

'Feather Frame'

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Night 'Czar': Nightjars (*Caprimulgus sp.*) are crepuscular and nocturnal, and supremely proficient to hunt in the hours of darkness. Skimming comfortably through the air, they prefer to feed from dusk to dawn and roost in the daylight hours. Though their large eyes are adapted to detect flying insects in near total darkness, their main armament is the mouth which has evolved for the purpose of catching insects in the air. They have specialized jaw mechanics which enables them to open their



mouths vertically as well as horizontally! Our state has six species of nightjars; Jungle Nightjar (*C. indicus*), European Nightjar (*C. europaeus*), Sykes's Nightjar (*C. mahrattensis*), Large-tailed Nightjar (*C. macrurus*), Indian Nightjar (*C. asiaticus*) and Savanna Nightjar (*C. affinis*).

Nightjars have a small bill with enormous gape. This gape is surrounded by a 'moustache', called rictal bristles. These highly tactile bristles are stiff, countered feathers which are an evolutionary adaptation, helpful while they are preying on insects in mid-air. In the photograph of the Indian Nightjar given here, I have tried to highlight the rictal bristles and the eyes, with the bird's perspective in mind and titled it as a 'czar' (a king) of the night.

Interestingly, the scientific name of nightjars carries a whimsical story. There was a very old and popular belief for many centuries in European countries that nightjars suckle milk from goats and other livestock during the night. This gave rise to the colloquial name 'goatsucker'. Thus, *Caprimulgus* literally means milker of goats!

Book Review

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Title: HANDBOOK OF WESTERN PALEARCTIC BIRDS (2 Volumes) Volume 1 - 648 pp, Volume 2 - 623 pp.

Author: Hadoram Shirihai & Lars Svensson

Publisher: Helm, London,
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. July 2018.

These two volumes, volume 1: larks to warblers, volume 2: flycatchers to buntings, published by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, are 'the' definitive guide to the passerines of the Western Palearctic (henceforth WP). The authors, Hadoram Shirihai and Lars Svensson are very well known and have vast experience, both in the field and in museum studies, and need no introduction. The two volumes are quite large in size – 29.7 x 21.0 cm (hard cover) and have a combined weight of 5.2 kgs and come with a cardboard cover in which both volumes can be kept. This project was 18 years in the making and the amount of information contained in it is unbelievable.

For both volumes, the format is an introduction, followed by a chapter on 'an approach to moult and ageing birds in the field', general references, one page list of passerine families (old and new), a brief presentation of passerine families (two-three pages), the main species accounts, vagrants to the region, checklist of WP – passerines, photo credits and indexes. The authors state in the introduction

that 'from the start, the aim of the project was to focus on identification and taxonomy, and to make it the most complete and profusely illustrated photographic guide to WP birds', and they have surely succeeded in that.

The taxonomic treatment followed by the authors is different from accepted world taxonomies like Clements/IOC or Howard & Moore, with the authors succinctly explaining in the introduction that they have tried to find a 'sensible balance' between the proposed latest taxonomic developments and obtaining solid proof from independent sources before proposed splits or other changes are accepted. This results in the acceptance of about 15% fewer subspecies compared to other checklists and handbooks, and it is stated that most of the assessment of subspecies taxonomy was done by Lars Svensson. This independent taxonomic approach is quite interesting; of interest for Indian birdwatchers is that the authors do not treat the Eastern Yellow Wagtail as a distinct species and it is lumped with Yellow Wagtail, stating that 'more research is desirable before the taxonomy is revised'. However, the Variable Wheatear is proposed to be split into three species – Blyth's Wheatear (*O. picata*), Gould's Wheatear (*O. capistrata*) and Strickland's Wheatear (*O. opistholeuca*), with the authors explaining in detail why this approach is taken but suggest that future research – especially molecular studies, be carried out. There are a few such instances wherein the taxonomy may seem

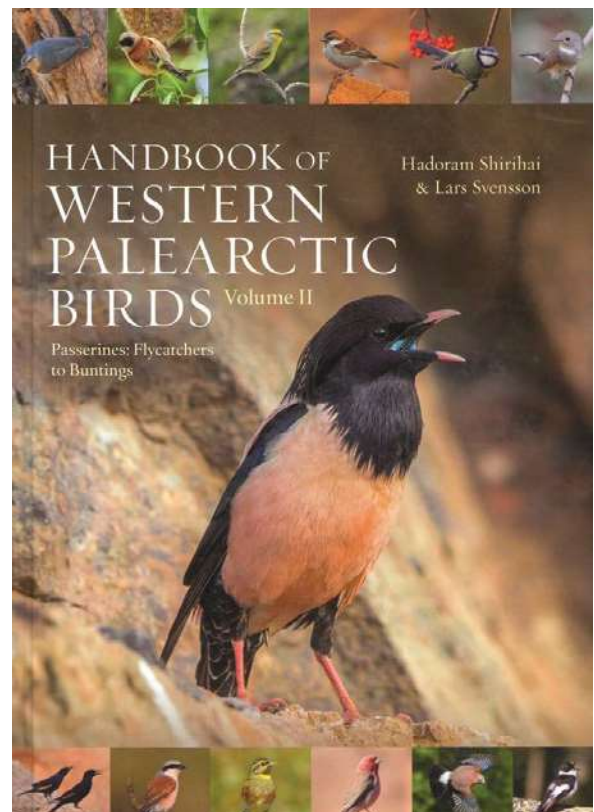
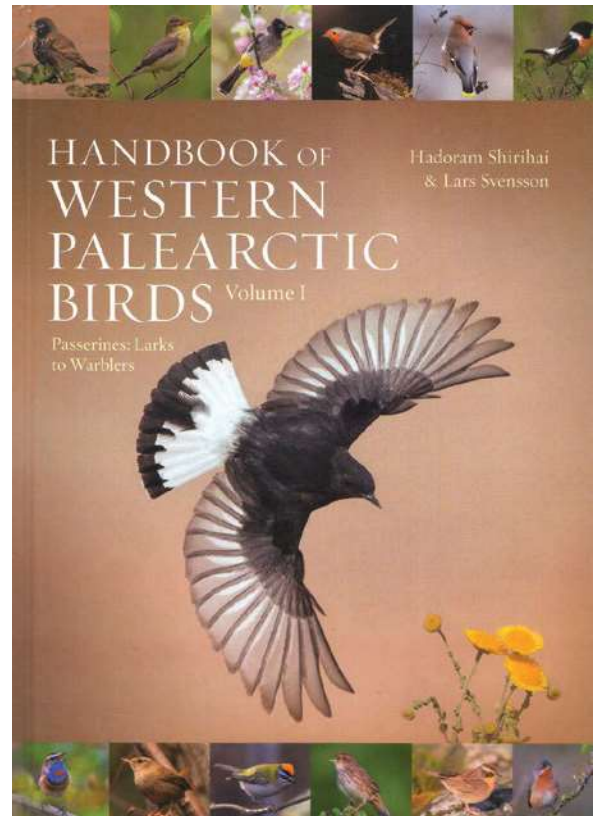
surprising, but the explanation given is quite thorough and convincing.

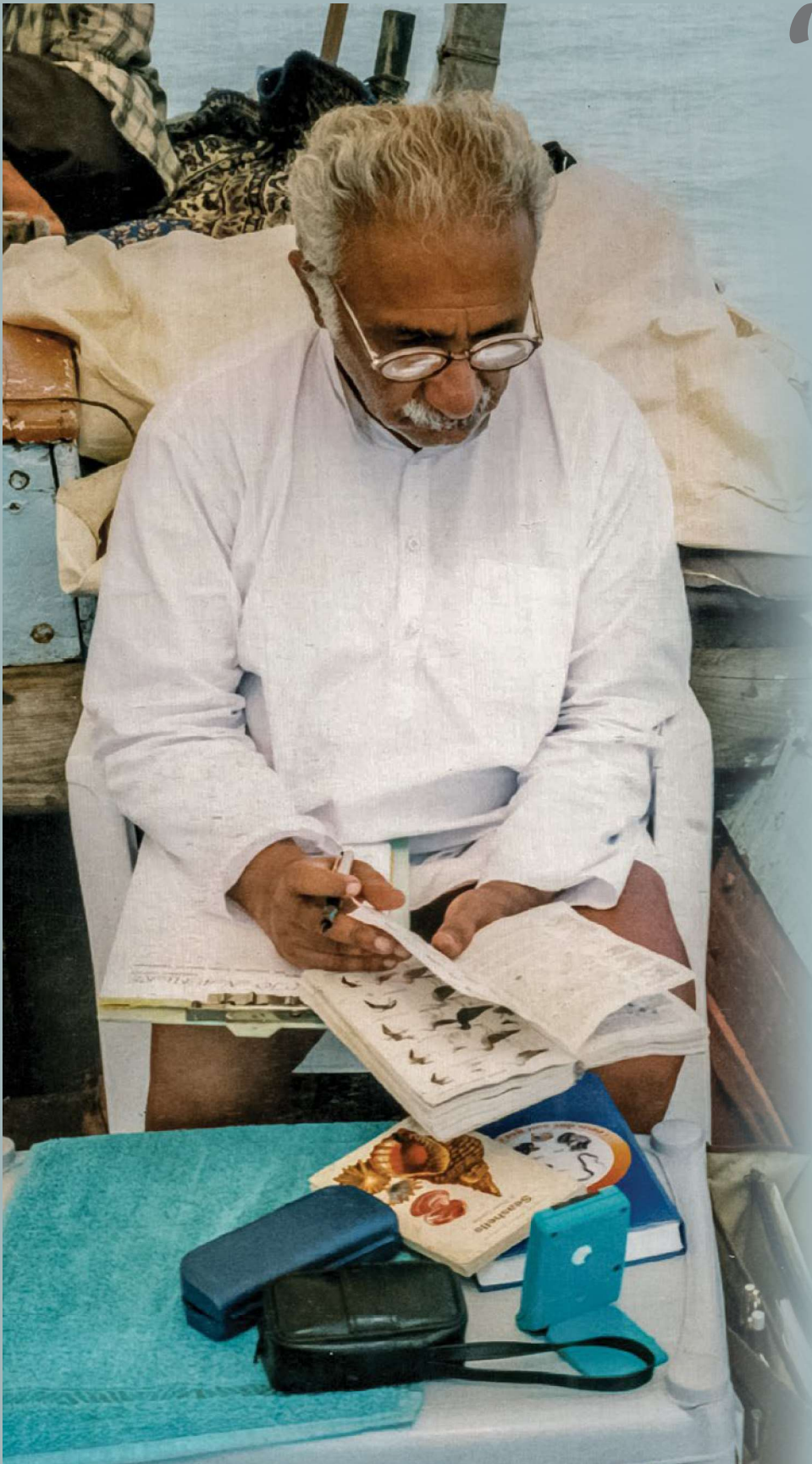
The main species accounts gives a distribution map, notes on identification, vocalisations, similar species, ageing and sexing, biometrics, geographical variation & range, taxonomic note and references, along with some superb and outstanding photographs, accompanied by short but very clear captions which help in the identification. Another very useful feature is the inclusion of photos of similar species side by side. For example, in the species account of Isabelline Shrike, photos of Turkestan Shrike (=Red-tailed Shrike), Red-backed Shrike and Brown Shrike are given alongside those of Isabelline Shrike, along with detailed captions, which are very useful in comparing the different species and their features for identification. And the detailing in this work can be noted by the fact that the species account of Isabelline Shrike has a total of 30 photos, giving the various subspecies, of different age and sex, and their separation from other similar shrike species.

Though the work is regarding WP birds, there is still a lot in it to keep the Indian birder interested. The species accounts of many difficult to identify birds like *Acrocephalus* sp. and *Phylloscopus* sp. warblers are very detailed and have some really superb photographs. Similarly, the species accounts of Shrikes (*Lanius* sp.) are also very good. For example the species account for Woodchat Shrike has 23 photographs! The text, combined with photographs (and captions), gives a complete picture regarding the identification of juvenile, female and male birds. The biometrics given for all species would be of use to ringers and though bird ringing is still at a nascent stage in India, these volumes will be useful for ringers too.

Reviewing a work which contains so much information would need months if not years to scrutinize, is almost impossible. This project is a milestone in bird books and is no doubt one of the most important publications in this decade. The photographs are of very high quality and this makes it very 'user-friendly', which would interest the amateur, the expert as well as ringers. The photographs are what make these volumes unique and spectacular. There are more than 5000 photos (with captions) in this work, contributed by more than 750 photographers, along with photos by the editorial team and the authors. The amount of work required for collecting the photographs itself is staggering. It is also very good to note that a lot of Indian photographers have contributed to this work and there are photos by many Indian bird photographers who are known to birders in India. Though the sheer size and weight makes it impossible to carry these books in the field, the amount of information contained in these two volumes means that it would have a permanent place in one's library as a last word on identification of passerines. Though these volumes are not available on online book sellers in India yet, they can be purchased from websites of the publisher ([https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/handbook-of-western-palearctic-](https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/handbook-of-western-palearctic-birds-9780713645712/)

birds-9780713645712/) for GBP 150. Some other websites are offering these volumes at around GBP 120-130. Though these volumes are expensive when converted to Indian rupees, they are, without any doubt, worth it. These volumes would make an important and much required addition to every amateur or serious birders library and would be referred to for years to come on any identification query on passerines. □





“ For years, I had been hearing a pleasant bulbul like “Tchee-cheu, chyue - chyu - chu - chu - chu” in my Vashishta orchard throughout the day and had attributed the call to the several White-eared Bulbuls in the area. It was only a couple of days back that I discovered that this call was that of the male Paradise flycatchers of which two are white and one chestnut. I know there are three of these exquisite birds in addition to the females because I have seen all three together on several occasions, “dive bombing” jungle crows. During the attacks only the harsh well known “trachh” is uttered. But it was on a lovely, picture post card perfect morning, that I had three flycatchers’ fledglings newly out of their host huddled together on a branch of a tree edging my front garden, and the white male was coming and going attending to them. His exuberance was overflowing in song as he frequently posed on a nearby conifer or swept into an apple tree. It was then I realised that what I had thought were calls of bulbuls, were the song of a bird which has to my mind never been credited with any distinctive utterance other than the harsh call. ”

- Lavkumar Khachar