

Unusual prey by waterbirds

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'Waterbirds' is a term used to refer to birds that live on or around wetlands. Since Gujarat has a large number of wetlands and suitable habitats for waterbirds, there is a good population of these birds. Here, I report some observations of unusual prey by waterbirds.

Great White Pelican (*Pelecanus onocrotalus*) preying on Common Pochard (*Aythya ferina*)



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I have observed pelicans usually eating fish, which are available in plenty in Lakhota Lake, Jamnagar. On 11 February 2013, I saw a Great White Pelican feeding on a female Common Pochard at Lakhota Lake.

I observed the bird catching a Common Pochard in its pouch, probably inadvertently. Though the pochard was struggling, the pelican did not let it go. The Common Pochard struggled very hard, but was unable to escape. Other pelicans pursued this pelican to rob its prey, but they were not lucky enough to snatch it. It took the pelican nearly one hour to swallow the prey.

I have witnessed one more incident wherein a Great White Pelican caught a male Tufted Duck (*Aythya fuligula*). However, in the first attempt, the Tufted Duck was lucky enough to slip from its pouch and escape. Though the pelican chased the duck, it was unsuccessful in catching it again.

Purple Swamphen (*Porphyrio porphyrio*) preying on chick of Black-winged Stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*)

The Purple Swamphen usually feed on soft parts of the stems of aquatic vegetation. But on 10 June 2010, I saw that it caught a Black-winged Stilt chick. Usually the Black-winged Stilt is very alert; but it could not prevent the swamphen from catching its chick. The parents tried very hard to save their chick, but were helpless against the Purple Swamphen. The swamphen killed the chick and swallowed it.



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Behaviour of Dalmatian Pelican (*P. crispus*)

I have observed that the behaviour of Dalmatian Pelicans is different from that of Great White Pelicans. Dalmatian Pelicans are less aggressive than Great White Pelicans. But when they are in flocks, they too can be very aggressive.



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I was watching a Blue Rock Pigeon (*Columba livia*), which had fallen in the lake near Jamnagar. It was floating in the water and trying to come out. Meanwhile, two Dalmatian Pelicans came close to it and tried to pick up the pigeon twice, but after pecking at it a few times, they did not pick it up or catch it in the pouch. The pelicans seemed reluctant to catch the pigeon and it could escape. It seems Dalmatian Pelicans are not as opportunistic as Great White Pelicans.

Discussion:

Great White Pelican is known to catch birds as prey, and this has been noted at Jamnagar (Soni & Kathad 2014). It is

also known to feed on eggs and chicks of Cape Cormorant (*P. capensis*) in Namibia (Elliott *et al.* 2016). Hence this is not unexpected.

Purple Swamphen is primarily vegetarian, but it is known to be omnivorous. Animal food forms only a small part of its diet, but it is known to feed on eggs and nestlings of birds (Taylor 2016).

These observations add to our knowledge about the diet of these waterbirds.

References:

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Sightings of Stoliczka's Bushchat in Kachchh

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other grass spp. and *Capparis* and *Ziziphus* shrubs. The species is probably highly adaptive, considering its presence in the dissimilar habitats present in Banni and Naliya areas, and other distinct habitats in Rajasthan. The habitat in Rajasthan is dominated by *Cenchrus ciliaris* grass and scanty bushes of *Capparis* and *Ziziphus*. Some individuals observed in the Naliya and Banni region, inhabit agricultural land, and adjacent areas.



Introduction

The White-browed Bushchat or Stoliczka's Bushchat (*Saxicola macrorhynchus*) is endemic to the north-west Indian subcontinent. Its historical distribution included Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat in India; adjacent parts of Punjab and Sind in Pakistan (probably now extinct) and Afghanistan (now extinct) (Ali & Ripley 1983). It inhabits dry, semi-deserts and desert plains with low herbs and scattered shrubs. The species is threatened by habitat loss and degradation and is classified as 'Vulnerable' (BirdLife International 2016).

Habitat, Distribution and Ecology

The Stoliczka's Bushchat is mainly distributed in the Banni and Naliya grasslands of Kachchh district (Himmatsinhji 2004, Varu 2007, 2009, 2010, Soni 2015). The Banni grassland is located in Kachchh district, south of the Greater Rann of Kachchh while Naliya grassland is situated in Abdasa Taluka of Kachchh. In Banni, it inhabits dry flatland having *Suaeda fruticosa* along with *Cressa cretica* and *Tamarix* shrubs. In Naliya grasslands, it inhabits grassland having *Aristida*, *Cenchrus*, *Dicanthium*,

Sightings and Behaviour

The Stoliczka's Bushchat is a strictly insectivorous bird (Ali & Ripley 1983). The bird is highly parochial and has high site fidelity, and shows preference to certain favoured bushes or shrubs in their territory (Rahmani 1997). This is mainly due to food niche. The birds observed in both Banni and Naliya habitat are either seen singly or in pairs.

A peculiar behaviour unique to the Stoliczka's Bushchat is the 'Puff and Roll'. In it, the bird puffs up its chest, sways sideways, runs a little distance and again repeats the same. The bird appears to be larger than normal, and the white belly is prominently visible. The head is held slightly back, and the tail