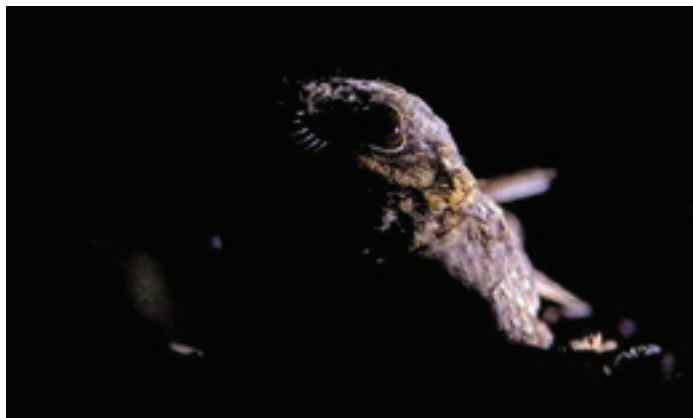


'Feather Frame'

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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