



UTTARAKHAND

Spring Bird Festival

4-8 February, 2015



Dabka River flowing through Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve | Dhananjai Mohan

Flights of Hope on Wings of Birds!

Promoting Birdwatching for conservation and community benefits

India's Himalayan State of Uttarakhand has amazing bird diversity with 687 bird species having been recorded representing more than half the avifaunal diversity of India. Unfortunately, this phenomenal diversity remains largely untapped for ecotourism. The "Uttarakhand Birdwatching Programme" was launched by Forest Department's Ecotourism Wing in February 2012 to bridge this gap by increasing awareness regarding birds, improving birdwatching skills and linking known rural tourism destinations with birdwatching activity.

The last two-and-a-half years have seen the organization of Birdwatching Camps throughout Uttarakhand at 20 destinations with the participation of 500 individuals including 108 nature guides. A number of valuable publications have been brought out with help from local NGOs as birdwatching aids. The sphinx-like progress of many of the nature guides fills our hearts. And the energy for some of the recent activities came from outside the forest department – an administrator, a biologist, a bird tour operator and village

communities in Munsiyari. Clearly, the programme is taking roots.

The First Uttarakhand Spring Bird Festival 2014 was organized at the Asan Conservation Reserve from 5th to 9th February 2014. This newsletter captures some of the excitement that was witnessed during the Bird Festival. We are now eagerly looking forward to the organization of the Second Uttarakhand Spring Bird Festival 2015 at Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve from 4th to 8th February, 2015.

The Festival will take visitors right into Jim Corbett's "farmyard" and promises greater participation, more diverse trails for birdwatching, Increased activities and attention to sustainability issues. In Jim Corbett's words, February is the best month to be in this region. Then why wait? This spring, come and join us at Pawalgarh to celebrate this unique natural heritage.

Rajiv Bhartari, IFS
Chief Conservator of Forests Ecotourism



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PAWALGARH Conservation Reserve

– The Birds Beckon

Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve is located in the beautiful, vast and rich forests of Ramangar Forest Division which in turn is a part of the Terai Arc Landscape. The Conservation Reserve was notified in December 2012 encompassing an area of nearly 60 sq. km. The area had been the home turf of Jim Corbett and many of his writings are set in this area. Sandani Gaja—a beautiful, large grassland in proximity of riverine forests is located 5 km south-east of Pawalgarh Forest Rest House. According to Jim Corbett, Sandani Gaja ‘in addition to being the most beautiful spot for a hundred miles round is noted for its birdlife’. The area is primarily drained by Dabka River and has prime forests of Sal and other species. Baur River flows to the east of the



Pawalgarh Forest Rest House constructed in the year 1912 | Somendra Singh



Common Green Magpie | Soumyajit Nandy

area. Kotabagh plateau is under inhabitation and agriculture but the forest edges are rich in bird life. The entire landscape in the backdrop of Nainital range of mountains is a mosaic of dense Sal, mixed and riverine forest, grasslands, rocky river-beds, inhabitation and agriculture. The area is already attracting a large number of birding visitors on account of its diverse birdlife, estimated to be over 350 bird species.

Trails at the birding destination/birding strategy: A 5 km trail from Pawalgarh FRH to Sandani Gaja grassland takes you through forest edges, dense Sal and riverine

forests and grassland habitats. Around **Pawalgarh**, short trails leading to the picturesque Dabka Valley can be very rewarding. The immediate surrounds of the Sitabani FRH, which is about 5 km from Pawalgarh on a forest road, has a diverse assemblage of birds. Sitabani is the best place for ‘arm-chair forest bird-watching’! The 5 km trail from Sitabani to Kyari village passes through dense forests and is also known for its bird richness.

Accommodation: FRHs at Pawalgarh and Sitabani (DFO Ramnagar 05947-251362); resorts at Pawalgarh, Kyari and Kotabagh



Jim Corbett with the Bachelor of Pawalgarh |



Community-run Camp Hornbill in village Kyari | Sanjay Sondbi



Forests near Sitabani Forest Rest House | Ashish Kothari

District	: Nainital
Nearest railhead	: Ramnagar
Nearest airport	: Pantnagar
How to get there	: By road. The entry to the area is from Pawalgarh, 20 km by road from Ramnagar.
Altitudinal range	: 300 to 600 m.
Bird specialties	: Rufous-bellied Eagle, Great Slaty Woodpecker, Great Hornbill , White-bellied Erpornis, Little Pied Flycatcher, Nepal Wren-babbler, Blue-bearded Bee-eater.
Birding Trails	: Pawalgarh to Kyari, Kyari to Belgarh, Pawalgarh to Hathigaliyar, Pawalgarh to Sandani Chaur via Karda srot, Bhandarpani to Tedha

Knock-knock! Who's there?

– The Woodpeckers of Pawalgarh

Dr. Raman Kumar, Nature Science Initiative
www.naturescienceinitiative.org

When I came to know that the official logo for the Bird Festival at Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve was none other than the Great Slaty Woodpecker, I was really thrilled. The choice of a creature chosen to represent such a rich area couldn't have been more fitting.

Having walked hundreds of kilometres in the forests of Ramnagar and Corbett researching woodpeckers, Pawalgarh became one of my favourite places. Contrary to the popular belief, field research is far removed from the much-romanticised version portrayed on TV that shows brilliantly plumaged creatures waiting for you at every corner of the jungle. The reality is that birds can't be seen at will in dense forests. You can spend miles walking and yet only encounter a handful of species. And when you do manage to see birds, they usually offer only fleeting glimpses and frustrate you to no end. Such was my story, too!

However, Pawalgarh was an exception – it was always rewarding.

It was the Sal forest of Pawalgarh where I had several memorable encounters with woodpeckers – particularly, the elusive Great Slaty Woodpecker. More than 50 cm long, the Great Slaty is arguably the largest surviving species of woodpecker in the world. Although I had detected this woodpecker on several occasions in Corbett each time it had either been too dark, or the birds were too high in the canopy for me to get a proper look. So, I longed for a decent sighting of this woodpecker. My prayers were answered, surprisingly, not in the celebrated Corbett Park but the lesser known (and much underrated) Pawalgarh. It was January and we had just completed our survey transect. We were chatting with forest watcher Moti Singh when I heard a low tapping sound from the patch behind the forest *chowki*. We went to investigate and after a few minutes' search saw a thrilling sight: a group of five Great Slaties foraging in a clump of tall Sal trees! The birds were quite obliging and we spent about half an hour taking photographs and recording videos. But this wasn't a freak sighting. Later in the year in the forest just a couple of kilometres east I was lucky to witness the rituals of a courting pair of Great Slaties, which was a wonderful insight into the life of this rare bird. While the Great Slaty was a 'star' bird, the Sal forests of Pawalgarh were

brimming with a surprising array of woodpeckers – 14 species of various hues and size! Here I have witnessed a pair of Streak-throated Woodpeckers labouring for weeks to construct a cavity.

Another time I saw two Himalayan Flamebacks at a nest hole in a dead tree. I also chanced upon a pair of Rufous Woodpeckers quietly pecking away at ants on the trunk of a jamun tree. Then, there were the 'regulars' which you saw almost

every day: the green woodpeckers-Grey-faced, and the yellownapes (Lesser and Greater); the flamebacks – Greater and Black-rumped; and the pied woodpeckers – Fulvous-breasted and two kinds of pygmy woodpeckers (Grey-capped and Brown-capped).

Winter was the best time to look out for woodpeckers in Pawalgarh. This was the season when several kinds of woodpeckers and other birds teamed together to form huge mixed-species flocks and foraged together. It wasn't unusual to see six species of

woodpecker foraging in close proximity to one another! Alongside, there were scores of other birds – drongos, flycatchers, warblers, minivets, nuthatches, treecreepers, cuckooshrikes and orioles.

There are very few places in the world that can boast of such richness in woodpeckers as the landscape where Pawalgarh is located. This richness also symbolises the overall bird diversity of the region. Pawalgarh is a wonderful place not just for woodpeckers but for other birds, too.

I will also remember Pawalgarh for another hilarious – and somewhat embarrassing –



Great Slaty Woodpecker
Mulleripicus pulverulentus

instance. Those were early days of fieldwork and I was initiating my new assistant by giving a long lecture on woodpeckers. I went to great lengths, describing how woodpeckers always forage on woody surfaces such as tree trunks and branches. At that moment we crossed a

village and my assistant stopped to point out a bird feeding on banana flowers in near a farmstead. "What bird is that?" he asked. To my utter surprise, I found that the bird in question was a Black-rumped Flameback – behaving in a most unwoodpecker-like manner – feeding on nectar as if just to prove me wrong! The lesson: just when you think you've learnt enough about nature, it throws something totally unexpected to show how little you know.

-illustrations by Sumit Sinha



Streak-throated Woodpecker
Picus xanthopyga



Himalayan Goldenback
Dinopium shorii

Woodpeckers of Pawalgarh

- Rufous Woodpecker
- Greater Flameback
- White-naped Woodpecker
- Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker
- Fulvous-breasted Woodpecker
- Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker
- Black-rumped Flameback
- Himalayan Flameback
- Great Slaty Woodpecker
- Speckled Piculet
- Grey-headed (Grey-faced) Woodpecker
- Lesser Yellownape
- Greater Yellownape
- Streak-throated Woodpecker

Specialised Body Parts

- Woodpeckers have a sharp and powerful beak that works like a hammer and chisel and can chip away the hardest of woods.
- A woodpecker's toes are also modified – with two toes facing forward and two backwards – to enable it to have a firm grip on vertical tree trunks.
- The most remarkable organ that woodpecker possesses is its tongue, which is extremely long, stiff and sticky. This enables the woodpecker to reach insects hidden in deep, narrow holes with great ease.

Twitching in PAWALGARH

Memories from a Birdwatching Camp

-Dr. Dhananjai Mohan, IFS

Forest trail to Sandani Gaja | *Sanjay Sondhi*

When Rajiv Bhartari, CCF, Ecotourism gave me an option of selecting a location to conduct a birdwatching camp, Pawalgarh came up as a natural choice, since I had never watched birds properly at the location even though I had passed through it many times and watched birds in the landscape innumerable times. November, in any case, is a wonderful time to be in the Himalayan foothills since many birds descend down to the foothills from the higher altitudes of the Himalayas. Of the three days spent in the area, the most memorable was the day long walk to the Sandani Gaja grassland which in Jim Corbett's words 'in addition to being the most beautiful spot for a hundred miles round, is noted for its birdlife'. The trail took us through forest edges to dense Sal forest habitat springing up interesting sightings such as Rufous-bellied Niltava, Green-backed Tit (very low altitude record), many woodpeckers and flycatchers. The best, however, was yet to come. Very close to the Sandani grassland, the Sal forests gave way to mixed patchy transition zone

with a whole lot of interesting bird sightings. We spotted White-bellied Erpornis, Little Pied Flycatcher and Black-crested Bulbuls one after another, resulting in a lot of excitement. There were Lineated and Blue-throated Barbets, too, on a fruit laden tree while the Common Iora sang from the vicinity. As we entered the grassland, which was to be our lunch point, Yellow-breasted Greenfinches' twittering calls welcomed us. It was the middle of the day and as we were starting on the long

return walk, one of us spotted

a raptor, a first for the day, flying low on the far edge of the large clearing. Even the binoculars were not helpful in identifying the bird and just when we were thinking of giving up the challenge, the bird decided to fly in our direction revealing its details and everybody jumped with joy on finding that it was an adult Rufous-bellied Eagle. It circled a few times and then flew right above our heads forcing many to dump their binoculars and switch over to cameras instead.

The short walks around Pawalgarh were also very rewarding. The ever present Plumbeous and White-capped Water Redstarts on the Dabka canal greeted us at the beginning of each walk. The broad picturesque Dabka river bed gave

opportunity to see many riverine birds which were easy to show to the large group of participants, many of whom were birdwatching for the first time in their lives. There were wagtails, redstarts, kingfishers, lapwings, bee-eaters and sandpipers to keep the group engrossed. The walk on the Kyari road helped the participants get accustomed to the forest birds of which the three species of Minivets, Small Niltavas and the dainty Yellow-bellied Fantail were particularly interesting. We were unlucky not to see the Great Hornbill, but the Oriental Pied was seen a few times around the forest rest house. The area is also known for Great Slaty Woodpecker which also eluded us. We ended up seeing 96 bird species in three birdwatching sessions punctuated by a few classroom sessions which were organised at the rest house. The participants were full of questions and shared many an experience which made these sessions very lively.

Pawalgarh and Sandani surely lived up to their reputation and I could see a high level of satisfaction on the faces of the participants. I am sure many of them who got their first lessons on birdwatching are not going to look back and credit should surely go to the beautiful birds of Pawalgarh.

White-bellied Erpornis | *Padmanav Kundu*Red-billed Leiothrix | *Sanjay Sondhi*

Exploring PAWALGARH

-It's not just about birds

-Sanjay Sondhi, Anchal Sondhi, Titli Trust
www.titlitrust.com

Having helped to organize the first bird fest at Asan, Anchal, my wife and I, were looking forward to providing similar support to next festival at the Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve.

However, despite having visited the Corbett landscape on numerous occasions, a visit to Pawalgarh had eluded us. When Rajiv Bhartari suggested we make a visit to the conservation reserve, we grabbed the opportunity with both hands. In early April, we spend 3 days walking through the conservation reserve. Our routine was quite simple; watch birds in the early mornings, butterflies during the day and moths at night. And we visited all the areas we could on foot.

At the checkpost at Pawalgarh FRH, a quaint sign announcing the conservation reserve

greeted us. The FRH at Pawalgarh is surrounded by tall trees, and is a terrific spot for watching birds. The sight of a really old Semal tree amazed Anchal, with its huge buttress, which measured 23.7 meters in 2011, the year its centenary was celebrated! In numerous locations, the fresh red leaves of the Kusum tree, seemed paint-brushed onto the mountain hills slopes.

Kyari, where Camp Hornbill is located, is a community-based campsite at the Kyari village. The local community members who run the campsite have done a marvelous job of setting up a picturesque campsite, with minimum fuss and impact on the natural habitat. In addition, they are very knowledgeable about the area's nature trails and birds. On one of the days, we

walked from Pawalgarh to Sandani Gaja, the lovely grassland in the reserve. After a long walk on a hot day, Anchal could not resist lying down on the grass to gaze at the clear, blue sky, and the forest surrounding the grassland. As always, nature has its ways of welcoming nature lovers. And Anchal was greeted by a tick at Sandani, which climbed onto her. Unfortunately she found out about this only a few days after returning to Dehradun, when the tick bite began to itch and swell!

We walked numerous trails in the landscape; along the Dabka River from Pawalgarh and Kyari; the trail from Kyari to Pehla Ghat or Kyari to Ban Devi, the marvelous forest around the FRH at Sitabani, and a trek from Sitabani along the Khichdi River to Moteshwar



Footman Moth Cocoon | Sanjay Sondhi



Footman Moth | Sanjay Sondhi



Spot Swordtail | Sanjay Sondhi

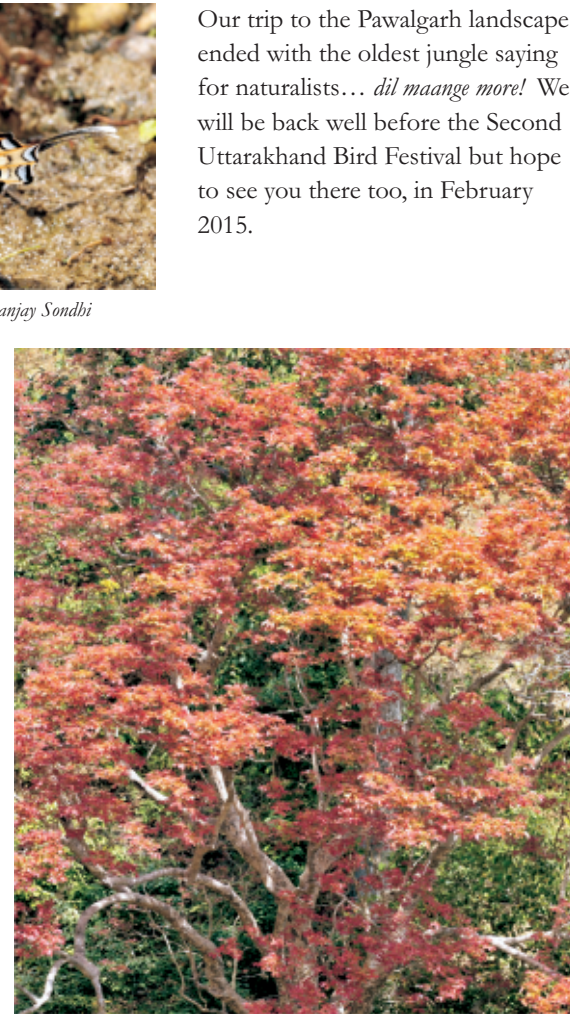
Mandir. Each location threw up different wildlife sightings keeping us enthralled.

Our three-day visit resulted in the sighting of 120 bird species. Sightings of birds such as the White-capped Bunting, Crested Tree Swift, Green Magpie, Cinereous Vulture, White-eyed Buzzard, Emerald Dove and numerous other birds kept us enthralled. It is expected that Pawalgarh will be home to at least 350 bird species, so there is still a lot of birdwatching for us to do there!

Birds were not the only creatures we saw. We recorded 55 species of butterflies during our visit. The spectacular Spot Swordtail, with long trailing tail was one of the many gorgeous butterflies we spotted. At one location at Sandani Gaja, we watched a group of five swordtails mud-puddling together. Spotted Palmfly, Gaudy Baron, Baronet, Pallas's Sailer,

Indigo Flash, Bright Sunbeam, Spangled Plushblue were amongst some of the pretty and not-so-common butterflies spotted. The last named, Spangled Plushblue, is a butterfly whose known range was Nepal eastwards, and it was only in 2011 that Peter Smetacek, a lepidopterist from Bhimtal, recorded its presence in Kumaon. This is probably the first record of this species from Pawalgarh.

Nights caught us listening for calls of night birds, and we were duly rewarded by calls of the Brown Hawk Owl and the Large-tailed Nightjar. We also set up moth screens to observe moths in some of the areas. While the identification of all of the moths is yet to be done, we did identify the pretty Footman Moth (*Cyana peregrina*), which builds a funky tent-like mesh-cocoon. These cocoons dot the walls of forest rest houses leaving people to wonder what these peculiar structures are!



Kusum tree with fresh leaves | Sanjay Sondhi

Our trip to the Pawalgarh landscape ended with the oldest jungle saying for naturalists... *dil maange more!* We will be back well before the Second Uttarakhand Bird Festival but hope to see you there too, in February 2015.

PAWALGARH'S Wetlands

Haripura - Baur Reservoirs

-Dr. Jatinder Kaur



Migratory waterfowl in Haripura Reservoir | Rajesh Panwar

Pawalgarh's rivers apart, numerous other wetlands play host to water birds and many other species of avifauna which are migratory. The well-known Baur Reservoir is fed by the Baur and Kakrala Rivers. The periphery is dominated by agricultural activities, while the catchment is dominated by forests of two types - Moist Terai Sal forest and Dry Siwalik Sal forest. The Baur Reservoir is an excellent location to see an array of waterbirds-both species of jacana, numerous species of waterfowl and many waders.

The Haripura Reservoir, located almost adjacent to the Baur Reservoir, is fed by the Bhakra and Khazia Rivers. Sixty one species of waterbirds and four species of wetland dependant birds belonging to a total of 15 families have been recorded from Haripura. It is the only known location where the Grey-headed Lapwing can be seen in Uttarakhand.

Both the reservoirs are easily approached from Kaladhungi. Come explore Pawalgarh's wetlands.



Grey-headed Lapwing | Anupam Mukherjee



Bar-headed Geese | Sanjay Sondhi



Black-headed Ibis | Sanjay Sondhi



ASAN

-First Uttarakhand Spring Bird Festival

-Rajiv Bhartari, Sanjay Sondhi

Not many people are aware that Uttarakhand is a birdwatching haven, and home to 687 bird species, more than half of India's avifauna. It was to address this lacuna that Forest Department of Uttarakhand initiated Uttarakhand Birdwatching Programme. Little did the birdwatchers of Uttarakhand realize that the seed sown would quickly take root, and grow to a tree bearing fruit in the form of a very successful First Bird Festival at Asan in February 2014.

The five-day "First Uttarakhand Spring Bird Festival" at Asan was organized by the Uttarakhand Forest Department in collaboration with Titli Trust and Nature Science Initiative, two Dehradun-based NGOs. The Bird Festival was sponsored by Ministry of Environment and Forests, Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board, Uttarakhand Forest Development Corporation and Ajeevika. Wildlife Preservation Society of India gifted 30 binoculars for bird watching. The festival was inaugurated by His Excellency, Dr. Aziz Qureshi, Governor of Uttarakhand. The Asan Bird Festival had numerous highlights. To list a few....

- **GUIDED BIRDWATCHING:** Ten Team Leaders and around twenty guides

from various parts of Uttarakhand led by Sanjay and Anchal Sondhi from Titli Trust conducted guided birdwatching for more than 800 visitors from 7th to 9th Feb, 2014 for three days. The visitors to the festival were conducted on three trails at Asan CR and one forest trail at Timli FRH.

- **PHOTOGRAPHY WORKSHOP:** India's renowned bird photographer, Sumit Sen conducted a day long workshop on digital bird photography and post processing.
- **EXHIBITION:** Ms. Ranjana Kala, CCF Publicity and Extension inaugurated an exhibition on Birds and Livelihoods.
- **WORKSHOP:** "Workshop on Birds, Birdwatchers and Community-based Tourism" was held at the Wildlife Institute of India and Dr. Alexandra Coghlan from Griffith University Australia delivered the Key note address.
- **CULTURAL PERFORMANCE:** Students from Kasiga and Shigally International School performed "Jaen to Jaen Kaban". The dance drama was composed and choreographed by

Sharmila Bhartari while Shailendra Rawat wrote the script and sang the lead songs.

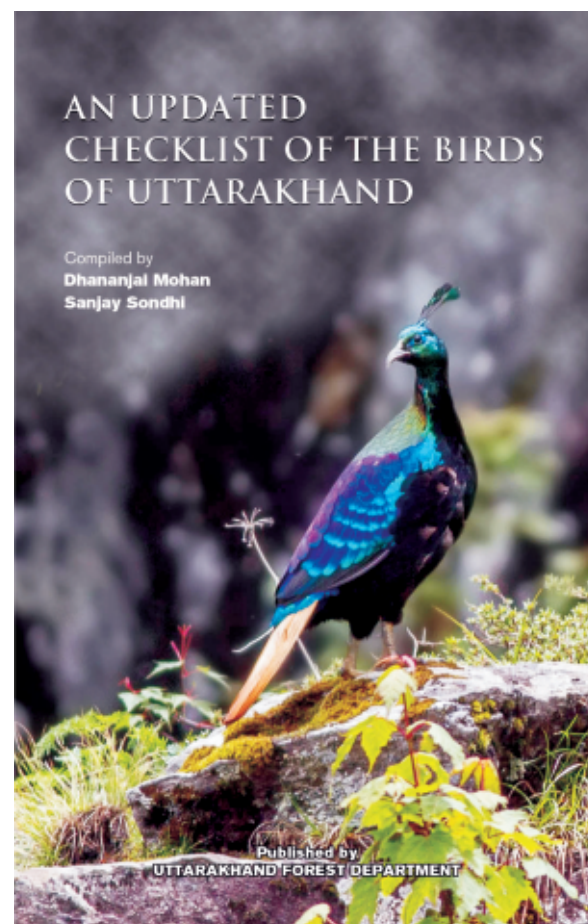
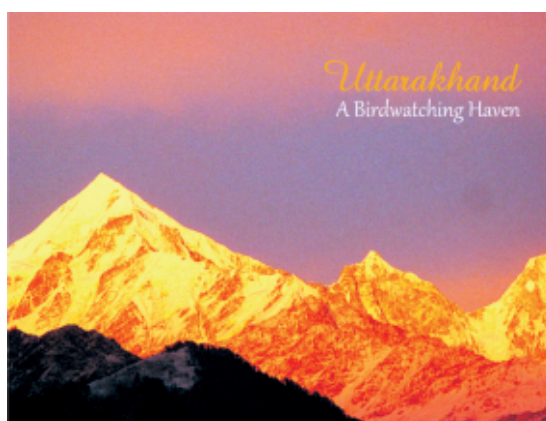
- **BIRD CALLS WORKSHOP:** Dr. Pratap Singh from Wildlife Institute of India told students about bird calls and techniques for recording.

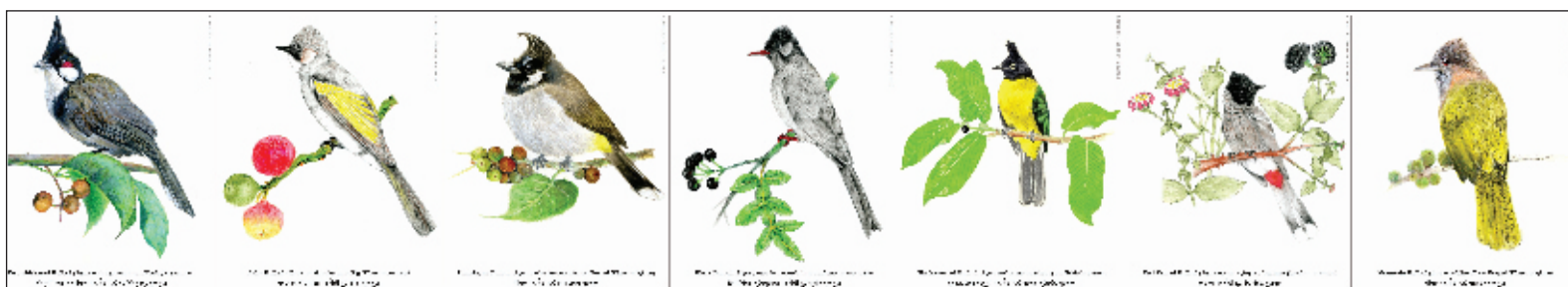
A total of one hundred and sixty-eight species were sighted at Asan Conservation Reserve and sixty-five species at Timli Forest Rest House. More than 1200 people participated in various activities conducted during this first ever festival. Ms. Veena Sekhari, Principal Chief Conservator Forests Projects, Uttarakhand gave away mementoes to Team Leaders and Bird Guides.



PUBLICATIONS/ SOUVENIRS OF FIRST BIRD FESTIVAL

- Book titled "Threatened Birds of Uttarakhand".
- Booklet titled "Updated Checklist of Birds of Uttarakhand".
- CD titled "Bird Songs of Uttarakhand".
- Booklet titled "Uttarakhand-a Birdwatching Haven".
- Pamphlet on Asan Conservation Reserve.
- Posters on Hornbills and Bulbuls.
- Souvenirs-cups with Bulbul illustrations.





"Jaen to Jaen Kaban" Dance Drama on birds
by Sharmila Bhartari & school children from Shigally



Book Release of "Threatened Birds of Uttarakhand"
by Dr. Dhananjai Mohan



Organizing Committee Members



Children watching the performance



HE Governor Uttarakhand Dr. Aziz Qureshi releasing Logo for Asan Conservation Reserve



Sumit Sen conducting Photography Workshop



Visitors being briefed at the NSI stall at the Exhibition



IHM Diploma trainees serving food at the Exhibition



Principal Chief Conservator of Forests Ms. Veena Sekhari
giving memento to bird guide



Dr. Alexandra Coghlan delivering keynote address during
Workshop on "Birds, Birdwatching & Community-based Tourism"

Recent Initiatives



Participants at Maheshkhan Birdwatching Camp
(30th May to 1st June, 2014) | *Amitabh Joshi*



Book Cover of
"Birds in and around Mussoorie"



Bird Festival, Munsiyari (14th to 16th May, 2014) participants
sharing the experience | *Ashish Kotbani*



Jungli School participants at
Bird Festival, Munsiyari (14th to 16th May, 2014) | *Ashish Kotbani*



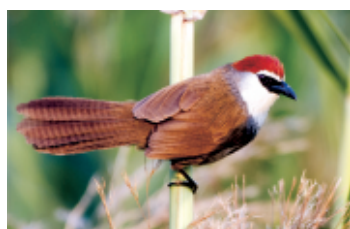
Birdwatching Camp at Van Sarai, Jageshwar (4th to 6th July, 2014)
sponsored by Asian Adventures



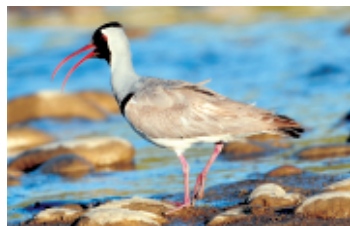
Victor Banerjee releasing Book "Birds in and around Mussoorie" by Sanjay Kumar
30th June 2014, Dhanolti Eco Park | *Amitabh Joshi*



Second Uttarakhand Spring Bird Festival 2015



Chestnut-capped Babbler | *Gunjan Arora*



Ibisbill | *Manoj Sharma*



Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch | *Ashish Kotbani*

LOCATION : The IIInd USBF will be organized at Pawalgarh Conservation Reserve situated close to Kaladhungi /Ramnagar in Nainital District of Uttarakhand (India). The Festival activities will be conducted at the Centre for Ecotourism at Chunakhan near Bailparao. Guided Birdwatching will be conducted at Kyari, Sitabani and Pawalgarh and Kaladhungi.

PROGRAMME & ACTIVITIES : The five-day USBF will be inaugurated on Wednesday 4th February and culminate on Sunday 8th February 2015. The foremost activity during the Bird Festival will include guided bird watching. Other activities will include a bird and rural tourism exhibition, bird photography and sound recording workshops, lectures & film shows on birds, popular fun activities based on birds (book reading, quiz, puppetry) and cultural performances.

PARTNERS : The event will be organized by the Uttarakhand Forest Department in partnership with NGOs (Titli Trust, Nature Science Initiative, WWF, Rainbow Friends of Nature and Environment, BNHS, Kalpavriksh, Waste Warriors), Wildlife Institute of India, Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam, Institute of Hotel Management, Dehradun and bird tour operators.

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www.uttarakhandbirdfestival.in, www.facebook.com/events/1429765560588054



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