

Bird Calls

Newsletter of the Evanston North Shore Bird Club

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Northern Shrike by Nancy Halliday

BIRDING IN SIKKIM A LESSON IN BUDDHIST DETACHMENT

By Debby Storms

Earlier this year finding myself between jobs, I faced a difficult choice: Should I travel to Sikkim, the exotic Himalayan state of northern India, to visit my son and daughter-in-law for six weeks in April and May? Or stay home and fully enjoy, for the first time in 30 years, the spring migration after another long, hard Chicago winter?

Though I certainly missed my "kids," who'd been living in a Buddhist ashram in Gangtok, Sikkim's capital, I was torn. But after reassurances that "There are so many beautiful birds here, you won't miss the ones at home!" they convinced me. I booked my flights and prepared to go.

On searching "birding in Sikkim," I quickly discovered that Sikkim is one of the world's birding hotspots, a veritable birder's Shangri-la. Due to its Himalayan topography with three distinct altitudinal zones, Sikkim is home to a remarkable number of birds – estimates vary between 527 and 600, or a whopping half of the 1,250 species listed for the entire Indian subcontinent. A further boon to its birds is that Sikkim's rugged terrain and remote

location (it's nestled between Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan, and West Bengal), have combined to keep it nearly undeveloped, so the majority of its hills and mountainsides are still covered in virgin forests, and almost all the many rivers and waterfalls flow down from the Himalayas without interference from human beings.

The more I read, the more excited I became. Figuring that with all those birds, it would be easy to find a birding guide or trip to use, but, much to my surprise, my many inquiries got me nowhere. Maybe it's due to its remoteness and lack of modern accommodations, but I was going to have to rely on myself to find Sikkimese birds. But, I reasoned, "With 500 birds around, how hard can it be?"

Very hard, it turns out. Lucky for me that Sikkim has such a Buddhist culture, because its philosophy of taming the ego turned out to be helpful as I struggled daily to identify birds. My total trip count of birds identified with confidence was an (ouch!) mere 46 birds in six weeks, or (ouch again!) .08 percent of Sikkim's possible birds. Was there a lesson in there for me?

Here are some of the birds I DID manage to identify, along with wisdom gathered from six weeks of faithful, if not very fruitful, birding:

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GIVE BACK TO BIRDS

By Suzanne Checchia

Bird Conservation Network will be sponsoring its fifth "work and birding" event on October 30, 2010 at 9:15 a.m. with a field trip and workday to Hennepin and Hopper Lakes. The purposes: 1) Fellowship and camaraderie among our bird conservation and birding communities. 2) Helping out some sites that have conservation needs. 3) And seeing some great birds and beautiful places!

Hennepin and Hopper Lakes is an Illinois Important Bird Area, located in Hennepin near the bend of the Illinois River — about a 2-2½ hour drive from the Chicago area.

Partners at this unique habitat restoration project have turned off the drainage pumps to return floodplain farmland to wetland. We will learn about the project from a site ecologist, and enjoy the wide array of waterfowl and other wetland birds (a spotting scope would be helpful).

After the morning bird walk and complimentary snack, we'll collect seeds in the prairie. These seeds will be spread in other grasslands elsewhere at the site at a later date, where they will fight invasive plant species

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ENSBC DIRECTORY GOES GREEN

When our brand new conservation chair, Lloyd Davidson, suggested he would prefer to get an email version of the ENSBC directory, some of us longer-term board members metaphorically smacked ourselves in the head and said, "Why didn't we think of that!" In line with Lloyd's innovation, ENSBC is now offering an email version of the directory. Any one who would like the current directory emailed to them, please contact Libby Hill at libbyhill@comcast.net. Members will be given the option in the future of selecting the email version over the print.



Verditer Flycatcher photo by Sumit K. Sen
(for Birds of India www.kolkatabirds.com)

BIRDING IN SIKKIM CONTINUED FROM COVER

Approach birding in a new country with 500 unfamiliar birds with patience! I had no trouble seeing lots of birds. ID'ing them was the hard part and more than a bit humbling. I'd spend days looking and relooking at the same birds, flipping through my field guide over and over, narrowing down the possibilities until I finally figured one out, only to discover that it was about as rare as our Robin. Though the names were exotic – Black Drongo, Red-tailed Minla, Rufous Sibia, Red-vented Bulbul – the birds were inevitably "common." But each was new to me and thus not common at all.

Rooftop birding is awesome! Most of my birding was done from the flat roof of my son's ashram's apartment building. Like a canopy tower, the roof gave me magnificent 360-degree views of dense, tropical vegetation, the tops of trees and vistas of distant hillsides. Thus I could see quite a variety of species, from teeny tits and warblers just feet away, to hawks and eagles soaring across the valleys and city beyond.

Indian birds move a lot faster than the rest of India. I had been forewarned that everything moves slower in Sikkim. Not the birds! They'd dart in and out of the dense foliage, rarely giving me enough time to imprint even basic field marks onto my dazzled brain.

It's a blue flycatcher! Piece of cake! Because I was used to our flycatchers mostly coming in shades of brown and grey, I assumed that the incredibly blue flycatcher I saw from my roof would be one-of-a-kind and easy to ID. Wrong! There are 23 kinds of blue flycatchers in India, and it took some study before I was confident that I was seeing the Verditer Flycatcher.

Binoculars have many good uses. The birds may have been elusive, but those binos sure came in handy the night of the full moon, when the snow-covered Mt. Kanchenzunga, the third tallest in the world, was alight in a wash of eerie blue

light. This sacred mountain is so tall (28,146 feet) that it dominates the landscape everywhere in Sikkim. Magnified through binoculars glowing in the dark, it was even more astonishing.

Birding is a great meditation practice. At the Ashram, I learned from my kids' guru that there are many kinds of meditation practice. Over my six weeks, as I let go of any "listing" expectations, I discovered that simply watching birds, enjoying their behavior, and appreciating their mere existence, is calming, grounding and a form of meditation too.



"A view from the Ashram roof"
by Debby Storms

Birding brings good karma. My prideful ambitions to conquer Sikkim's birds on my own crumbled to dust. But my delight in looking again and again, day after day, yielded some unintended, positive results. By the end of my stay, the people around me, who previously had had little awareness of or interest in birds, were excitedly coming to me with reports of birds and questions about what they'd seen.

Apparently I'd infected everyone with a bit of my birding passion. So what if I'd only seen 46 species? They were 46 wonderful new birds, and I'd made some birding converts in a land that is on the brink of making important choices between development and conservation. That, I decided, was good birding and good enough for me.



SIKKIMESE MOUNTAIN VALLEY BY DEBBY STORMS

BIRDER INTERRUPTED

By Eleonora di Liscia

Jeanette Jaskula discovered the joys of birding in graduate school, after volunteering for a Wetland Bird Survey. After graduating, she continued to bird while pursuing an environmental career.

Then along came baby Xander, followed by baby Luka. Now with two children under the age of 3, Jeanette mostly birds the berry tree in her Evanston yard while wistfully checking IBET for the rare species that she cannot take the time to see.

While she did not begin birding until adulthood, Jeanette was always attracted to biological sciences.

"I knew from a young age that I really liked nature. I always did. In addition to playing with my Barbie dolls, I put my Barbie dolls in the mud," she said.

The young scientist emerged after moving from Pennsylvania to Indiana in the 9th grade. Before moving to Indiana, Jeanette had never experienced wetlands.

"When I moved to Indiana, I had what I thought were tadpoles, and what I found was I was raising mosquito larvae, much to my mother's chagrin since they were indoors. I was wondering why they kept disappearing. Little scientist that I was, I put a piece of saran wrap over the bowl, and then I had an adult mosquito. And I said, 'How did that get in there?' Upon reading a description of salamanders eating mosquito larvae, they had a little picture, and I had one of those 'Doh!' moments," said Jeanette.

Jeanette pursued a B.S. in Biology followed by a Masters in Environmental Science from University of Wisconsin Green Bay. At Green Bay, Jeanette entered the project that turned her on to birds.

"One of my first birding experiences, they put us in the Nicolet National Forest in Wisconsin, and we were supposed to do a point count bird survey. We kept hearing a lot of Ovenbirds, and we had

no idea what we were hearing. We decided if we couldn't figure out by the call, we were going to find one. Needless to say, we left the forest not identifying any of the birds because we could not see through the dense foliage," said Jeanette.

Since her husband moved to Green Bay to support her degree, she later moved to Ohio as he pursued a Masters. In Ohio, she worked for an environmental consulting firm that conducted bat surveys. After her husband applied for a Ph.D. at Northwestern, the

couple moved to Evanston. Jeanette continued to work from home writing a habitat conservation plan for the Indiana bat under the Environmental Species Act.

"Then colicky Xander showed up, and I quit my job. I do love him, but I could not work with a colicky baby, and then when I could come back, they did not have a job for me," said Jeanette. "Since then I have been home with the kids, and I have already started their bird education."

Xander, in particular, has a fondness for the film *Winged Migration*.

Otherwise balancing birding and motherhood has not been easy. When asked for

suggestions, Jeanette says, "I think I'm the one that needs the advice. If there are any other mother's who would like to get together with another birding Mom, call me."

Jeanette has managed to serve as ENSBC field trip chair since 2006, leading an occasional field trip or giving a talk. And she still checks IBET a couple times daily to see what comes in, but the requirements of small children and naptimes often prevents her from seeing anything herself. "You just try to appreciate the common birds, because one day, I will be able to see the rare birds again," she vows.

(Since this interview, Jeanette has moved with her family to Ripon, WI.)



*Jeanette with happy birder interruptions
Xander and Luka.*

Photo courtesy of Jeanette Jaskula

GIVE BACK TO BIRDS CONTINUED FROM COVER

that degrade the habitat.

This trip/workday will take place rain or shine. Dress in layers, with sturdy shoes. Bring a sack lunch if you would like to picnic after the workday. Goodies for dessert will be provided!

RSVP to Joan Bruchman at pjbruchman@yahoo.com or 847-687-3108. Let Joan know if you would like to carpool. Directions are: I-80 west to I-39 south. Take Route 71 exit west to Route 26. Turn left towards Hennepin. Go approximately 2.5 miles south. Turn

right onto Hennepin Farms Road (paved road before the road swings up the hill.) Pass the first house on the right, then turn right onto a sand road. Follow sand road approximately 300 ft. to parking lot and Nolan Observation Tower.

PROGRAM NIGHTS

Club programs are held on the fourth Tuesday of the month at 7:30 p.m. at the Evanston Ecology Center, 2024 McCormick Blvd., Evanston.

Oct. 26, 2010: "Birding Conservation Issues Facing us Today": Donnie Dann. Fellow ENSBC member Donnie Dann will cover the current threats to birds including habitat loss, feral cats, wind turbines, etc. but will also update us on the latest success stories in local bird conservation.

November 23, 2010: "Wintering Raptors in Illinois and the Surrounding Areas": Vic Berardi. Vic will talk to us about what hawks and eagles can be found within 4 hours of the Chicago area and where to look for them.

FIELD TRIPS

October 16, 2010 - Saturday — JUST ADDED!

October 24, 2010 - Sunday — JUST ADDED!

Hawkwatch at Illinois Beach State Park, North Unit. Meet at 9:00 a.m. at the hawkwatch shelter. Directions: Take Rte 94 or 41, exit at Rte. 173, continue west to Sheridan Rd, turn north, go for a couple of blocks to 17th St., turn right, and continue into the park. Turn right at Sand Prairie Day Use Area. Leader: Dave Johnson. Call or email leader: djohnsoda@comcast.net or 224-567-9650.

October 23, 2010 – Saturday

The Grove, Glenview. Expect later warblers and other passerines. Meet at 8:00 a.m. at The Grove: east side of Milwaukee Ave., just south of Lake Ave., in the second parking lot that leads to the Interpretive Center. Leader: Ari Rice.

November 21, 2010 – Sunday

41st Annual Jeff Sanders' Fall Specialty Trip! North shore lakefront — Northwestern, Gillson Park, Maple Park, Tower Road Park, Park Ave., Rose Beach in Highland Park, and other areas as time permits. Meet at 8:00 a.m. at Northwestern University beach. Go east on Lincoln St. from Sheridan Rd., turn south past the giant fitness center, then turn east (left) and go almost to the end. Bring scopes and dress for cold lake wind. Leader: Jeff Sanders.

SIGN UP FOR YOUR TRIP TO ALBUQUERQUE AND PHOENIX!

Dave Johnson will lead a weeklong winter trip to Albuquerque, NM and Phoenix, AZ in January 21 through January 29, 2011. Birding will include Sandia Crest, Bosque del Apache, and elsewhere in the southwest desert. Target thrashers will be: Crissal, Curve-billed, LeConte's and Bendires. We'll also look for all three Rosy-finches, Longspurs and more. For more information and to sign up, contact Dave Johnson at djohnsoda@comcast.net or 224-567-9650.

JUST A MAGGIE By Eleonora di Liscia

I was happily birding my somewhat fertile yard when I caught sight of a tiny yellow and black bird flinging itself around a bush.

"Oh," I sighed. "It's just a Maggie."

Of course, I love Magnolia Warblers, but like American Redstarts, there's a point during migration when you wish they'd move out of the way and let you see something else.

"Excuse me!" A tiny voice startled me from my musings.

"What! What!" I said. I searched for the voice but saw no one. Then, I lifted my binoculars and noticed the same Magnolia that I had just disregarded.

"Excuse me! I am not just a Maggie. I'll have you know I flew from the Yucatan this spring. Can you do that? No. I am quite sure you cannot. Not without one of those big bird-sucking tin cans, you can't. How would you like it if I called you 'just a birder'?"

"I suppose I wouldn't," I mumbled.

"And not that much of a birder either. I heard about that Blackpoll you confused for a Pine!"

"But it was fall!" I whined.

"Oh, please. The difference couldn't be more obvious. And another thing. Who came up with the name Magnolia? I wouldn't know a Magnolia if it tried to eat my young. And even worse, 'Maggie!' Maggie is for Magpies. Who wants to be reminded of them? I'm not even female. Why do you call us that?" he insisted.

"I dunno," I whimpered.



"Not 'just' a Maggie!"

Photo by Jerry Goldner

"I want to be called Clem!" the Magnolia said proudly, at which point he lifted his head and let out his song.

"Clem?" I was incredulous.

"What's wrong with Clem? I feel Clem has the right blend of insouciance and masculinity and best expresses my inner warbler."

"Oh, brother."

"What! You don't like Clem?" I swear he was glaring. I pondered how a 5-inch bird could make one feel so small.

"Um, Clem is great, Clem. Is it meant just for you or the entire species?"

"Hmmm. I haven't thought about that. I'll have to ask my girlfriend, Bertha."

"Oh, my God."

"Something wrong with Bertha?"

"Oh, no. It's just great."

"Good. Well, I hope you have learned something. Just a Maggie! Harrumph!"

And with that he flew off. I was beginning to think I'd get in less trouble if I switched to watching snakes.