

Feather frame

The courtship behaviour of Black-shouldered Kite *Elanus caeruleus*

Yashodhan Bhatia: Bhatia Stores, Old Station Road, Jamnagar 361001. ybhatia3@yahoo.com



It was a tranquil, almost windless predawn of 8 June 2017, with a few minutes for the sun to rise over the horizon. While driving along the countryside some 35 km away from Jamnagar, strong, shrill squeals of a raptor drew my attention. I was witnessing two Black-shouldered Kites (*Elanus caeruleus*) in the air; one chasing the other. For a moment it appeared to be a chase, but to my curiosity, one of the kites acrobatically twisted itself and regained normal flight position as the upper one flew near it. I took no time to realize that this was a courtship display of the Black-shouldered Kite, a small and graceful raptor of the Indian countryside, which is also known as the Black-winged Kite. While witnessing this wonderful natural history event for the first time, I recalled that I had read during my early years, in one of Dr. Salim Ali's books, that in raptors, females are slightly larger than their males.

I observed that this couple flew from a distant low perch, and soon gained some height. Suddenly, the female, who was flying

slightly below the male, rolled up-side down and displayed her talons to the male soaring slightly above her. But the male passed by without any reaction. It seemed that he was flying as if lost in his own thoughts. The female, however, rolled back to her normal flying position. Again she sped up, caught up with her mate, overtook him slightly, and rolled over yet again to present her talons. Again the male did not display any interest. However, the female repeated the same maneuver a third time by speeding up and catching up with him and rolling herself mid-air to present the talons. This time, the male responded by dangling his legs straight.

An almost monotonous, scream-like, thin, high-pitched whistle *pee-o* was repeated over and over with very short intervals. Now, the male rose to about 100 meters in the sky with the female following him. This time they came in close proximity. The female, below, was in normal flying position, stretching her neck to almost touch him. Abruptly they dropped down, to just about 20 meters above the ground, before gaining height again. Both the birds were watching each others' maneuvers continually. At one time, I observed the male descending sharply from a significant height with wings held back and tail folded. The female circling at a lower altitude suddenly turned herself upside with the talons towards the sky as if receiving him. As they reached closer, male extended his legs, almost touching her. Once again, they gained height together, and as the male took a slight lead, the female tried to come closer to fly below him.

This spectacular courtship display involving undulating flights along with wild, twisting chases and whistling screeches was repeated a few times. All this was happening swiftly and in about 500 meters' radius but at varying altitude. Also, twice the couple flew very close to us. Display of talons was performed at almost all heights. They both came close to touching the talons but never interlocked or cart-wheeled. The female initiated the act, every time, by extending her legs and clearly presenting the talons, but the male reciprocated to this gesture only a few times. I was with my birder friend Dr. Mehul Bhadania, and we witnessed this event for about 20 minutes before the couple flew far away where they were unapproachable. □