *Mangalkatti*
House Sparrow: *Urvista*.

Epilogue:

Though the expedition did not result into rediscovering the rare Jerdon's Courser, we are sure some day it will be rediscovered here. The forest department has strongly suggested us not to go for a second expedition, as the situation has worsened now, hence we are holding back. We hope, whatever the problems, the Naxalites are not against the wildlife and or birds!

Acknowledgements:

Thanks to Mr. B. Mujumdar, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Maharashtra State) for helping us in executing the expedition. Thanks to Mr. Shaikh, RFO, Sironcha, Mr. Gahokar, RFO, Asaralli, Mr. Jangamwar, Forester, Kopela for making the stay comfortable and helping us everytime. Thanks to Mr. Ashish Bhole for accompanying us during the trip. Thanks to Mr. Rafique for driving us safely. Thanks to Mr. Jeganathan for providing us the call box of Jerdon's Courser.

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Suggested citation:

Kasambe, R., Pimplapure, A. & Thosar, G. (2008): In search of Jerdon's Courser *Rhinoptilus bitorquatus* in Vidarbha, Maharashtra. *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*. 48(6): 89-91.