

Book Review

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Title: Robins and Chats – 688 pp

Author: Peter Clement and Chris Rose

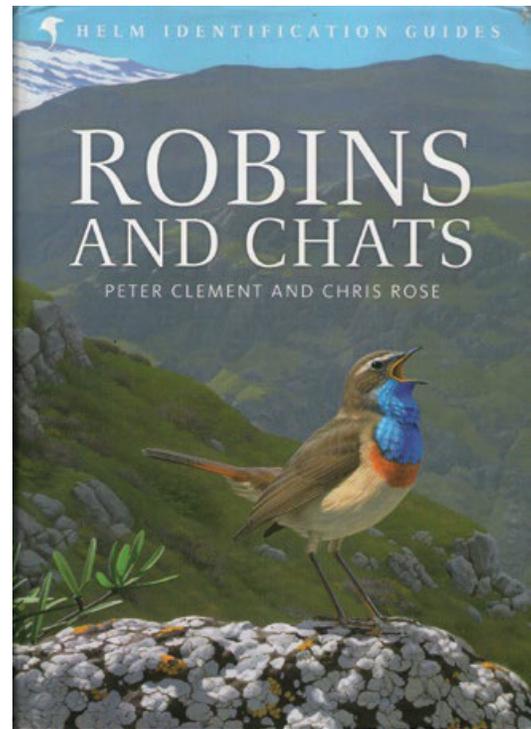
Publisher: Christopher Helm, London. 2015

This is a voluminous book, under the 'Helm Identification Guides' series, on Robins and Chats. The author, Peter Clement, has previously written books under this series like 'Thrushes' (Helm Identification Guides, 2000) and 'Sparrows and Finches' (Helm Identification Guides, 2011). This is the latest in the series by the author and covers a total of 175 species. These species are of interest to many birders and photographers, and include some stunningly beautiful and many sought after and skulking species.

The format of the book is an introduction, followed by a chapter on how to use the book, a detailed chapter on taxonomy and systematics by Per Alström, then 62 stunning colour plates painted by artist Chris Rose, and finally, the detailed species accounts. The chapter on taxonomy explains the advancements made in DNA study in the last few years, resulting in revised classifications. The taxonomic treatment followed in this book is in line with the current understanding for the group, and it is acknowledged that except for a few notable cases, the species level taxonomy is generally stable. However, as explained by the author, the treatment for Common Stonechat is maybe too conservative, as it is retained as a single highly variable species, albeit with three distinct groupings; European, Siberian and African Stonechats. The author acknowledges that comprehensive reviews of the present species limits are required for Oriental Magpie-Robin and White-rumped Shama, which could be of interest for Indian bird watchers in the future.

The detailed species account covers field identification, similar species, voice, habitat, behaviour, breeding, status and distribution, movements, description, geographical variation, moult, measurements and taxonomy. Thus, each species is detailed in this format and it results in a thorough treatment for each species. That this is a very comprehensive work, which is fully referenced, becomes apparent when referring to the bibliography, which is of 23 pages. This includes the latest published data, for ex., the recent records of the Indian Blue Robin from Gujarat (article in *Indian BIRDS* by BCSG member Ashok Mashru) are included in the text for that species.

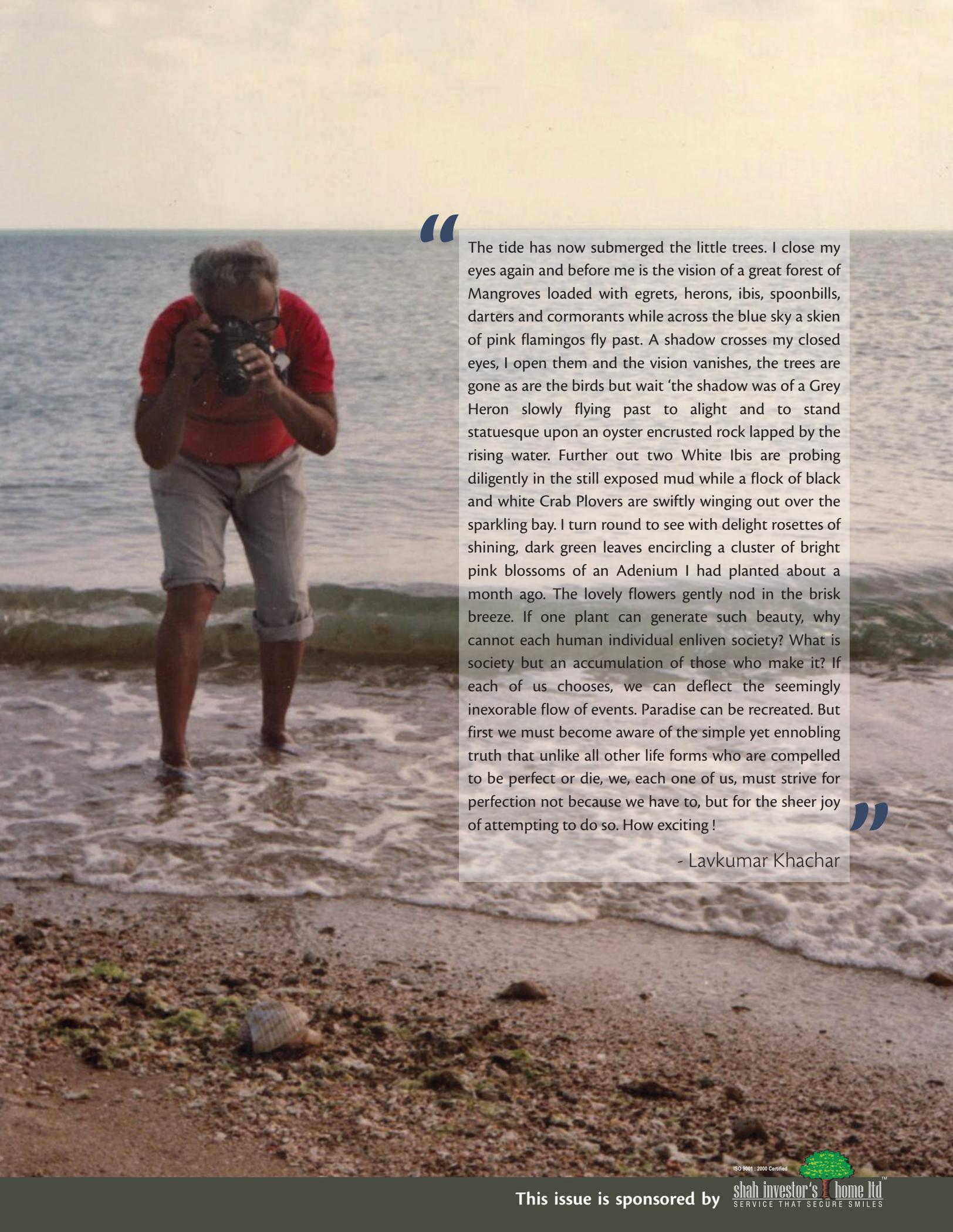
Though the book lists many species which do not occur in India, there is still enough for the Indian bird watcher. Many enigmatic species like Shortwings, Cochoas, Rubythroats, Forktails, etc are beautifully illustrated, have detailed species accounts, and the photographs are also quite good. The many Himalayan species in this book will be of interest for birders



and photographers from India. The illustrations for both the Siberian Rubythroat and the Himalayan Rubythroat are superb. The Bluethroat merits ten illustrations, including one illustration of the adult tail pattern.

Of particular interest for Gujarat are the species accounts of Wheatears. Of the 22 Wheatear species given in the book, six species have been noted in Gujarat, and the field identification of this group is quite challenging. The tail patterns are illustrated for each species and along with the illustrations, photographs are also given. The description for adults (male and female) and juveniles is exhaustive and will certainly help in field identification. The level of detailing in this book can be judged by the fact that an entire plate is given for the Variable Wheatear, with 12 full illustrations and three head illustrations, for a total of 15 illustrations for this species alone. Also of interest for Gujarat are the species accounts of Stoliczka's Bushchat (with inputs by BCSG member Jugal Tiwari and a photo by BCSG member Arpit Deomurari), Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin, Black Redstart etc.

This book is a must have for the serious bird watcher with an interest in Robins and Chats. Though there are some errors in ageing and moult for a few species, these are not very significant and the book will remain as a standard reference for years to come. It is available with online retailers in India at a price of around Rs. 4800/- and will be an important addition to one's literature collection and can be used for identification as well as a reference guide.



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The tide has now submerged the little trees. I close my eyes again and before me is the vision of a great forest of Mangroves loaded with egrets, herons, ibis, spoonbills, darters and cormorants while across the blue sky a skien of pink flamingos fly past. A shadow crosses my closed eyes, I open them and the vision vanishes, the trees are gone as are the birds but wait ‘the shadow was of a Grey Heron slowly flying past to alight and to stand statuesque upon an oyster encrusted rock lapped by the rising water. Further out two White Ibis are probing diligently in the still exposed mud while a flock of black and white Crab Plovers are swiftly winging out over the sparkling bay. I turn round to see with delight rosettes of shining, dark green leaves encircling a cluster of bright pink blossoms of an Adenium I had planted about a month ago. The lovely flowers gently nod in the brisk breeze. If one plant can generate such beauty, why cannot each human individual enliven society? What is society but an accumulation of those who make it? If each of us chooses, we can deflect the seemingly inexorable flow of events. Paradise can be recreated. But first we must become aware of the simple yet ennobling truth that unlike all other life forms who are compelled to be perfect or die, we, each one of us, must strive for perfection not because we have to, but for the sheer joy of attempting to do so. How exciting!

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- Lavkumar Khachar

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