

A new breeding location of Indian Skimmer *Rynchops albicollis*, and notes on other birds in Son Gharial Wildlife Sanctuary, Madhya Pradesh, India

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Abstract

Here we report of a new breeding population of Indian Skimmer *Rynchops albicollis*, in the Son Gharial Wildlife Sanctuary. Breeding of Indian Skimmers indicates that the sanctuary could be a potential Important Bird Area (IBA), and provides opportunities for locating other breeding sites of the birds, on Son River, and its tributaries—Banas, and Gopad. We also present notes on some common, and rare birds found in the sanctuary, and a bird list of 111 species, compiled from earlier published reports and our own opportunistic observations, adding 24 species to the sanctuary's checklist. We feel that detailed scientific bird surveys are needed in the Son Gharial Wildlife Sanctuary to comprehensively document its avifaunal diversity.

Introduction

Son Gharial Wildlife Sanctuary (hereafter Son) is situated in Sidhi District of Madhya Pradesh. It begins from Bansagar Dam (24.18°N, 81.28°E), and ends at Piparijhar village (24.60°N, 82.77°E), bordering Mirzapur District, Uttar Pradesh (Fig. 1). The sanctuary extends southward to the Eastern Vindhya Range, or the Kaimur Range of eastern Madhya Pradesh. It is 209 km long, and has 200 m wide riverbanks on either sides of the Son River (a major tributary of River Ganges) (Rao 1992).

In the past two decades the avifauna of the sanctuary has been studied, either in detail (Sharma & Sharma 1997; Singh *et al.*, 2015), or through rapid assessments (Sharma *et al.*, 1999; Sharma *et al.*, 2011; Nair & Katdare 2013). In the present study, we try to review the existing state of knowledge on the avifauna of the area, and augment it with our own observations.

Study area

Son is a shallow, meandering sand-bed river with an extensive floodplain, comprising midstream sandbars. The river flows between cliff-like banks characterized by terraced accumulations of early Middle- to Late Pleistocene sediments (Gatti 2010). The river flows in shallow streams that get divided into two types of riverbeds: one comprising rocky beds with multiple pools, present at four locations along the entire stretch of the sanctuary, two, comprising sandy islands, and riverbanks. The vegetation around the Son River is mainly composed of two forest types: tropical moist deciduous forests, and tropical dry deciduous forests (Champion & Seth 1968). The Son was declared as a wildlife sanctuary in 1981 by the government of Madhya Pradesh to protect, and preserve the faunal diversity of the river, specifically the critically endangered gharial *Gavialis gangeticus*, and the vulnerable marsh crocodile *Crocodylus palustris* (Singh *et al.*, 2015).

Methodology

Over a period of one year, three visits (13 April 2011, 28 January, and 15 April 2012, respectively) were made to Son. The visits were predominantly made to the gharial-spotting site of Jogdeha Ghat, passing through Bansagar Dam Shikargang, to an unnamed spot (24.40°N, 81.68°E). Birds were recorded randomly. Our observations revealed that Jogdeha Ghat sustains a larger number of wetland birds than any other sites visited along the Son River.

Results

Based on our recent observations, and from previously published works, we drew up a bird list of 111 species, of which 24 were additions from our recent visits (Appendix). Under The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (<http://www.iucnredlist.org/>), 94 of these species were categorised as, of Least Concern, seven as Near Threatened, and ten as Threatened.

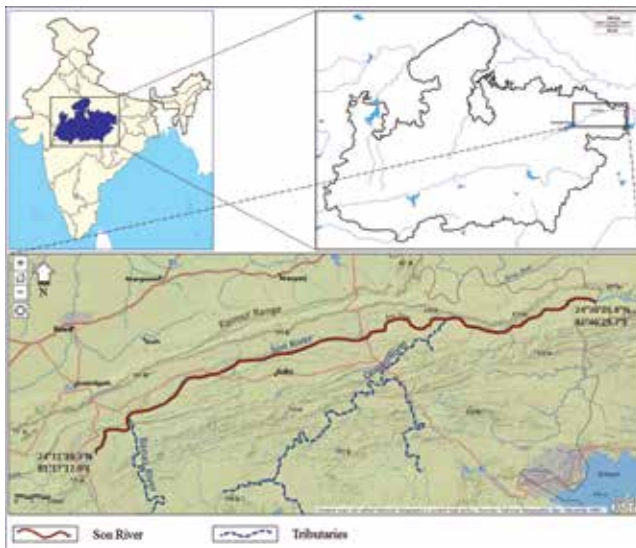


Fig. 1. The Son Wildlife Sanctuary

A significant outcome of our observations was the discovery of a hitherto unrecorded breeding site of Indian Skimmer, besides recording the Common Pochard at Son, and other riverine bird species like Black-necked Stork, Black-headed Ibis, Great Thick Knee, and River Lapwing.

Indian Skimmer *Rynchops albicollis* VU

Fourteen individuals were recorded nesting on a small sand-island near the southern bank of the river, at Jogdeha, on 15 April 2012 [47]. This is a new breeding colony, and falls within Son, unrecorded earlier (Sharma & Sharma 1997; Sharma *et al.* 1999; Sharma *et al.* 2011; Nair & Katdare 2013; Singh *et al.* 2015). Though prior studies did not indicate skimmers breeding in the sanctuary, all of them have recorded it during the breeding season (Table 1) and hence this proves a virtual breeding population in the sanctuary in recent years.

Photo: Varun Sharma



47. Indian Skimmers *Rynchops albicollis* at Jogdeha Ghat.

Table 1. Site locations representing *R. albicollis* population studied by earlier workers

| S. No. | Site location | Number recorded | Reference |
|--------|-----------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------|
| 1. | Terideh near Bhaversen Ghat | 2 | Nair & Katdare (2013) |
| 2. | Jogdeha | 17 | Singh <i>et al.</i> (2015) |
| 3. | Jogdeha | 14 | Nair & Katdare (2013) |
| 4. | Kultideha | 18-21 | Nair & Katdare (2013) |
| 5. | Kherpur/Bichheri Ghat | ≈80 | Srivastava (2014) |
| 6. | Kheraini Ghat | | |

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina* VU

A flock of 47 birds was recorded mid-river at Shikargang, near Terideh, on 28 January at 1505 hrs. This is a first record from Son, and in 2015 this species has been up-listed to Vulnerable by IUCN.

Black-necked Stork *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus* NT

Recorded in two different seasons, an adult was spotted at an unnamed location on 28 January 2012, at 0920 hrs, while it foraged along the riverbank, and four juveniles were spotted at Jogdeha on 15 April 2012 at 1335 hrs, while they basked, and waded along the southern sandy bank.

Black-headed Ibis *Threskiornis melanocephalus* NT

About 11 birds were recorded basking on the southern bank of the river on 28 January 2012. Six birds were recorded on 15 April 2012 on rocky islands mid-river at Jogdeha Ghat.

Great Thick Knee *Esacus recurvirostris* NT

Six birds were recorded on mid-river rocky beds on 28 January, and five on 15 April 2012 at Jogdeha Ghat.

River Lapwing *Vanellus duvaucelii* NT

Two birds were spotted on rocky river banks at an unnamed location (24.41°N, 81.69°E) at 0900 hrs, and two birds were later recorded from Jogdeha Ghat at 1335 hrs on 28 January 2012.

Discussions

A potential breeding site for Indian Skimmers

The Indian Skimmer occurs on sandy rivers, and lakes of various sizes, and is principally adapted to feeding while flying over rivers. It breeds on sandy spits, or river islands. It frequently feeds near the edges of river channels, and lagoons—sometimes where the water depth is only three to four centimeters (BirdLife International 2001). The geography of Son River, and its tributaries, the Banas, and Gopad rivers, provides an ideal habitat for this bird (Fig. 2). The river has shallow channels and sandy islands throughout its length in Son, with the exception of four rocky beds, with large and deep pools and sparse vegetation at the beginning of sanctuary, mainly at Shikargang, Kuldeha Bridge, and Jogdeha Bridge. The confluence of the Banas, and Gopad rivers also provides nesting opportunities by opening-up large sandy banks and shallow channels. In the earlier studies (Sharma & Sharma 1997; Sharma *et al.* 1999; Sharma *et al.* 2011; Nair & Katdare 2013; Singh *et al.* 2015), apart from Jogdeha Ghat, the existence of this bird during its breeding season has been reported from sites that are only at confluence points of tributaries, and not from the interiors. However, we still do not know much about the pattern of movements of the species. Although flooding regimes could be critical, breeding can only occur when water levels are low (BirdLife International 2001).



Fig. 2. Sites representing potential Gharial breeding sites where Indian Skimmers have been recorded.

We observed that the Son River offers sandy banks, and mid-river islands, ideal for nesting of the species, along the whole stretch of the sanctuary (>100 km). Earlier studies seem to have restricted most of their activities to gharial breeding sites at Terideh Ghat, Jogdeha Ghat, Kherpur/Bicchheri Ghat, Kultideha, and Kheraini Ghat (Table 1).

With a record of more than 80 birds at confluence of Gopad, and Son rivers in 2014 (Srivastava 2014), there is a possibility of identifying more breeding sites of Indian Skimmers on the Son River; a clear need for more intensive surveys during the bird's breeding season, which is highly dependent on riverine water levels (in turn dependent upon regional rainfall). The breeding season of the species is predominantly from March to May (BirdLife International 2001).

Considering that the current estimate of Indian Skimmer population is 6,000–10,000 individuals, of which, roughly 4,000–6,700 are mature birds (BirdLife International 2015a), the Son

population of 80 individuals is >1% of the global population level (Wetlands International 2015), qualifying it to be listed under the Global IBA criteria (BirdLife International 2015b).

India has always been the most important country for the species. It has now become crucial in any strategy to preserve it (BirdLife International 2015c). IBAs are part of a wider, integrated approach to conservation that embrace sites, species, and habitat protection, and are used to reinforce existing protected areas networks (BirdLife International 2015b).

Our study reveals that Son supports ten species under the IUCN Red List categories (IUCN 2015.3). Besides this, we strongly feel that Son holds great potential for the commoner avifauna as well. However, it is difficult to assess the avifaunal diversity of Son, based merely on earlier studies in a sanctuary that stretches over 209 km. The Son River has two big tributaries originating from thick forests, and they also have similar geography, flowing patterns, and run through the forested areas, scrubs, undulating rocky cliffs, farmlands, and human habitation. This could very well contribute to a great diversity in avifauna in the sanctuary, but it needs to be validated by further detailed studies and scientific surveys in future.

Alarming threats

Though most of the bird species are legally protected under The Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, their habitats are under heavy anthropogenic pressures. One of the major threats to the ecology, and habitat of birds along the river is anthropogenic disturbance. Increase in human populations in surrounding villages, and towns has resulted in the increase and expansion of new settlements, modern agricultural practices with the use of toxic pesticides, illegal encroachment for temporary cultivation along river banks, and river beds, and increased livestock grazing (Sharma & Sharma 1997; Singh *et al.* 2015). These pressures could have potential impacts on the degradation of nesting and basking habitats of skimmers along the Son River. We also found that due to habitations along the river, there is a great deal of movement of cattle, and stray dogs, which could pose a threat to the eggs, and nestlings of Indian Skimmers.

Sharma & Sharma (1997), and Singh *et al.* (2015) indicate that the Son River has become shallower due to the construction of the Bansagar Dam, which has resulted in drastic water flow instability, with low flow conditions in the river, which in turn has enhanced siltation, and reduced water depths. During summer, the water level plummets; while during the monsoon, due to sudden discharge, the river is in spate, causing potential flood situations.

Industrial developments in the district have resulted in higher dependency on the river for sand, and thus, sand mining from riverbanks has increased (Singh *et al.* 2015). Also, the denotification of large sections of the river areas of the sanctuary for sand mining (Singh *et al.* 2015) could result in a detrimental loss of critical habitat for Indian Skimmers in the sanctuary in future.

The inhabitants, or the local communities, are completely dependent on the river for their livelihood, which urges a dependency upon the fishes and turtles as food. Often this is coupled with certain unsustainable practices of fishing, such as the use of explosives, and netting (Sharma *et al.* 2011). Dumping of non-biodegradable waste, and garbage [48], by the local communities, who celebrate most of their religious ceremonies, festivals, and *melas* along the river, has resulted in littering of the habitat with cutlery, and disposable polystyrene and plastic materials.



Photo: Mohammed Dilawar

48. Discarded non-biodegradable waste near the most important Gharial breeding site at Jogdeha Ghat.

Conservation

Son was established to protect the gharial. Thus, most of the conservation policies for, and research at Son are primarily centered on the gharial. But one should not forget that Son also supports great avifaunal diversity along the river, and adjoining areas. The occurrence of such significant bird species throughout the area highlights the importance of landscape level conservation of avifauna and their habitats along the Son River. Conservation of an area can be achievable, if there is a reduction in anthropological pressures.

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| Appendix. Compiled avifauna of Son Wildlife Sanctuary | | | |
|---|--|--------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Common Name(s) | Scientific Name | Conservation Status (BLI 2015) | Observations recorded |
| Fulvous Whistling-duck | <i>Dendrocygna bicolor</i> | LC | A, B |
| Lesser Whistling-duck | <i>Dendrocygna javanica</i> | LC | E, F |
| Bar-headed Goose | <i>Anser indicus</i> | LC | A, F |
| Greylag Goose | <i>Anser anser</i> | LC | F |
| Common Merganser | <i>Mergus merganser</i> | LC | A, E |
| Ruddy Shelduck | <i>Tadorna ferruginea</i> | LC | A, E, F |
| Red-crested Pochard | <i>Netta rufina</i> | LC | F |
| Common Pochard | <i>Aythya ferina</i> | VU | F |
| Gadwall | <i>Mareca strepera</i> | LC | A |
| Indian Spot-billed Duck | <i>Anas poecilorhyncha</i> | LC | A, E, F |
| Northern Pintail | <i>Anas acuta</i> | LC | A |
| Common Teal | <i>Anas crecca</i> | LC | A |
| Comb Duck | <i>Sarkidiornis melanotos</i> | LC | A, E, F |
| Cotton Teal | <i>Nettapus coromandelianus</i> | LC | F |
| Indian Peafowl | <i>Pavo cristatus</i> | LC | A |
| Grey Francolin | <i>Francolinus pondicerianus</i> | LC | F |
| Little Grebe | <i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i> | LC | F |
| Rock Pigeon | <i>Columba livia</i> | LC | A |
| Eurasian Collared Dove | <i>Streptopelia decaocto</i> | LC | A |
| Red Collared Dove | <i>Streptopelia tranquebarica</i> | LC | A |
| Laughing Dove | <i>Spilopelia senegalensis</i> | LC | F |
| Greater Coucal | <i>Centropus sinensis</i> | LC | A, F |
| Common Moorhen | <i>Gallinula chloropus</i> | LC | F |
| Common Coot | <i>Fulca atra</i> | LC | A, E, F |
| Sarus Crane | <i>Antigone antigone</i> | VU | A |
| Painted Stork | <i>Mycteria leucocephala</i> | NT | A |
| Asian Openbill | <i>Anastomus oscitans</i> | LC | A, E |
| Woolly-necked Stork | <i>Ciconia episcopus</i> | VU | A, E |
| Black-necked Stork | <i>Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus</i> | NT | A, E, F |
| Indian Pond Heron | <i>Ardeola grayii</i> | LC | A, E, F |
| Cattle Egret | <i>Bubulcus ibis</i> | LC | A, F |
| Grey Heron | <i>Ardea cinerea</i> | LC | A, E, F |
| Purple Heron | <i>Ardea purpurea</i> | LC | E, F |
| Great Egret | <i>Ardea alba</i> | LC | A |
| Intermediate Egret | <i>Egretta intermedia</i> | LC | E, F |
| Little Egret | <i>Egretta garzetta</i> | LC | A, F |
| Black-headed Ibis | <i>Threskiornis melanocephalus</i> | NT | A, E, F |
| Eurasian Spoonbill | <i>Platalea leucorodia</i> | LC | A, E, F |
| Indian Black Ibis | <i>Pseudibis papillosa</i> | LC | A, E, F |
| Little Cormorant | <i>Phalacrocorax niger</i> | LC | A, E, F |
| Great Cormorant | <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i> | LC | A, E |
| Indian Cormorant | <i>Phalacrocorax fuscicollis</i> | LC | A, F |
| Oriental Darter | <i>Anhinga melanogaster</i> | NT | A |
| Great Thick Knee | <i>Esacus recurvirostris</i> | NT | A, E, F |
| Black-winged Stilt | <i>Himantopus himantopus</i> | LC | A, F |
| Little Ringed Plover | <i>Charadrius dubius</i> | LC | A |
| Kentish Plover | <i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i> | LC | A |
| River Lapwing | <i>Vanellus duvaucelii</i> | NT | A, F |
| Yellow-wattled Lapwing | <i>Vanellus malabaricus</i> | LC | A |
| Red-wattled Lapwing | <i>Vanellus indicus</i> | LC | A, F |
| Bronze-winged Jacana | <i>Metopidius indicus</i> | LC | E, F |
| Common Sandpiper | <i>Actitis hypoleucos</i> | LC | A |
| Common Redshank | <i>Tringa totanus</i> | LC | A |
| Small Pratincole | <i>Glareola lactea</i> | LC | A |
| Indian Skimmer | <i>Rynchops albigollis</i> | VU | A, C, D, E, F |
| Brown-headed Gull | <i>Chroicocephalus brun-nicephalus</i> | LC | E |
| River Tern | <i>Sterna aurantia</i> | NT | A, E |
| Black-bellied Tern | <i>Sterna acuticauda</i> | EN | A, E |
| Osprey | <i>Pandion haliaetus</i> | LC | F |

| Appendix. Compiled avifauna of Son Wildlife Sanctuary | | | |
|---|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Common Name(s) | Scientific Name | Conservation Status (BLI 2015) | Observations recorded |
| Black-winged Kite | <i>Elanus caeruleus</i> | LC | A |
| Egyptian Vulture | <i>Neophron percnopterus</i> | EN | A, E |
| Red-headed Vulture | <i>Sarcogyps calvus</i> | CR | A |
| White-rumped Vulture | <i>Gyps bengalensis</i> | CR | A |
| Indian Vulture | <i>Gyps indicus</i> | CR | F |
| Pallas's Fish-eagle | <i>Haliaeetus leucoryphus</i> | VU | A |
| Black Kite | <i>Milvus migrans</i> | LC | F |
| White-eyed Buzzard | <i>Butastur teesa</i> | LC | F |
| Spotted Owlet | <i>Athene brama</i> | LC | A, F |
| Indian Grey Hornbill | <i>Ocyroceros birostris</i> | LC | E, F |
| Common Hoopoe | <i>Upupa epops</i> | LC | A, F |
| Coppersmith Barbet | <i>Psilopogon haemacephalus</i> | LC | A, E |
| Green Bee-eater | <i>Merops orientalis</i> | LC | A, F |
| Blue-tailed Bee-eater | <i>Merops philippinus</i> | LC | A |
| Indian Roller | <i>Coracias benghalensis</i> | LC | A, F |
| Common Kingfisher | <i>Alcedo atthis</i> | LC | A, F |
| Pied Kingfisher | <i>Ceryle rudis</i> | LC | A, F |
| White-throated Kingfisher | <i>Halcyon smymensis</i> | LC | A, E, F |
| Common Kestrel | <i>Falco tinnunculus</i> | LC | F |
| Plum-headed Parakeet | <i>Psittacula cyanocephala</i> | LC | F |
| Rose-ringed Parakeet | <i>Psittacula krameri</i> | LC | F |
| Black Drongo | <i>Dicrurus macrocerus</i> | LC | A, F |
| Long-tailed Shrike | <i>Lanius schach</i> | LC | A |
| Great Grey Shrike | <i>Lanius excubitor</i> | LC | A |
| Rufous Treepie | <i>Dendrocitta vagabunda</i> | LC | A |
| House Crow | <i>Corvus splendens</i> | LC | F |
| Purple Sunbird | <i>Cinnyris asiaticus</i> | LC | A, F |
| House Sparrow | <i>Passer domesticus</i> | LC | A |
| Yellow-throated Sparrow | <i>Gymnoris xanthocollis</i> | LC | F |
| Western Yellow Wagtail | <i>Motacilla flava</i> | LC | A |
| Grey Wagtail | <i>Motacilla cinerea</i> | LC | A |
| White Wagtail | <i>Motacilla alba</i> | LC | F |
| Crested Bunting | <i>Melophus lathami</i> | LC | A |
| Rufous-tailed Lark | <i>Ammomanes phoenicura</i> | LC | A |
| Indian Bush Lark | <i>Mirafra erythroptera</i> | LC | A |
| Grey-breasted Prinia | <i>Prinia hodgsonii</i> | LC | F |
| Ashy Prinia | <i>Prinia socialis</i> | LC | F |
| Streak-throated Swallow | <i>Petrochelidon fluvicola</i> | LC | F |
| Red-rumped Swallow | <i>Hirundo daurica</i> | LC | A |
| Wire-tailed Swallow | <i>Hirundo smithii</i> | LC | A |
| Barn Swallow | <i>Hirundo rustica</i> | LC | A |
| Red-vented Bulbul | <i>Pycnonotus cafer</i> | LC | A, E, F |
| Yellow-eyed Babbler | <i>Chrysomma sinense</i> | LC | F |
| Common Babbler | <i>Argya caudata</i> | LC | A, F |
| Jungle Babbler | <i>Turdoides striata</i> | LC | F |
| Asian Pied Starling | <i>Gracupica contra</i> | LC | A |
| Brahminy Starling | <i>Sturnia pagodarum</i> | LC | A |
| Common Myna | <i>Acridotheres tristis</i> | LC | A, F |
| Bank Myna | <i>Acridotheres ginginianus</i> | LC | A, F |
| Indian Robin | <i>Saxicoloides fulcatus</i> | LC | A |
| Oriental Magpie Robin | <i>Copsychus saularis</i> | LC | A |
| Brown Rock Chat | <i>Oenanthe fusca</i> | LC | F |

Observations recorded - A: Sharma & Sharma 1997; B: Bharos 2008; C: Nair & Katdrae 2013, D: Srivastava 2013, 2014a,b; E: Singh et al. 2015; F: Our observations.

CR – Critically Endangered; EN – Endangered; LC – Least Concern; NT – Near Threatened; VU – Vulnerable